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Book review:

Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Kristin A. Eggeling*

Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia edited by Martin Brusis, Joachim Ahrens and Martin Schulze Wessel, 2016, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Martin Brusis, Joachim Ahrens and Martin Schulze Wessel's edited volume *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (2016) is the outcome of a workshop held in Munich in November 2013, and brings together the work of scholars based in Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, the United States, and Kazakhstan. The volume consists of ten chapters that can broadly be divided into two framework chapters (chapter 1 and 10) and eight analytical chapters (chapter 2-9). Based on this structure, the volume takes on the shape of an hourglass that includes broader discussions towards the beginning and the end, and focuses in on specific case studies in the chapters in-between. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the literature for at least two main reasons: first, it adds an important reference work to ongoing debates in the broader field of International Relations (IR) and comparative politics on the importance of legitimacy and legitimation in non-democratic contexts; and second, it particularly places these debates into the context of the post-Soviet sphere, where against initial hopes of democratisation and pluralisation authoritarian rule has consolidated and displayed remarkable 'robustness' (p. 1) over the last two decades. The publication of this volume is therefore a timely one, and will be of great interest to students and scholars working on the puzzling relationship between legitimation and authoritarian rule both in the region and beyond.

Next to this general contribution, much of the volume's value lies in the dual function performed by its individual chapters. On the one hand, all chapters contribute towards the overall aim identified by the editors of studying 'the legitimacy dimensions of non-democratic political regimes and the relationship between institutional legitimacy and stability' in post-Soviet Eurasia (PSE); a region defined to include 'those states that share the legacy of the former Soviet Union, but which have not established stable democracies' (p. 2). It is possible to read the book in one – if long – sitting, and to identify the recurrence of common themes and theoretical assumptions, which speaks to internal coherence and editorial skill. Taken together, the contributions, moreover, span a wide range of theoretical and conceptual approaches (including economics, political science, legal studies, historiography, and literary criticism) that discuss political legitimation in both its administrative and institutionalised forms (chapter 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), as well as in its more emotional, everyday guises (chapter 2, 7, 8, 9). The volume, moreover, includes case studies from a number of states (Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Belarus), and the single authors draw on a broad range of (re)sources (interviews, primary data, surveys, datasets) to support their arguments. On the other hand, most of the chapters can also be read as stand-alone pieces, some of which – if in slightly different form – have previously already been published as such (chapter 2, 6). It is, therefore, worthwhile to look at the single chapters in some more detail.

In chapter 1, editor Martin Brusis outlines the central puzzle of the book around how different 'modes of legitimation' have contributed to the endurance and stability of non-democratic rule in PSE, and establishes the general 'relevance' of the book preparing it for the 'so-what' intervention (p. 3). Building on David Beetham and his 'empirical concept of legitimacy' (p. 2), Brusis constructs the volume's main theoretical framework around the relationship between 'institutional legitimacy' and regime stability, and argues that this approach assumes that political actors

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can draw on a plurality of sources, modes and patterns of legitimation when either claiming or contesting the legitimacy of institutions and their rule (p. 2). Moreover, he underlines Leslie Holmes' identification of eleven 'modes of legitimation' that have ensured the stability of political institutions, specifically in the context of post-Soviet Russia.

Chapters 2-9 then emphasise the importance of these 'institutions' and 'modes' of legitimation for the continued stability and authoritarian resilience in various states across PSE. A partial exception is chapter 2, written by Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, which does not offer an in-depth case study but proposes a framework for 'compar[ing] and contrast[ing] the most commonly used claims to legitimacy in post-Soviet countries' (p. 19). To this end, the authors introduce a six-fold typology that spans 'input', 'process' and 'output' legitimacy and includes 1) ideology, 2) foundational myths, 3) personalism, 4) international engagement, 5) procedural mechanisms, and 6) performance, as legitimation claims (p. 20). Within this framework, von Soest and Grauvogel produce a convincing and largely unmatched study of the resources of legitimation across the region.

Following the more general discussion in chapter 2, chapters 3-6 take a closer look at the functionalist modes of legitimation found throughout the region. In chapter 3, Joachim Ahrens, Herman Hien and Martin Spechler focus on economic governance, and argue that the regimes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan partly build their legitimacy on a 'dual-economy' structure, in which there is a 'core' economic sector dominated by the state and a 'periphery' sector operating according to free-market principles (p. 48; 58). This set-up, the authors argue, 'serves the overall state interests such as the promotion of security and economic growth, but also the particularistic interests of the political leadership', by simultaneously enriching the state and creating at least the illusion of individual economic opportunities (p. 68). Another contribution emphasising the role of the economy is Christian Timm's analysis of state-led economic policy in Georgia in chapter 5. Here, Timm argues that since independence governments in Georgia have attempted different models of economic development that ultimately resulted in a 'contradictory institutional environment consisting of formal withdrawal of the state, one the one hand, and massive informal interventions on the other' (p. 113). As a result, Georgia's attempts to generate legitimacy have produced mixed results, which according to the author run the risk of diminishing the government's legitimacy in the long run. In-between these two, Adele Del Sordi in chapter 4 analyses the institutional legitimacy of the regime in Kazakhstan by putting a special emphasis on the role of the political party Nur Otan, which developed into an important regime-stabilising factor since its formation in the late 1990s by means of coordinating elites behind the president and mobilising citizens during elections. As the final contribution that looks at institutionalised forms of legitimation claims in the region, Alexei Trochev in chapter 6 looks at Russian Courts and their role in lending a voice to aggrieved citizens without undermining the nature of the regime on the one hand, and providing a legal veil for '(1) reigning in political opponents or business competitors and (2) approving decisions on crimes made by law-enforcement officials' on the other hand (p. 123).

