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Putin and the Russian Mythscape: Dilemmas of Charismatic Legitimacy

Bo Petersson¹

Abstract

For decades now, President Vladimir Putin has consistently enjoyed markedly high approval rates and seemingly benefitted from charismatic legitimacy, whereas systemic legal-rational legitimacy has remained on a low level. This article discusses how, through the successful communication of political myth, legitimacy has become ever more personalized in Putin's Russia, and considers some of the dilemmas inherent in non-democratic settings where legitimacy builds on grounds that are not legal-rational in the Weberian sense.

Keywords: Legitimacy, charisma, mythscape, Putin, political succession.

Introduction

Vladimir Putin commands a unique power position as President of the Russian Federation, having held office from 2000 to 2008, and then, after an intermission when he formally served as prime minister under Dmitrii Medvedev, from 2012 onwards. If the results of the presidential elections go his way, there is no constitutional rule preventing him from maintaining the incumbency until 2024. This article applies theories on legitimacy, political myth, and charisma to discuss the dilemmas inherent in highly personalized political regimes of the type that Putin represents.

I begin by presenting general perspectives on legitimacy, taking as my point of departure Max Weber's discussion of ideal types of legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic authority² and the role of these typologies as foundations of a legitimate order.³ The focus then shifts to legitimacy in non-democratic states, and next to the concept of political myth, which addresses the important link between charismatic political leaders and their followers. Turning to master myths in today's Russia, I argue that Putin has been very successful in communicating as well as claiming to feature in such myths. Lastly, I consider the dilemmas of political succession in regimes centered on individual charismatic leaders.

Legitimacy in non-democratic states

The concept of "legitimacy" has a long history within political science and social thought. It refers to a solid and widespread belief within a political entity that the current arrangements of power are appropriate, proper, just, and in keeping with agreed rules. This is what forms a legitimate order.⁴ Because of this legitimacy, people feel that they need to defer to decisions and rules and follow them voluntarily, out of obligation and responsibility to others, rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of rewards. This contrasts with acting out of

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² Max Weber. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich). Berkeley: University of California Press.

³ S. N. Eisenstadt. 1968. *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building. Selected Papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. In his writings, Weber discussed the ideal types of *authority*, not *legitimacy*. However, in this article I join the broad consensus of contemporary scholarship in referring to authority legitimized through the ideal types as *legitimacy*.

⁴ Eisenstadt, *Max Weber...*

fear of coercion or because the powers persuade people through provision or promises of economic benefit.

Most often, the concept of legitimacy is applied to the state, or indeed nation-state, level of analysis. The basic rationale holds that if a state is to function effectively in the longer run, its ideational basis must appeal to the bulk of the population.⁵ Being able to gain voluntary acquiescence from most of the people, most of the time, due to their sense of obligation and commitment, means that state and society can function even during periods of scarcity, crisis, and conflict. It creates a reservoir of support to be drawn upon under difficult circumstances, a support not contingent upon self-interest or coercion. Loss of legitimacy, by contrast, is likely to result in popular discontent and societal opposition to political leaders.⁶

It has become customary to use the Weberian ideal types of legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic authority as points of departure for discussing the foundations of a legitimate order. However, Weber anticipated that these ideal types would not appear in pure form, but were all likely to blend with the others, albeit with one sub-type dominating.⁷ The first ideal type, the legal-rational one, is the most refined, and undergirds society and politics in stable Western democracies. It rests on broad popular consent that exists because of the political leaders' conscientious observance of the letter and spirit of the legal and constitutional framework. Nevertheless, Weber made it clear that this Western ideal type of legal-rational authority is not the only way in which social arrangements of power can be justified and kept stable in a state. He also recognized traditional authority, built on the logic that the ruler(s) had been there for as long as anyone could remember; and charismatic authority, built on the magnetic and unique personality traits of a political leader, usually in non-democratic settings.⁸ However, Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections should remind us that charisma could be a powerful legitimating force also in mature Western democracies.

Even though legitimacy is at its core a positive thing, it also entails potential risks. By conferring legitimacy, the people authorize leaders to act on their behalf. When a political leader deemed to be legitimate exhorts people to act in a certain way, they may concur because that leader is considered legitimate, not because the actions are moral or proper as such.⁹ This can become especially momentous when the legitimacy of the ruler is founded not on a legal-rational basis but on charismatic grounds.

Many scholars have argued the case of the applicability of the concept of legitimacy beyond the democratic nation-state context¹⁰ – to settings outside of the nation-state frame, such as

⁵ Herbert C. Kelman. 1969. "Patterns of Personal Involvement in the National System: a Socio-Psychological Analysis of Political Legitimacy." In James Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, New York: Free Press.

⁶ Oliver Schlumberger and André Bank. (2001). "Succession, Legitimacy, and Regime Stability in Jordan," *The Arab Studies Journal* 9/10: 2/1: 50-72, p. 53.

⁷ Eisenstadt, *Max Weber...*

⁸ Eisenstadt, *Max Weber...*

⁹ Kelman, "Patterns...."

¹⁰ Chung Joong-Gun. 1993. "Charisma and Regime Legitimacy: Political Succession in North Korea." *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 7: 1 (Winter/Spring): 79-115; Muthiah Alagappa, ed. 1995. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Schlumberger and Bank, "Succession, Legitimacy..."; Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert, eds., 2008. *Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China: Institutional Change and Stability*. New York: Routledge; Vladimir Gel'man. 2015. *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Change*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

international relations,¹¹ international organizations,¹² and the company level.¹³ Consequently, there is great variation between contexts where the concept of legitimacy has been used, but common to all settings are widespread popular consent and the societal stability that this engenders.

