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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Is Politics Always the Same? Response to Comments on *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity*

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The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity, by Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, $99.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780197502938.

I am very grateful to join this forum with colleagues who largely share the ideas and approaches developed in *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity*. I view these comments as an enlightening and productive engagement with the book's ideas and as attempts to further them even more. They clarify the comparative implications of the argument and the uniqueness of Putinism, probe alternative concepts that capture similar meaning, and highlight the global context in which identity politics takes place in various countries as well as the specificities of the domestic historical and social context in Russia.

Preaching to the choir also means taking for granted the fundamental assumptions shared by scholars who focus on issues of collective identity in their research. I would like to specifically highlight two assumptions that might be seen as distinguishing the political scientists working in the rationalist institutionalist tradition and those who focus on issues of nationalism and identity politics. These assumptions concern our understanding of the terms *human being* and *politics*. Any analytical perspective in social sciences needs to rely on a conceptualization of a human being. The currently influential analytical framework of rational choice institutionalism—arguably still reigning in economics and political science (at least in its Anglo-Saxon practice)—often relies on the view of the human being as *homo economicus*. This view builds on the appreciation of social agents' individualism (that individuals are autonomous and self-interested), their optimizing (or at least satisficing) behavior, and their rationality (even if bounded). These features apply universally across different countries and cultures, thereby enabling generalization and development of theories that apply in a comparative setting (Urbina and Ruiz-Villaverde 2019).

The analysis of political and social phenomena featuring identity issues normally relies on a somewhat different view of a human being. Whenever we focus on collective identity, individualism is overturned by the importance of social aspects of human existence and the sense of belonging in different groups. Optimizing rational behavior to maximize individual utility is frequently replaced by irrational, affect-laden action undertaken with the view of the group. In short, the *homo economicus* model that might explain individual behavior in the context of so-called normal politics might be amiss in the context of identity politics.

This brings me to the important nuances in the conceptualization of politics and the political that we, as scholars, rely on in our analytical practice. Let me use the term *normal politics* to refer to the analysis of institutionalized political action governed by rules (formal and informal) and interests (individual and group based). This conceptualization captures well the context of stable politics and established rules that work to structure social and political interaction. But how do politics change at

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times of disruption or transformation? Are there other conceptualizations of the political that become more relevant at times? Yes, there are. The one that has become increasingly relevant in the Russian context is the Schmittian conceptualization of the political understood through the distinction between a friend and an enemy (Lewis 2020). This concept of politics focuses on the mobilization of a political unity of a group of people (a nation) and building a group consensus driven by the opposition to the Other. While Carl Schmitt's "The Concept of Political" (1932) might have been written in part as a pamphlet criticizing the politics in Weimar Germany in the 1920s, the underlying concept of the political helps to explain the political evolution in Putin's Russia, Trump's America, Orban's Hungary, and more. Anywhere political leaders and political entrepreneurs draw sharp us-versus-them boundaries and, instead of emphasizing the rule-based, deliberation- and negotiation-driven conflict resolution, they spark more intense forms of political action driven by emotions. Such politics in the state of exception cannot last forever. At the end of the day, social agents contain multiple selves—*homo economicus* and *homo politicus* (along with other aspects of human multidimensionality). Here I diverge somewhat from Vyacheslav Morozov's interpretation of *homo economicus* as a myth. I rather view it as a model that approximates human behavior and that could be fruitfully applied to social analysis in specific contexts (indeed, far from universally applicable). Still, an important challenge for social scientists is to integrate the understanding and analysis of the context—both structurally given by history and constructed by political and social agents—that would help us assess which concept of human being and the political might provide a greater analytical leverage for explaining political outcomes. One can argue that the underappreciation of this challenge is costly both politically and analytically. How else can we explain the unforeseen disruptions of Brexit or Trump's electoral victory?

