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Balance of threat: The domestic insecurity of Vladimir Putin [☆]



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ABSTRACT

During the 17 years that Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia, the country has become increasingly authoritarian. However, I argue that this rollback of democracy has not been motivated by Putin's blind desire to maximize his political power, as many have assumed. Rather, his anti-democratic policies have responded to perceived specific threats to his control. In applying theories originally developed in the field of international relations to individual leaders, we can understand Putin as a "defensive realist" who balances against threats in order to maintain security rather than maximize power. This is an essential distinction that produces important conclusions about what motives lie behind the increasingly authoritarian character of the Russian state and gives insights into the possible future trajectory of the regime.

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1. Introduction

The anti-democratic policies and reforms of Vladimir Putin during the years he served as Russia's president (2000–2008, 2012–present) and as Prime Minister (2008–2012) are well known. Efforts aimed at silencing independent media, jailing and legal harassment of outspoken oligarchs, elimination of gubernatorial elections, and raising barriers to opposition political parties characterized the early years of Putin's rule. The mid- to late-2000s witnessed increasing manipulation of electoral processes in order to produce favorable outcomes for Putin and the party of power, United Russia. Not until the mass protests that spread through

Russian cities following the questionable Duma and presidential elections of 2011–2012 did Putin initiate a significant crackdown on ordinary citizen political activism.

To many observers and scholars of Russian politics, Putin's efforts have been a constant and deliberate process of deepening authoritarian rule in Russia, concentrating ever more political power in the Kremlin. Such a narrative is often paired with the assumption – explicit or otherwise – that Putin's goal (whether for personal or institutional reasons) is to maximize his political power as head of the Russian state. Thus, the gradual attack on democratic institutions and individual liberties in Russia has come at the hands of a power-hungry dictator who always seeks more for himself. This line of reasoning resonates at the domestic level with theories developed in International Relations to describe the behavior of states: "offensive realism" argues that great powers seek to acquire as much power in the international system as possible in order to promote their security. A domestic "offensive realist" explanation of Putin's authoritarianism would argue the same.

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However, in international relations theory there is another school of thought, that of the “defensive realists” who argue that states seek not to maximize power but rather to maximize their security. The goal of states in the international system, according to defensive realists, is to ensure their security and survival, an objective that may actually be undermined if they seek too much power and provoke a backlash. “Balance of threat theory,” first developed by Stephen Walt, is an example of the defensive realist school of thought. Walt argues that states take action to counter threats to their security, with threat level determined by four characteristics of a possible rival state: 1) Aggregate power; 2) Offensive power; 3) Proximate power; and 4) Offensive intentions. To the defensive realist operating according to balance of threat logic, the threat to state security comes first and is followed by a counterbalancing reaction. This contrasts with the offensive realist assertion that great powers are primarily assertive – not reactive – in efforts to expand their power.

I argue the application of insights from these IR theories to the domestic political power calculations of Vladimir Putin’s regime can produce important insights into the logic and trajectory of Russia’s authoritarian development. By properly understanding Putin as a “domestic defensive realist” who seeks first and foremost to maintain and secure his domestic power, we can understand his anti-democratic policies in a new light. A careful analysis of several episodes throughout Putin’s rule will reveal that his policies – while undoubtedly authoritarian – are not examples of a power-hungry dictator expanding his control as widely and deeply as possible. Rather, they are more accurately seen as reactions to threats that have arisen to his political control and security.

This conclusion – that Putin “balances” in reaction to domestic threats – leads to some troubling and surprising conclusions: Vladimir Putin’s actions suggest a deep sense of insecurity which has led to a nearly obsessive counterrevolutionary focus on ever-emerging threats to his political survival. These threats have often been concentrated around electoral cycles in Russia and – importantly – in Russia’s neighbors as well. This leads to a prediction that Russia will continue its authoritarian ratcheting under Putin and that the next rounds of elections in Russia are likely to be the most oppressed in Russia’s post-Soviet history.

2. Putin’s authoritarian march

There can be no question that since coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin has overseen the transformation of Russia from a semi-democracy to an exemplar of “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The causes of that transition are multiple and they are complex; the present endeavor does not afford the opportunity to explore the full spectrum of causes of Russia’s authoritarian trajectory. However, there is no doubt that Putin himself has been a key driving force behind Russia’s increasingly autocratic regime. The general outlines of Russia’s political development under Putin is readily apparent in Figures 1 and 2, which display Russia’s compiled scores from Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit* (NIT) reports (Ortung, 2009, 2014). The *Nations in Transit* reports evaluate, rate, and discuss a country’s progress toward or away from democracy along several dimensions of liberal democracy, as well as a composite “democracy score” (Fig. 1) that combines the ratings in each subcategory. The Freedom House scale ranges from 1 (consolidated democracy) to 7 (consolidated

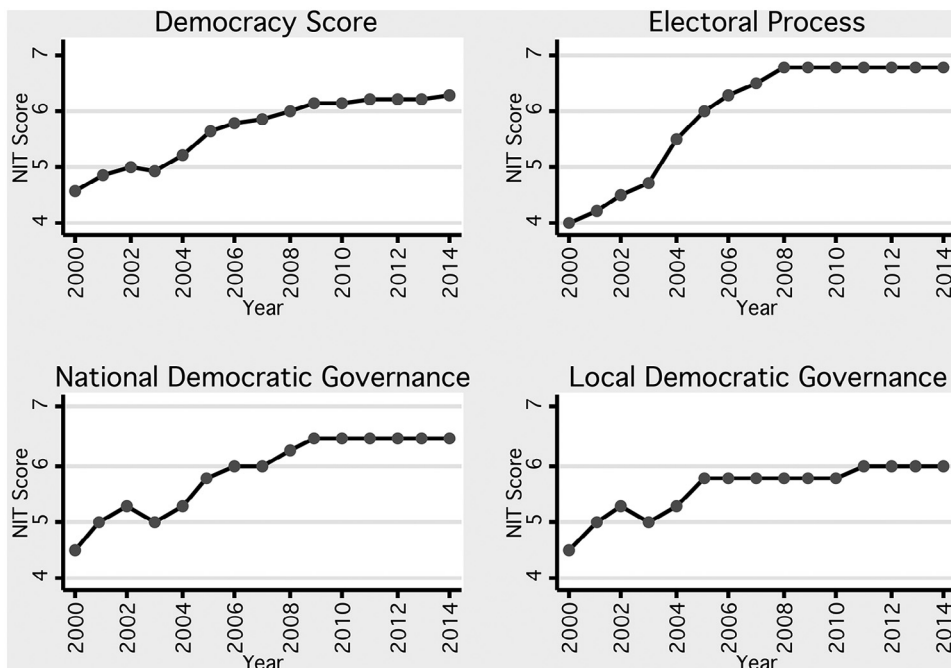


Fig. 1. Freedom House “Nations in Transit” scores – Russia.

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