The instruments of achieving legitimacy in non-democracies are diverse, and it is important to investigate the processes through which legitimacy-engendered stability can be achieved in such settings.¹⁴ In his analysis of the Soviet political system, T. H. Rigby expanded on the Weberian triad, introducing the concept of goal-rational legitimacy, which fed on the basic logic that the end supposedly justified the means, however harsh the latter.¹⁵ In the Soviet case, the obvious end goal in the early years after the October revolution was the ultimate attainment of communism. The repression during the Stalin era made the Soviet regime persist through violence and terror, and so bases of legitimation were not the primary instruments for the maintenance of social control, even if the personality cult and the appeals to patriotism during the Great Patriotic War clearly were used as legitimizing events.¹⁶

A further effort at elaborating on the Weberian ideal types was made by Leslie Holmes, who discerned, among other subtypes, what he called eudaemonic legitimacy.¹⁷ This is, basically, legitimacy gained through the provision of a certain level of material well-being and affluence, reasonably well dispersed among the population at large. Other scholars have referred to the same phenomenon using labels such as allocative legitimacy,¹⁸ output legitimacy,¹⁹ performance legitimation,²⁰ and performative legitimacy.²¹ Legitimacy of this kind is prone to be fragile, as it is likely to erode in times of economic downturn. Eudaemonic legitimation was a highly prevalent strategy during post-Stalin Soviet times. After the early decades of revolutionary fervor, Stalin-time terror and the cataclysms of the Great Patriotic War, basic stability finally seemed to emerge in Soviet society. Clearly delineated limits still restrained the politically permissible and the state instruments of repression were highly effective, but individuals who did not actively oppose the system had in general little to fear. Even if the material well-being could not match the standards of the despised but envied West, there was a system of affordable housing, low taxes and functioning education and health care, which apparently sufficed to sustain the regime for several decades.

Even if elements of ideational and goal-rational legitimacy were to different degrees consistent features, the predominant bases of legitimacy changed repeatedly throughout the

¹¹ Ian Hurd. 2008. *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹² David Beetham and Christopher Lord. 1998. *Legitimacy and the EU*. London: Longman.

¹³ Tom R. Tyler. 2006. "Psychological perspectives on legitimacy and legitimation." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57: 375-400.

¹⁴ Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia...*, 6-7.

¹⁵ T. H. Rigby, ed, 1982. *Political Legitimation in Communist States*. New York: St. Martin's Press. The subtype of goal-rational legitimacy can also apply to theocratic systems and religious convictions that sacrifices made during one's lifetime will yield rewards in the afterlife.

¹⁶ Graeme Gill. 2011. *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Leslie Holmes. 1997. *Post-Communism: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

¹⁸ Schlumberger and Bank, "Succession, Legitimacy..."

¹⁹ Peter McDonough, Samuel H. Barnes, and Antonio López Pina. 1986. "The Growth of Democratic Legitimacy in Spain," *The American Political Science Review*, 80:3: 735-760.

²⁰ Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy...*, 25.

²¹ Peter J. Burnell. 2006. "Autocratic Opening to Democracy: Why Legitimacy Matters." *Third World Quarterly* 27: 4): 545-562.

history of the Soviet Union.²² They transformed abruptly again when the Soviet Union started to dissolve under Mikhail Gorbachev from the mid-1980s onwards. During his first presidency in post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin relied heavily on charismatic legitimacy,²³ at the same time as there was initially also a strong element of legal-rational legitimacy to his hold on power, derived from his convincing win in the RFSFR presidential elections in 1991, which made him the first popularly elected president in Russian history. During his second presidency, in 1996-1999, Yeltsin's charismatic legitimacy waned amidst increasing signs of ill health, and so the ideational foundation of his hold on power started to evaporate. The basic social, economic and political stability, which had been so fundamental for the eudaemonic legitimation of the Soviet leaders during the 1970s and early 1980s, was lost, which added to the precariousness of his position.

Legitimacy and political myth

The convictions in people's minds that arrangements of power are appropriate, just, and in keeping with agreed rules necessarily rest on an ideational basis.²⁴ For legitimacy, *political myth* can provide such a foundation. Key political actors enact and communicate central political myths that cannot be assessed meaningfully with regard to their philosophical truth or falsity.²⁵ Whether they are true or false is irrelevant here: the important thing is that a significant number of people believe in them, relate to, and live by them as if they were true.²⁶ The myths express naturalized, taken-for-granted cultural knowledge in the Barthesian sense of the word.²⁷ It is in the best interest of political leaders to present themselves as those who most faithfully epitomize the myths and most successfully act to uphold them. The myths bestow legitimacy on those leaders who master the game.

Political myths concern core values that the populace holds dear. They contain an invitation, indeed even an invocation, to act here and now, since "the construction of myth impinges very closely on the freedom with which people live their lives."²⁸ The association with core values and emotionally cherished sentiments makes for strong links between legitimacy, political leaders and their actions as perceived by the populace, on the one hand, and political myth, on the other.²⁹

To use the concept promoted by Duncan Bell, political myths are articulated and communicated in a "mythscape", a "temporally and spatially extended discursive realm" where there is an incessant struggle for hegemony with other potentially contending myths.³⁰

²² Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy*...

²³ Thomas A. O'Brien. 2007. "The Role of the Transitional Leader: A Comparative Analysis of Adolfo Suárez and Boris Yeltsin". *Leadership*. Vol 3 (4): 419-432.

