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COMMENTARY

Fighting for Discursive Hegemony: The Kremlin's Foundation Is Shaking

By Mario Baumann

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The backbone of Putin's leadership has always been unswerving support from a large part of the Russian population. Putin's accession to office was accompanied by an aura of a new beginning and youth, contrasting with the disillusionment of the Yeltsin era and the grim 1990s. After the swift economic upswing of Putin's first two terms, the leadership's support has been largely nourished by a narrative of external threat. The centrality of this narrative has been underlined by the recent events surrounding Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. These events show, however, that the leadership is increasingly having trouble maintaining that logic.

The Kremlin has reacted stridently to Western accusations of the leadership's complicity in the attack. Through questioning, ridiculing and discrediting the Western narrative, the Russian leadership has denied any involvement in the case. It has attempted to turn the tables and present Russia as the victim of an anti-Russian conspiracy. According to this version of events, Western governments are not only unwilling to cooperate in establishing the truth; it has also been suggested that the case was a staged operation (Lavrov 2021a), a mass disinformation campaign (Deutsche Welle 2020) resulting from anti-Russian hysteria (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

This storyline resonates with the ongoing accusations of non-credibility and double standards that the Kremlin asserts against the West. The idea of the 'outside enemy' has become central to generating political support. Yet, the question is to what extent the Kremlin is actually successful in hegemonizing public discourse with this narrative of the 'besieged fortress'.

With regard to the Navalny case, data provided by the Levada-Center (2020) draw a mixed picture. Out of all respondents aware of the issue, 30% subscribe to the idea of a staged operation and 19% believe the poisoning to be a provocation by Western intelligence services. Against these officially articulated narratives, only 15% support the version suggested by Western governments and institutions, namely that the incident was an attempt by the Russian leadership to eliminate a political opponent. Yet this interpretation of events is supported by the biggest share of those aged 24 or younger (34%). A similar picture emerges from polls on the Russia-wide protests after Navalny's detention in January (Levada-Center 2021a). While feelings towards protestors are generally mixed among respondents, sym-

pathy is especially high among the young and those relying on non-traditional media sources.

This illustrates that the Russian official rhetoric is only partly successful in hegemonizing public discourse. It seems to struggle particularly with the young, who have no active memory of the instability of the pre-Putin years and, through the internet and social media, are most exposed to alternative narratives. While Putin's approval ratings are still high (Levada-Center 2021b), they are nonetheless on an overall decline. The echo of Navalny's latest investigative video indicates that the legitimacy of Putin as the protector of the Russian people against a corrupt elite and the oligarchy might be shaking (Levada-Center 2021c).

Responses: Increasing Hostility and Repression

So far, the Kremlin's response has been an ever more aggressive stance against the West and increasing repression against political dissent. Russia's fierce reactions to Western accusations in the Navalny case have demonstrated an unprecedented level of hostility, causing the country's already-strained relations with the EU to sink to a new low.

The Kremlin's rhetoric, however, not only discredits the challenge of an alternative Western interpretation—it also serves to legitimate a tougher stance at home, thereby transferring internal dissent to the outside. Navalny, so it goes, is an instrument of either the CIA or German intelligence (Peskov 2020, Lavrov 2021b). This rhetorically legitimises the hard course of action against him, his team, and his supporters. The harsh crackdown on protestors during the January events is indicative of a growing authoritarian response to domestic political challenges. Other signals include the recent confrontation with Twitter, the suppression of oppositional activities, and the tightening of the foreign agent law, whose application has now been extended also to non-registered entities and individuals.

For the leadership, these two sources of instability—Western accusations and growing internal dissent—are inextricably linked, since both challenge the authority of the official narrative. By lumping together any form of domestic political challenge with evil forces from abroad, the Kremlin thus aims to kill two birds with one stone. This strategy seeks to marginalise and discredit alternative interpretations from outside, to delegitimise dissent

within the country, and to justify the repressive measures taken to suppress those critics.

Implications for the EU's Russia Policy

The EU ought to take the Kremlin's besieged fortress narrative into account when devising its policy approach towards Russia. This narrative not only perpetuates the political deadlock between Brussels and Moscow, but also aids the latter in covering up the silencing of domestic political dissent. Any policy must thus be evaluated against what effects it induces within the country—and especially for those the Kremlin has rhetorically ostracised.

The Russian leadership's defensive reaction to Western accusations in the Navalny case has shown that

a pro-government public discourse is crucial for the Russian leadership to keep up the appearance of legitimacy for its course of action. In response to the current crisis, the EU should therefore first and foremost vocally insist on the accountability of Russia's leadership to its population. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are values Russia openly committed to as a member of multilateral institutions such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the United Nations. Firmly insisting on this normative ground, the EU can argue with facts to challenge the Kremlin's deflecting rhetoric while at the same time maintaining a basis for an inclusive vision for Europe that in the long run keeps alive the possibility of rapprochement and normalization.

About the Author

Mario Baumann is reading for his PhD at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies (BSIS). In his research he focuses on the interaction of interpretations in Russia and the European Union. In a [recent study](#), he analyses the discourse on information warfare in Russia–West relations.

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