The remaining three analytical chapters (chapters 7-9) look at the 'more diffuse' (p. 149) production of legitimation claims by focusing on the artistic, the imaginative and the everyday. Fabian Burkhardt in chapter 7 discusses how in post-Soviet Belarus authoritarian durability is achieved 'through a gradual, adaptive process of nation-building' under President Alexandr Lukashenko (p. 149). Here, Burkhardt traces the development of four 'concepts of the nation' over time and argues that the regime's alterable references to these concepts contributed to 'authoritarian learning' and 'adaptive authoritarianism' that have reinforced the regime's durability as views on national identity evolved and diversified. Similarly stressing ideational factors, Philipp Bürger in chapter 8 underlines different modes of memory- and myth-making in Russia as a tool used by especially Putin's government to establish an 'interpretation of history that suggests a certain meaning for the present' in which the rule of the incumbent regime is idealised and necessitated (p. 173). In this context, Bürger specifically underlines the importance of 'patriotic education', the making of 'national heroes' and the recurring importance of spectacular military parades, as powerful instruments to establish legitimacy on the basis of a shared views of the past (p. 189/190). And finally, in chapter 9, Alfred Sprode and Oleksandr Zabirko offer another, unique interpretation of

how authoritarian rule is legitimated in PSE by looking at the literary field in Russia. Drawing on three examples of contemporary literary fiction, the authors show how literature can support government discourses about the primacy of state control and security guarantees over freedom and political change. The longest chapter in the volume, this last contribution stands out as being the most comprehensive and timely one, as it links various current issues in Russian politics (especially the 2014 and on-going crisis in Ukraine) to the regime's changing legitimisation claims.

Finally, Leslie Holmes' 'Comparative Conclusions' (chapter 10) broadens the discussion again and puts the variously discussed 'modes of legitimisation' in context with each other. He, therefore, ties the various emphases of the single chapters (reliance on economic structures, political parties, the judicial system, identities, and narratives) into a broader argument that political leaders in the region have changed and adapted their dominant mode of legitimisation over time, and that – when need arises – so-called 'legitimation-shifts' can occur in which the regime (de)emphasises certain aspects of its rule over others (p. 223). One major finding Holmes proposes for the relationship between legitimacy and non-democratic rule in PSE is that legitimisation is not only bound to popular approval, but similarly reliant on the support of the 'staff' of the state (officers of the state, particularly the military and the security policy), and, indeed, the 'chiefs' of the regime (i.e. the leadership itself). He, moreover, observes that in the post-Soviet sphere, legitimisation claims have recently shifted from more legal-rational and socio-economic performance claims to once again stress nationalism, artificial charisma and old traditions. He argues that these modes may, however, not be sufficient in the long run to keep incumbent regimes in power. In this sense, the relationship between politics and legitimacy in post-Soviet Eurasia remains a system in flux that demands close observation over the years to come.

In sum, *Politics and Legitimacy in post-Soviet Eurasia* is an important publication that provides a good glimpse of the political landscape of PSE, which today, after 25 years of independence remains a region in transition. After turning over the last pages of the book, there are merely two noteworthy limitations that come to mind: one structural and one empirical. First, Leslie Holmes' modes of legitimisation are frequently referred to throughout the chapters (starting from Brusis in the introduction), but not really outlined and explained until the conclusion. Assuming that not every reader is an expert on Holmes' work, it may, therefore, have been good to introduce his concepts in more detail somewhere in the beginning of the volume, maybe even in the form of an additional introductory chapter. Second, the majority of chapters seem too focused on the domestic/internal dimensions of legitimisation, with only chapter 2 and 10 making some references to the region's trans- and international legitimisation claims. For Eurasia, a region whose history has been influenced by being located along the crossroads of international exchange, and where again today many international initiatives call for the collaboration of local regimes (i.e. China's OBOR policy, ideas of a new Silk Road, or EU and NATO expansion into the former Soviet bloc), analysis calls for more attention to the international dimensions of the politics of legitimacy. It is here that there is much room for further research. Nevertheless, this volume as a whole and each chapter individually greatly contribute to advancing scholarship on the relationship between legitimisation and non-democratic rule; furthermore, the volume expands discussion to the vital region of post-Soviet Eurasia, which still remains too often overlooked in international scholarship.

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