²⁴ Tyler, "Psychological Perspectives..."

²⁵ Chiara Bottici. 2010. *A Philosophy of Political Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy*, p. 4.

²⁶ See Willerton's observation that it is the perceptions of policies and their outcomes that determine the degree of public support, not the policies as such, Willerton. 2017, "Searching for a Russian National Idea..."

²⁷ Roland Barthes. 1993. *Mythology. An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

²⁸ Jonathan Charteris-Black. 2011. *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 25.

²⁹ Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand. 2013. *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Duncan Bell. 2003. "Mythscape: memory, mythology and national identity." *British Journal of Sociology* 54: 1: 63-81.

The myths will most often be top-down constructs, shaped by “deliberate manipulation and intentional action,”³¹ but in cases of widespread political discontent, they may also be challenged from below. Because of this unceasing contestation, what Anne Clunan calls “fitness tests” are continually performed among the political elites and the population at large.³² When passed, these fitness tests serve to legitimize the political leaders. When failed, the myths fade out, probably together with the leaders who have claimed to represent them. If the political elites do not live up to the myths and do not deliver accordingly, the contents of the myths can contribute to bringing down the incumbents. This is “the myth’s cunning”³³ – it may prove to be a treacherous companion. For social scientists, it is intriguing to try to gauge the outcome of these fitness tests, and assess the public support that political leaders enjoy for their interpretation and purported implementation of the political myths.

Political myth is, just like the political rhetoric that promotes and communicates it, characterized by the close intertwining of emotive and cognitive elements.³⁴ Unless some emotive glue is there, no political entity will be likely to hold together in the longer run, as political leaders are certain to be aware. This is where we can establish a nexus between political myth, legitimacy, and charisma, as charismatic leaders are likely to be able to convey and recount the narrative of the myth to their followers, and see to it that they themselves play a pivotal role in its plot.³⁵ Schlumberger and Bank found this link between political communication and legitimacy so central that they introduced the concept of “discourse legitimacy” for the phenomenon, stressing the importance of conveying the image of a superb political leader for the maintenance of regime stability and securing political power.³⁶ Simply put, charismatic leaders are gifted storytellers who tell a story that is fundamentally convincing to their mass audiences.

Certain political myths reappear in slightly shifting guises, in many settings and in many different countries.³⁷ Murray Edelman enumerated three universally recognized master myths: the omnipresent conspiratorial enemy; the valiant and wise leader who saves the people from that enemy; and the people who in times of great need unite behind their leader to deliver their country from the gravest danger.³⁸ All three myths are familiar from the Russian context. However, although the use of such political mythmaking has perhaps been particularly intense in Russia, Edelman’s observation underlines that Russia and its political leaders are not unique in their adherence to and use of political myth. This is widespread political practice, albeit perhaps particularly strong in authoritarian political settings.³⁹

Legitimacy and political myth in Putin’s Russia

³¹ Bell, “Mythscape...,” p. 75.

³² Anne Clunan. 2014. “Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia’s pursuit of international status.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47: 3: 281-290.

³³ Roland Boer. 2009. *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes*. Durham, NC Duke University Press, p. 26.

³⁴ Ol’ga Malinova. 2015. “Mif kak kategoriya simvolicheskoi politiki: analiz teoreticheskikh razvilok.” *Polis. Political Studies* 4: 12-21.

³⁵ Rico Isaacs. 2015. “Charismatic Routinization and Problems of Post-Charisma Succession in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,” *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 7:1: 58-76.

³⁶ Schlumberger and Bank, “Succession, Legitimacy...,” p. 65.

³⁷ Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric...*

³⁸ Murray Edelman. 1977. *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Politics that Fail*. New York: Academic Press, quoted in Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric...*, p. 26. For a similar account, see Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy...*, p. 4.

³⁹ Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric...*, p. 1

The story that Boris Yeltsin successfully told his audience during the first part of his presidency was that he had emerged to save Russia from the scourges of Soviet communism. He figured as one of the very few who had dared to stand up and defend democratization at the time when the Soviet regime seemed close to staging a comeback. Yeltsin's bold and defiant posture against the communist ringleaders at the August 1991 coup attempt was no doubt the kind of fabric that political myth consists of.⁴⁰ In the early 1990s, this narrative seemed to be an effective legitimizing device. In the run-up to the presidential elections in 1996 when Yeltsin sought the presidency for the second time, denial and rejection of the Soviet era was still an essential component in his legitimation strategy.⁴¹ As was mentioned above, Yeltsin's charismatic legitimacy had however begun to vaporize at this time, as persistent rumors about illness and abuse of alcohol took their toll. He was no longer a successful communicator. Instead, as disorder and instability beset Russian society, the myth's cunning revealed itself, and the electorate gradually withdrew their support. In turn, however, Boris Yeltsin's progressing delegitimizing prepared the soil for Vladimir Putin's successful strategies of acquiring legitimacy.

Throughout his presidencies, Putin has been highly skilled at capitalizing on a small number of overarching political myths, which have tended to dominate the contemporary Russian mythscape.⁴² First, there are Russia's aspirations to be recognized as a great power, always and unconditionally. As manifested over the centuries, from Peter the Great, to Stalin, and up to Putin today, this belief seems to function as a basic pillar of Russian national identity.⁴³ The idea of the country as being predestined to be a great power, one that will act and be treated with the proper respect, seems to be a predominant political myth upon which Russian we-ness largely relies.