My book focused on the state of exception in post-Crimea Russia when the national identity imperative seemed to take hold of the Russian society. I thought it was important to illuminate the historical context along with the processes of political construction that enabled this new, post-Crimea moment. Morozov fittingly brings up the issue of where Russia's uniqueness could be found in this analysis and highlights important structural similarities of the identity politics practiced in other political contexts. Indeed, the wedge politics of pitting the losers against the well-to-do people is not what distinguishes Russian-style identity politics. Rather, the combination of identity legacies of the late Soviet period (the historical context) combined with the political construction of the collective trauma relying on real-life experiences of the 1990s is what makes Putinism unique. Political construction is a process that is bounded by what the context allows. The victimhood politics à la Putin was made possible given the late Soviet assumptions of greatness, exceptionalism, and superiority (often taken for granted) and the residue of emotions associated with the transition of the 1990s. Indeed, as Olga Malinova suggests, it was not only about the economic and social dislocation; the collapse of the Soviet Union shattered the symbolic pillars and the ideational connective tissue people used to live in. The symbolic repercussions of the end of communism differed dramatically across postcommunist countries. While other transition countries gained national sovereignty and a sense of exceptionalism (through return to Europe or rebuilding the lost nationhood), Russia had to confront the challenge of othering itself, as I try to explain in chapter 4. Therefore, the pains of transition were absorbed very differently in transitioning countries: while some communities could connect with the collective purpose of transition (i.e., returning to independent nationhood), the Russian elites tried to create a new collective purpose under Putin's leadership through denying the original purpose of the transition period and constructing a sense collective trauma around it.

In her discussion, Olga Malinova brings up the concept of a political myth that can also usefully capture the political role of the narrative about the 1990s in contemporary Russia. Myths consolidate communities; they can play a role in legitimizing rulers and propping charismatic leadership. One can also perceive the same mythologizing in the narratives about a sacred victory in World War II. Other scholars have found the political myth-making perspective helpful for making sense of Russia (Petersson 2017). My choice of Vamik Volkan's (2009) double concept—chosen glory and

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chosen trauma—reflects more my appreciation of a particular fit of these concepts to the Russian discursive environment where these dual, positive and negative, symbols used for consolidation are protruding in the Russian symbolic landscape. While the search for political myths can lead us in various directions, Volkan's conceptualization highlights two foundational elements essential for collective consolidation that incidentally prop up the contemporary collective consensus in Russia.

Vycheslav Morozov highlights the global context of the growing role of capital and the retrenchment of the welfare state as important structural forces that have shaped political developments and the rise of populism in East Central Europe (as well as other countries). How did this context of globalization and the neoliberal consensus of the 1990s play out in Russia's political evolution? As Morozov suggests, the beneficiaries are concentrated largely in cosmopolitan urban centers, while the communities of the periphery experienced stagnation (at best), even though the economic growth of the first decade of the 21st century was felt across the country. The 2011–2012 political protests and movement for fair elections were led by the cosmopolitan, urban middle class, while the political strategy developed by the Kremlin to counter this political threat relied on the conservative mobilization of the periphery through collective identity politics. One can conjecture that the type of identity politics the Kremlin promoted would not have worked in Russia if more Russian citizens have found personal self-actualization in their professions, social work, and other pursuits that would have allowed them to construct more secure selves. The actualization of the victimhood frame in relation to national identity is more effective among individuals with lowered self-esteem, and recent scholarship on collective narcissism highlights the role collective identity can play in compensating for the undermined sense of self-importance (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, and Lantos 2019).

Finally, as Eugene Huskey notes in his comments on *The Red Mirror*, "No legitimating device can last forever" (2021). The question we are left with is "How long can such collective identity politics last?" We see the weakening of this consensus in Russia starting at least in 2018, following the pension reform that directly hit the pockets of many Russian citizens. The 2020 constitutional amendments enabling Putin to stay in power until 2036 represented another moment that revealed the corruption of power in Russia. Alexei Navalny's political choices also shaped the political landscape in Russia in ways unexpected by the Kremlin. So, the heyday of the effectiveness of Putin-style identity politics has long passed, forcing the Kremlin on the path of increasing repressions, restrictions, and the use of the state apparatus to maintain the status quo. (We should also add social payments and benefits in the list of the Kremlin's sticks and carrots.) But on the symbolic plane, the Kremlin has not found any alternative but to maintain the approach based on collective identity for its legitimation.

Postscriptum: The unthinkable, all-out war Russia started on February 24, 2022, against Ukraine restructured the political context globally and locally in Russia. It brought the identity-driven, Schmittian politics of us versus the enemy onto a new level, splitting the Russian society and forcing people to choose between two sides (Russia and Ukraine) and between two outcomes: Russia's victory and Russia's defeat. The politics of victimhood has now consummated in the horror of war at the scale the European countries have not known since the WWII. That war was also driven by a sense of victimhood, nurtured and manipulated, to be then turned into a senseless military aggression. The consequences of this war—for Russia, Ukraine, and the world—are still unknown at the moment of this writing, and while we cannot not think about what awaits Russia, Ukraine, and the world after the war ends, bring the war to an end is a priority for all.

Disclosures. None.

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