



DOMESTIC RUSSIAN POLITICS AND COMPARATIVE DEMOCRATIZATION

Date: April 21, 2022

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KEY EVENTS

On April 21, 2022, Dr. Lisa Sundstrom, an expert on Russian politics and a professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia (UBC), presented *Domestic Russian Politics and Comparative Democratization* at the April Digital Roundtable event hosted by the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS)-Vancouver. The key points of discussion included the popularity of the war in Russia, the economic impacts of sanctions and military losses, and the potential sources of opposition to President Vladimir Putin. Dr. Sundstrom's presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Sundstrom questioned whether or not an end to the war can come through domestic change. She discussed what we know about the Russian support for this war and how the impacts of economic sanctions and military losses could affect the growth of the opposition. She also provided an analysis of where potential sources of opposition might come from in Russia and the likelihood of a coup developing.

Question and Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Sundstrom discussed how Canada deals with Russian troll factories and the social media platforms currently being used by Russia. In addition, she discussed possible reasons why wealthy Russians flee to Gulf states as opposed to neighbouring countries, as well as the potential influences behind Putin's actions.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

To begin her presentation, Dr. Sundstrom discussed the popularity of the war against Ukraine in general, and the popularity of Putin as a leader. Based on polling from non-government agencies at the beginning of the war, approximately 50% of the Russian population was in favor of the invasion, which increased to 70% as the war progressed, and rose to over 80% by the beginning of April 2022. Similarly, Putin's popularity as a leader rose from 60% in January 2022, to 71% in March 2022, and to 83% in April 2022.

Dr. Sundstrom pointed out that these results were partially due to people responding disingenuously to surveys due to fear of punishment, as well as people buying in to Russian propaganda, which depicts Ukraine as a country ruled by Nazis or anti-Russian nationalists that are attacking Russian-speaking citizens. Studies have found that there are strong cognitive biases at play of people not wanting to believe their own people are committing horrendous crimes. Furthermore, there appears to be a group herd effect where individuals believe the majority opinion must be the correct one. However, this herd effect can be quite fragile as regime support can dissolve very quickly when the popular opinion breaks down.

Dr. Sundstrom indicated that sanctions and military casualties could be potential sources that contribute to the breakdown of support for Putin and the war. The economic sanctions being imposed on Russia has made it difficult for them to conduct international business in Euros and US dollars or access their sovereign wealth fund. Russians are losing their jobs if they are involved in international transactions, and most Western companies are pulling out of Russia entirely. Moreover, essential goods that need to be imported are starting to disappear, such as computer chips, car parts, and feminine hygiene products. Dr. Sundstrom noted that these sanctions could eventually anger those affected and cause them to lose faith in their government. Indeed, we have already seen Russians leaving the country in large numbers since the war began. Experts estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 Russians have fled to neighbouring countries, including well-known Russian actors, activists, and political figures.

Russian military casualties could also impact the public support for the war. Currently, there is not a reliable estimate of casualties; NATO estimates somewhere between 7,000 and 15,000 Russian soldiers were killed in the first month of the invasion, whereas the Russian military claims there were only a

little over 1,300 fatalities. Russian parents of conscript soldiers are starting to dissent because they have no information about where their sons are, and they are being blatantly lied to. Furthermore, many generals and higher-ranking officers have been killed in combat already, which may create some distress among the remaining officers in the military.

In terms of how opposition could grow and lead to change, Dr. Sundstrom stated that although many people place their faith in a mass uprising of Russian citizens, the government has increased measures of repression and censorship, which makes it incredibly risky to engage in protest. Nearly all independent and social media communications on international platforms have been shut down or blocked from access within Russia (unless via VPNs), which makes it difficult for Russian citizens to obtain accurate information about the war.

Dr. Sundstrom opined that anti-war protests are not enough to foster change or the downfall of the Putin regime. To transition towards more democratic governance, a split within the important decision-making elites within the country is necessary. Taken together, large protests, extreme economic crisis, and heavy Russian casualties may be enough to cause powerful elites to doubt the wisdom of the current approach to Ukraine. Dr. Sundstrom believes that if these *soft-liners* split from the *hard-liners* to argue for change, there is potential for an in-house coup to take place. Unfortunately, in regimes like Russia, dictators rarely relinquish power through negotiation because they are determined to retain power and only a small inner circle have influence.