Indeed, Putin's reputation of being the most credible keeper and guarantor of the great power tradition is a central key to his continued legitimacy. He has come across as the leader who, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the protracted domestic chaos of the turbulent 1990s, resurrected Russia to greatness and then kept it there. The electorate has rewarded him for this, as borne out by his consistently high monthly personal approval ratings over the years.⁴⁴ Indicatively, these have tended to peak after each assertive action taken on the international arena – whether directed at Georgia, Ukraine, or Syria.⁴⁵ Some 86% of the respondents to a ROMIR/NEPORUS poll conducted in October 2014 held the Russian state's ability to project and defend its national interests internationally to be "very important" or "close to very important" (8 to 10 on a 10-point scale).⁴⁶ Evidently, the electorate has seen the president as largely successful in this endeavor.⁴⁷

Another powerful political myth in today's Russia concerns the belief in the paramount value of political stability upheld by a strong hand at the helm of power, someone who can steer the country clear from disorder and chaos. Many voters seem to prefer a strong figure able to

⁴⁰ O'Brien, "The Role of the Transitional...", p. 427.

⁴¹ Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory During the Yeltsin Era*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁴² Bo Petersson. 2014. "Still Embodying the Myth?". *Problems of Post-Communism* 61:1: 30-40.

⁴³ Petersson, "Still Embodying..."; ; Bobo Lo. 2002. *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan; Ilya Prizel. 1998. *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia and Ukraine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁴ Willerton, "Searching for a Russian National Idea...".

⁴⁵ Derek S. Hutcheson and Bo Petersson. 2016. "Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin's Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68:7: 1107-26.

⁴⁶ ROMIR/NEPORUS poll, October 2014.

⁴⁷ ROMIR/NEPORUS poll, October 2014.

avoid disasters that otherwise would befall the country.⁴⁸ The bottom line is that whenever such a strong leader has been missing, ‘Times of Troubles’ (sing. *smuta*, from the paradigmatic Time of Troubles between 1598 and 1613) have tended to reappear again and again.⁴⁹ Such periods inhibit Russia’s aspirations to realize its great power potential and they block the domestic and international recognition that is her rightful due.⁵⁰ These are times of disorder, chaos, internal strife, power vacuums, and foreign intervention, which seem to put the very survival of the nation on the line. According to this political mythology, all the previous periods of such internal weakness had ultimately successful endings – thanks to the valiance and perseverance of the Russian people who could unite behind the great and courageous leader who entered the stage at a fateful moment in time to save the nation from cataclysm and Armageddon.

According to this imaginary, the latest occurrence of *smuta* in recent Russian political history was indeed the Yeltsin era of the 1990s, marked by its deep economic crisis, protracted political weakness, and dependence on loans and subsidies from the Western powers.⁵¹ This was a period of internal unrest and centrifugal tendencies, with the Chechen war as its epitome. From the outset of his first presidency in 1999/2000, Putin’s explicit ambition was to strengthen internal order, make Russia internationally respected again, and demonstrate that the country was its own master. The central message was that the Russian state had to be strong to fight internal disorder and to hold its external enemies at bay. As Gel’man has pointed out, during these years the word “state” figured as prominently in Putin’s rhetoric as did the keyword ‘God’ in religious texts.⁵²

After coming to power, Putin spoke frankly in characterizing his immediate predecessors in the President’s and Prime Minister’s offices. Concerning the situation in Northern Caucasus and Chechnya, for instance, he declared that the previous government “did not have enough guts to tackle the problems confronting it.”⁵³ On the very eve of the presidential elections in 2000 Putin was equally condemnatory of Boris Yeltsin’s accomplishment record, implying that he had squandered the country’s economy, prestige and leading role in the world, and had permitted Russia to become ungovernable and unstable.⁵⁴

Putin’s central message was simple: the Russian state must be strong to fight internal disorder and to prevent its external enemies from intruding.⁵⁵ He blamed his predecessor not so much for what he had done as for what he had neglected to do. Putin’s program for strengthening the power vertical was implemented effectively. It was also widely popular, earning Putin the reputation of being the one who managed to put an end to the Yeltsin-era *smuta*. He came

⁴⁸ Bo Petersson. 2013. “The Eternal Great Power Meets the Recurring Times of Troubles: Twin Political Myths in Contemporary Russian Politics”. *European Studies: A Journal of European Culture, History and Politics*, 30:301-26.

⁴⁹ Willerton, “Searching for a Russian National Idea...”.

⁵⁰ Thomas Parland. 2005. *The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia: The Growing Influence of Western Rightist Ideas*. New York: Routledge Curzon; Valerii Solovei. 2003. “Rossiya nakanune smuty.” *Svobodnaya mysl* 21: 2: 38-48.

⁵¹ Solovei, “Rossiya nakanune...”; Willerton, “Searching for a National Idea...,” p. 3..

⁵² Gel’man, *Authoritarian Russia...*, p. 76.

⁵³ Vladimir Putin. 2000. *Address at the Unveiling of a Memorial Stone at the Place of a Future Monument to the Soldiers of the 6th Company, 76th Guards Division, who Died as Heroes in Chechnya*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21512>, accessed January 16, 2017.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Putin. 2000. *TV Address to the Citizens of Russia*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24201>, accessed January 16, 2017.

⁵⁵ Petersson, “The Eternal Great Power...”.

across as the person who restored Russia to greatness and epitomized its newly regained power and glory, and was successively depicted as outstanding and unique in his role.⁵⁶

The hero images constructed around Putin has often had clearly gendered connotations, with Putin appearing bare-chested on horseback or fishing in a stream, masculine, able, physically fit, thereby symbolizing Russia's regained potency and might.⁵⁷ Although it has often been ridiculed in the West, this imagery seems to have been popular, not least perhaps among Putin's female voters; and as Elizabeth Wood argues, these traits of hypermasculinity seem to have bolstered the president's domestic base of power and legitimacy.⁵⁸

There are also other political myths of significance for the analysis of Russian politics today, and Putin has known how to play into these. As Ol'ga Malinova has noted, a very central myth is the belief in a superior Russian spirituality constantly beset and beleaguered by aggressive Western scheming.⁵⁹ This line of argument has become increasingly prominent during Putin's third presidency and has surfaced in his political rhetoric, as expressed not least in a growing anti-Americanism during the years of the Obama administration.⁶⁰

The justification of the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and tough actions taken against Ukraine were paradigmatic examples of the narrative about the imminent beleaguering by the West. The bottom line of Putin's uncompromising speech on the annexation was that the Russian actions had been inevitable, amounting to legitimate measures for defending the national interest – and ultimately Russia's survival – in the face of aggressive Western and, above all, US actions. In a key passage of the speech, Putin pledged:

They have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. They kept telling us the same thing: "Well, this does not concern you." That's easy to say.⁶¹

The myth about the foreign encirclement is also congruent with the frequent argument about Russia as a beacon for moral and family values, standing tall against the Western-led universal onslaught of depravity, untraditional gender roles and perceived moral relaxation. This self-proclaimed mission, together with the tough stance promoting Russian nationalism and opposing migration from abroad, has made Putin's Russia a favorite among right-wing populist parties across the Western world.⁶² In the Russian commentary on the Euromaidan events in Ukraine, the arguments about devious Western meddling, on the one hand, and Western liberal attitudes on LBTQ issues, on the other, were interwoven. The logic was that if the EU widened its influence in Ukraine, a relaxation of traditional family values would

⁵⁶ Helena Goscilo, ed. 2013. *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London: Routledge.

⁵⁷ Valerie Sperling. 2015. *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth A. Wood. 2016. "Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2015.1125649.

⁵⁹ Ol'ga Malinova. 2014. "Spiritual Bonds" as State Ideology, *Russia in Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Spiritual-Bonds-as-State-Ideology-17223>, accessed March 14, 2016.

⁶⁰ Bo Petersson and Elena Sommers. 2015. "Cold War to the Rescue? Anti-American Sentiment in Russian Highest Level Political Discourse", *Paper for the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN)*, Columbia University, New York, 22-24 April.

⁶¹ Vladimir Putin. 2014. *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed January 12, 2017.

⁶² Antonis Klapsis. 2015. *An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.

inevitably come in its wake, as signaled by the mocking reference to the EU as “Gayropa”.⁶³ Enacting his hypermasculine role, assuming and providing leadership against the perceived moral onslaught from the West, Putin could depict himself as a defender of traditional values against attacks from abroad as well as from decadent elements within. This “morality politics” earned him the support of the Russian Orthodoxy and seemed yet again to work well to strengthen his legitimacy at home.⁶⁴

Legitimacy and charisma: the Putin mix

In the convergence of the political myth about the hostile Western encirclement with the myth about the averted but ever-threatening Time of Troubles we can recognize Edelman’s master myths about the conspiratorial foe, the valiant leader and the ultimate perseverance of the people. These master myths, especially the one about the valiant leader who is able to fight back the conspiring enemy and bring forth the supreme qualities of the people, are in line with the characteristics often attributed to a charismatic leader. Quite clearly, this also corresponds to the Russian mythscape, which Vladimir Putin has exploited with considerable success.

The results of the regular monthly approval polls from the Moscow-based Levada Center suggest a clear pattern.⁶⁵ Except for minor dips chiefly around 2011/2012,⁶⁶ approval rates of Vladimir Putin have consistently been far above the 65% level – a result that most political leaders abroad could only dream of. Even though this measure may be un-nuanced, we may conclude that the president has been highly popular among the general Russian public, and that he has been continuously so throughout his almost 20 years at the center stage of Russian politics. Moreover, this is the matter of personal popularity, as the favorable ratings have consistently coexisted with indications of relative distrust of state institutions, signaling a poorly developed legal-rational legitimacy on the systemic level.⁶⁷ At least for the time being, the president’s charismatic legitimacy makes up for this deficiency.

As reported by Willerton, well into Putin’s third presidency an October 2014 ROMIR survey yielded high approval rates for Putin, whose favorability rating (7.546 on a 10-point scale) was far above those of other key state actors and potential contenders.⁶⁸ Other available survey data from 2014 indicated that support for the president spread rather evenly across age

⁶³ Emil Edenborg. 2016. *Nothing more to see: Contestations of belonging and visibility in Russian media*. Lund: Lund Political Studies 177, p. 179.

⁶⁴ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. 2014. “The Pussy Riot affair and Putins démarche from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality”, *Nationalities Papers* 42:4, 615-621.

⁶⁵ *Indeksy*. 2017. At <http://www.levada.ru/old/indeksy>, accessed January 16, 2017.

⁶⁶ Gel’man, *Authoritarian Russia...*

⁶⁷ Rudra Sil, R. and Cheng Chen. 2004. “State Legitimacy and the (In) significance of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia”. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56:3: 347-68.