Dr. Sundstrom argued that Russian oligarchs may wish to oust Putin, as they have been largely affected by the international sanctions against Russia and are displeased with the ruin of the country's economy. However, since Putin consolidated power in the 2000s, these oligarchs rely on Putin's approval in order to accumulate assets, so they have a lot to lose if they oppose him and fail despite how sanctions may be affecting them now.

Dr. Sundstrom noted that given the significant losses of the military in Ukraine, the terrible military strategy and preparation, and the recent replacement of military leaders due to these failures, dissent could begin brewing in the military ranks, leading some to support a coup. However, the Russian military has historically been resistant to launching coups largely due to infiltration by the security services.

A final possibility for a coup is the potential defection of important members of state security services, such as the Federal Security Bureau (FSB). Dr. Sundstrom

advised that Putin is highly dependent on the security agencies, but that there are some tensions that are starting to surface. According to Dr. Sundstrom, insider coups could be possible, particularly if several of these groups join forces to forcibly remove Putin from office or persuade him to step down; however, these processes would take a long time to develop and seem unlikely to occur.

To conclude, Dr. Sundstrom opined that if there is no coup, there will likely be more severe repression of the Russian population and continuous devastation in Ukraine for quite some time. Currently, only a minority of Russian citizens are able to access independent outside information and the dissenting minority are giving up and fleeing the country. On the other hand, Putin has miscalculated the impacts of the war, and the Russian economy is only expected to get worse. Individuals are getting creative and finding clever ways to get around censorship and share information. Furthermore, some of those in leadership are beginning to part ways with the government in small degrees, which offers a sliver of hope.

Question and Answer Period

In response to a question about the Canadian government's response to Kremlin trolls in Western social media, Dr. Sundstrom noted that in particular instances, some investigations are likely to occur; however, these issues are more often left up to the social media platforms to counter. Dr. Sundstrom provided an example of how troll factories in Russia were uncovered by investigative journalists, leading many of them to disband or decentralize; however, it appears that many of them have recently been re-instituted in the context of the Ukraine invasion. Despite the repression occurring in Russia, the platform that is still freely available to the public is Telegram. Dr. Sundstrom opined that this is likely because the Russian government and military use this platform to communicate information among themselves, but they may also be monitoring dissenters' activity and use it to prosecute them.

With respect to wealthy Russians fleeing to Gulf States in this war, Dr. Sundstrom indicated that there is a lot of anti-Russian sentiment from neighbouring countries, whereas there is no expectation of backlash from the Gulf States, so Russians are likely to feel more welcome there. Furthermore, wealthy Russians might have a more luxurious lifestyle in places like Dubai as compared to places in neighbouring countries.

Dr. Sundstrom commented on Putin's time in the KGB and noted that it does not seem to have directly influenced his decision to invade Ukraine. Over time, Putin has developed this obsession with Ukraine being part of Russia, which is not

necessarily linked to his KGB training. In terms of how he rules, however, the people he trusts and appoints as his advisors partly come from security service backgrounds, but also those that came from a Soviet Union background or held high-ranking positions in that political system. Dr. Sundstrom suggested that Putin likely learned how to manage his inner circle based on training in the KGB by using coercive tactics to prevent dissension, making a coup much less likely to take place.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The popularity of Putin and the war in Ukraine appears to be growing among Russian citizens as the war progresses; however, this may be due to Russian propaganda or fear of punishment.
- There are several factors that may lead to the breakdown of support for Putin and the war, including severe economic crisis and heavy Russian casualties; however, the Russian government is suppressing the truth, making it difficult for this information to reach most Russian citizens.
- In order to facilitate change and the potential downfall of the Putin regime, there needs to be a split within the important decision-making elites within the country.
- Some of those poised to oust Putin could be Russian oligarchs, military leaders disgruntled by heavy casualties, or members of the Federal Security Bureau.
- If there is no coup, there will likely be more severe repression of the Russian population and continuous devastation in Ukraine for quite some time.

Question and Answer Period

- Although the Canadian government may investigate some instances of Russian trolling in Canada, social media platforms are most often left on their own to monitor and police these cases.
- Telegram is one of the few social media platforms still accessible by Russian citizens, which may be a way for the Russian government and military to communicate information, as well as to monitor and prosecute dissenters.
- Wealthy Russians may be fleeing to Gulf states because there is less anti-Russian sentiment in comparison to their neighbouring countries, and they are more likely to have a more luxurious standard of living in places like Dubai and the United Arab Emirates.

- Putin appears to have built his inner circle with those who have a security service background or those aligned with the former Soviet Union, and he likely manages his circle by using coercive tactics to prevent dissension.



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