⁶⁸ ROMIR/NEPORUS poll, October 2014. John P. Willerton. 2017. “Searching for a National Idea: Putin Team Efforts and Public Assessments,” in this issue of *Demokratizatsiya*. What he referred to was an October 2014 ROMIR all-Russia survey of 1007 respondents, the resultant database of which formed the main bank of material for the NEPORUS project, “New Politics Groups and the Russian State,” funded by the Research Council of Norway, and with Geir Flikke as the principal investigator. The ROMIR survey, consisting of 70 questions, spanned four major substantive concerns: the executive and society; social protest and framing; societal developments; and mobilization and social media. For information regarding ROMIR, see: <http://ROMIR.ru>. The NEPORUS eight team members who constructed the survey are Geir Flikke, Elena Belokurova, Steven Fish, Pål Kolstø, Jardar Østbø, Carolina Vendil Pallin, Anna Tarasenko, and John P. (Pat) Willerton. For details regarding the survey instrument, contact Geir Flikke (University of Oslo).

groups and gender, even if Putin drew slightly higher confidence among women than among men, and enjoyed strongest support in the age group 45 years and above.⁶⁹

However, one should point out that not so long ago, Putin's possession of the quality of durable charismatic legitimacy seemed in doubt. In the wake of the casting move agreed between the then Prime Minister Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev prior to the 2011/2012 elections, to the effect that they would switch positions with each other afterwards, mass protests erupted in Moscow, St. Petersburg and several other major cities. It was widely held that, through the deal with Medvedev, Putin violated the spirit of the Constitution, according to which no one should serve as president for more than two consecutive periods. With hundreds of thousands of protesters taking to the streets to protest against the deal and the apparent election fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections, it seemed as if Putin's carefully accumulated legitimacy was finally wearing thin.⁷⁰ Gel'man labeled the massive protests against the 2011 Duma elections the "partial defeat of electoral authoritarianism in Russia" and held that the protest movement indicated the emergence of "cracks in the wall" that might eventually prove fateful for the regime.⁷¹ Did they perhaps also indicate cracks in the mythscape, and if so, how did the regime deal with these?

In the months immediately following the 2012 presidential elections, the newly reinstated president appeared visibly tired, lacking in vision and needing new recipes for how to uphold his former magic in relation to the public.⁷² In 2014, there was an abrupt change of scenery, and Putin and his team regained the political initiative. First, the Olympic Winter Games were held in Sochi, giving Putin the opportunity to take center stage and appear publicly as the symbol and embodiment of Russia's regained great-power status.⁷³ Then, in March, and following on the regime upheavals in Ukraine, there was the annexation of Crimea, which served as a game-changer, boosted Putin's popularity ratings far above 80% and kept them there. Working with apparent success on the intersection of political myths of Russia as a predestined great power, the looming prospect of a Time of Troubles, and the present danger of hostile Western encirclement, Putin seemed to have restored his legitimacy, at least among the bulk of the electorate. Especially the latter theme seems to have become increasingly prominent during his third presidential term. If rightful great-power prowess and the looming threat of internal disorder were not enough to sway the masses, perhaps the specter of foreign ill will and hostile intentions was.

However, popular perceptions of the legitimacy of the 2011/2012 elections still seemed to be vacillating for quite some time. In the ROMIR/NEPORUS survey of October 2014, only 56.4% of the total number of 1802 respondents said that they considered the 2012 presidential elections to have been "absolutely" or "at least for the most part" free and fair. (The corresponding figure for the 2011 parliamentary elections was 47%).⁷⁴

[Tables 1 & 2 here]

⁶⁹ ROMIR/NEPORUS poll, October 2014.

⁷⁰ Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia*....

⁷¹ Vladimir Gel'man. 2013. "Cracks in the Wall: Challenges to Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60:2: 3-10.

⁷² Petersson, "Still Embodying..."; Hutcheson and Petersson, "Shortcut to Legitimacy..."

⁷³ Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk. 2014. "The Four Pillars of Russia's Power Narrative," *The International Spectator*, 49: 4: 62-75; Emil Persson and Bo Petersson. 2014. "Political Mythmaking and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi: Olympism and the Russian Great Power Myth," *East European Politics*, 30:2: 192-209.

⁷⁴ ROMIR/NEPORUS poll, October 2014.

This relatively low level of indicated trust would seem to signal that the presidential magic had become somewhat tainted after all. Similarly, only about 47% of the respondents held it to be certain or close to certain (8 to 10 on a 10-point scale) that, if given the choice, they would vote for Putin in the presidential elections in 2018. On the other hand, only 11.5% of those surveyed believed it to be certain or close to certain that they would *not* vote for the re-election of Putin at that future point in time.

[Table 3 here]

These results would seem to indicate “legitimacy by default,” a label referring to the conundrum when there are no credible candidates around to contest the incumbent’s continued bid for power.⁷⁵ As a power basis for the regime, it would be frail in comparison to the Weberian sub-types of legitimating authority, and it could hardly supplant these, except for during a very limited time. This leads us to consider the dilemmas of succession and charismatic legitimacy in more detail.

Charismatic legitimacy and problems of political succession

Weber defined “charisma” as denoting “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”⁷⁶ Adapting this definition to more secular surroundings, Chung Joong-Gun argues that a leader who enjoys charismatic legitimacy must “possess some special qualities which can initially arouse the enthusiasm and emotional fidelity essential to leading to the establishment of charismatic authority.”⁷⁷ Moreover, such a leader must be seen as an exemplary national hero or savior of the nation, as someone who has shown leadership in the initial stage of nation building and has created a cohesive and unified society. Finally, a leader with charismatic legitimacy is someone who can serve as the ultimate justification of the political and social order.⁷⁸ The former Deputy Chief of the Presidential Staff, Vyacheslav Volodin declared at the annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in 2014: “there is no Russia today if there is no Putin.”⁷⁹ This is an emotional form of relationship, rather than legitimacy based on rational principles and processes. To a considerable extent, it seems to characterize the relationship between Putin and his followers.

Charismatic legitimacy is the least durable variant of the Weberian ideal types of legitimacy. It may be elusive, but it is still not likely to vanish overnight. Rather, it will gradually drain away, as indeed seemed to be the case with Putin during the months before and after his

⁷⁵ Vladimir Gel'man. 2010. “Regime Changes Despite Legitimacy Crises: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in Post - Communist Russia.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1:1: 54-63.

⁷⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*..., pp.241-242.

⁷⁷ Chung Joong-Gun, “Charisma and Regime Legitimacy...,” p. 87.

⁷⁸ Chung Joong-Gun, “Charisma and Regime Legitimacy...,” p. 85.

⁷⁹ “No Putin, No Russia,’ Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff,” *The Moscow Times*.

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-40702>, accessed 18 January 2017.

victory in the 2012 elections. From the perspective of a charismatic leader, the obvious remedy against receding charisma would be to try to renew the old magic, continuously and increasingly appealing to and stirring up new emotions. This process may display the dark side of legitimacy, as behavior consistent with prevailing political myths may be condoned and accepted, even if seeming outright immoral or starkly contravening basic principles of international law. The actions undertaken by Russia under Putin's third presidency regarding the annexation of Crimea and the evident but officially denied involvement in the civil war in eastern Ukraine⁸⁰ are cases in point. The president has been able to draw legitimacy from his forceful embodiment of the great-power myth, as well as from his perceived abilities to guarantee internal order and fight alleged foreign meddling and hostile encirclement.

This outcome has not come without a price tag, however. Charismatic legitimacy is not an entity, which is either there or not there: it is a continuous process of persuasive communication and emotional allegiance, serving to link the political leader to the populace. It comes into being only through interaction with the audience, i.e. the public at large.⁸¹ Putin's skills as a rhetorician, able to adapt his style of communication to fit the audience, are well known.⁸² He is the kind of gifted storyteller that the charismatic political leader is expected to be, and has the reputation of being able to get the stories that he wishes to tell across to the electorate. However, Weber saw charisma as being unstable, mystical, and irrational.⁸³ Because of these elusive characteristics, charismatic legitimacy would ultimately have to be routinized and transformed into either the traditional or the legal-rational type in order not to evaporate. From a Western democratic and normative perspective, the latter type would clearly be preferable.

As several scholars have argued, it is not simply the matter of there being a chronological and one-way transition from popularity, over to charismatic legitimacy, and further on to legal-rational legitimacy. Rico Isaacs holds that a blend of radically diverse types of legitimation grounds could make it difficult to proceed in the direction of legal-rational legitimacy, as the different subtypes could suppress each other.⁸⁴ Similarly, Gel'man has argued that Putin's reliance on personal popularity and high rates of approval may inhibit the development of legal-rational legitimacy of state institutions.⁸⁵ This would denote an adverse relationship between charismatic and legal-rational legitimacy. In addition, and as mentioned above, Putin's high approval rates have co-existed with consistently low ratings regarding trust in state institution,⁸⁶ which is hardly a sustainable situation.

There is a fundamental dilemma linked to political succession in non-democratic settings. As Gel'man has argued, the uncertain prospects of political succession are the Achilles' heel of authoritarian regimes.⁸⁷ Can charismatic legitimacy carry over from one generation of political leaders to another? Above all, can it be transferred from one incumbent to the successor?⁸⁸ Non-democratic states with their often less than transparent rules of the political

⁸⁰ Emil Edenborg. 2016. "Nothing more to see...".

⁸¹ Bert Hoffmann. 2009. "Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change: Lessons from Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession," *International Political Science Review*. 30: 3: 229-248, at p. 233.

⁸² Michael S. Gorham S. M. 2013. "Putin's Language." In Helena Goscilo, ed. *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London: Routledge.

⁸³ Weber, *Economy and Society*....

⁸⁴ Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization..."

⁸⁵ Gel'man, "Regime Changes..."

⁸⁶ Sil and Chen, "State Legitimacy..."

⁸⁷ Gel'man, "Cracks in the Wall..." p. 5.

⁸⁸ Chung Joong-Gun, "Charisma and Regime Legitimacy..."; Hoffmann, "Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change..."; Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization..."

game face the risk of encountering an “unpreparedness syndrome”⁸⁹ – *inter alia* due to the absence of truly competitive elections, which normally help resolve questions of succession in democratic settings.⁹⁰

Weber identified different processes of routinization of charisma through which the orderly succession from one generation of political leaders to another could take place. More recently, Isaacs has taken Weber’s theories as a point of departure for discussing ways of routinization of charisma that could be conceivable for the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁹¹ The problem of succession from the present and ageing charismatic leader seems to be more imminent in Kazakhstan than in Russia. Since Isaacs wrote his article, Uzbekistan has already been plunged into a transition period following the death of its long-serving president Islam Karimov in September 2016. Karimov’s perennial prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was swiftly appointed interim president after the demise of the former incumbent. In the December 2016 presidential elections, official figures reported that Mirziyoyev received the visibly reassuring figure of 88.6% of the vote.⁹²

Using Weber, Isaacs discussed in general terms the applicability of the processes of routinization through designation, hereditary strategies, and attempts to transfer charisma to bureaucratic office. The first would denote appointing a leader (“the Yeltsin path”), the second would mean passing on power to one of the incumbent’s kin (“the Aliev path”), and the third would involve the charismatic incumbent’s injecting legitimacy into parliamentary bodies, the prime minister’s office, or other state institutions, thereby giving a boost to the development of legal-rational legitimacy. Isaacs’ conclusion with respect to the Central Asian states is that the most likely way forward would be routinization by designation.⁹³ The swift appointment of Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan would seem to prove him right.

Would this route also be the most probable one for Russia? During the annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in 2016, Yuri Slezkine, Professor of Russian History at Berkeley, asked Putin about the strategies for political succession held in stock by the Kremlin. Slezkine observed that in Russian history there had most often not been any mechanism for an orderly succession of power, and he was therefore wondering what was being done so that the future transition to the post-Putin period could work smoothly. To this, Putin merely answered that it was up to the Russian people to elect the next leader and work together with the new government, which would come to power when that time arrived.⁹⁴ Regardless of whether he answered that way because he found the question improper or because he just did not care, his dodging of the issue was apparent.

So far, Putin has not shown any indications of trying to elevate his kin into top positions, so the hereditary strategy foreseen by Weber would not appear applicable. The strategy of conferring legitimacy to parliamentary or state institutions and thereby achieving a modicum of legal-rational legitimacy also does not seem to be an option favored by the president. Measures such as the clampdown in recent years on political opponents, and the hollowing-

⁸⁹ Chung Joong-Gun, “Charisma and Regime Legitimacy...,” p. 99.

⁹⁰ Hoffmann, “Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change...,” p. 229.

⁹¹ Isaacs, “Charismatic Routinization...”

⁹² *Presidential Election Results Announced*, 2017, <http://www.elections.uz/en/events/news/45267/>, accessed January 16, 2017.

⁹³ Isaacs, “Charismatic Routinization...”

⁹⁴ *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*. 2016. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>, accessed November 17, 2016.

out of the importance of the Russian parliament would be central pieces of counter-evidence, among many others.

On the other hand, Putin has not seemed keen on grooming any heir apparent whatever, so in this sense, the alternative of designation would also seem distant. Of course, that need not signify anything more than that the president hopes to remain in office for as long as the current constitution permits him to, i.e. up until 2024, providing that he remains in good health and wins the presidential elections due in 2018. Putin may simply be assuming that his health will remain sound for several years yet, and that there is no rush about making provisions for someone to replace him. However, that might seem a risky strategy given that, while still rather young in comparison to several presidential colleagues abroad, Putin is half-way into his 60s, and good health can never be taken for granted.

Conclusion

During recent decades in Russian politics, Vladimir Putin has consistently enjoyed markedly high approval rates and has benefitted from charismatic legitimacy, whereas systemic legal-rational legitimacy has remained poorly developed. This article has argued that Putin's charismatic legitimacy stems not least from the way that he has persuasively communicated his politics and his own central role to the electorate, thereby using and exploiting an imaginary, which for analytical purposes has been referred to here as "political myth."

Putin has come across as the sole guarantor of Russia's great-power status, as well as of Russia's continued stability and its defiance of and victory over allegedly hostile plots by Western powers. This success seems to have come at a price, however. Putin has been so adroit when it comes to portraying himself as the only available – and indeed the only imaginable – leader of any stature that no heir apparent is in sight and no one is there to challenge him for his office. A highly precarious power vacuum might appear, should he need to exit the political stage prematurely.

Authoritarian leaders who have not been able or willing to sustain legal-rational legitimization processes, have not founded a dynasty to inherit them, and have no clearly designated successors, may leave the way open for protracted power struggles and conflicts of succession after they leave the scene – even despite intentions not to let this happen. To prevent this from occurring, processes of routinization of charisma should be set in motion to reduce insecurity in the political system. If the field is left entirely open, new contestants will be likely to launch political offensives to attract a following, using emotive appeals to define new legitimizing political myths or try to tag onto and reinforce old ones. This is a process with uncertain outcomes, as the whole board game as well as its rules may have to be defined anew. In their attempts to make themselves heard and heeded, the new contenders may go much further in their rhetorical claims than Vladimir Putin has ever done. Unless forestalled through carefully crafted mechanisms for handling the processes of succession, this is likely to become a highly volatile and sensitive period of political development. In such a situation, domestic and external observers alike may find themselves longing for the materialization of the benevolent Weberian ideal type of entrenched legal-rational legitimacy with its well-established rules of transition.

Table 1: Do you consider the 2012 presidential elections free and fair?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Yes, absolutely	206	20.5	20.5	20.5
	2 Yes, somewhat	384	38.1	38.1	58.6
	3 No, somewhat (skoree)	166	16.5	16.5	75.1
	4 Not at all	87	8.6	8.6	83.7
	9 D/N	164	16.3	16.3	100.0
	Total	1007	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Do you consider the December 2011 parliamentary elections free and fair?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Yes, absolutely	141	14.0	14.0	14.0
	2 Yes, somewhat	364	36.1	36.1	50.1
	3 No, somewhat (skoree)	204	20.3	20.3	70.4
	4 Not at all	92	9.1	9.1	79.5
	9 D/N	206	20.5	20.5	100.0
	Total	1007	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3: What do you think is the chance you will vote to reelect Vladimir Putin
President of the Russian Federation in March 2018?**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-Definitely not	50	5.0	5.0	5.0
2	21	2.1	2.1	7.1
3	29	2.9	2.9	9.9
4	67	6.7	6.7	16.6
5	120	11.9	11.9	28.5
6	90	8.9	8.9	37.4
7	117	11.6	11.6	49.1
8	131	13.0	13.0	62.1
9	127	12.6	12.6	74.7
10-Definitely	255	25.3	25.3	100.0
Total	1007	100.0	100.0	