

The State and the Human Body in Putin's Russia

THE BIOPOLITICS OF AUTHORITARIAN REVANCHE

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Over the past decade, one of the key aspects of Russian politics has been the increased interference of the state in the private lives of the population. All sorts of controls have been applied about sexuality, reproduction, retirement, eating and drinking, hygiene, smoking, using obscene words, using the Internet, U.S. adoptions of Russian orphans, and sharing information about homosexuality. The various streams of disallowance – not all of them unusual among statehood – have been accompanied by Russian state policies promoting marriage, constraining abortion rights, and promoting a certain kind of public morality. Russia's new law about pensions and retirement age has a distinct biopolitical essence (directly affecting the human body) in that it encourages productivity by an ageing population to offset a declining demography and labor market.

In the Putin era, privacy has been broken due to the state claiming sovereign right to lifestyles and life itself. In a sense, having the “vertical of power” inside the human body is a logical continuation of the Kremlin's drive for authoritarian sovereignty. What do these physical-life-regulating policies tell us about the state of Russian society and the nature of the political regime? The supposition is that the Kremlin's uses of biopolitics are to “normalize” segments of society, change national discourses, test and discipline elites, increase birth rates and worker productivity, and, essentially, construct the ideal individual well-integrated into a like-minded community.

The Russian Uses of Biopolitics

In analyzing the “bodily” movement in Russian politics, one turns to the concepts of biopower and biopolitics developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault. For him, this is a technology of power closely linked to the emergence of the modern nation state and capitalism. Starting from the 18th century, fueled by advances in modern science, Western societies [developed](#) a “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of

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the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.” This [implies](#) the transition from public punishment of the individual body to disciplining the population, from usurping the right to take life (Max Weber) to assuming the right to give or administer life.

All countries in the world engage biopolitical conventions, however the depth of policies in this realm indicates that Russia’s initiatives surpass the typical. Various biopolitical initiatives were introduced by Russian authorities at different bureaucratic levels where individual deputies come up with (sometimes absurd) initiatives simply to solicit media and Kremlin attention. For example, a Chelyabinsk deputy in the Urals once [suggested](#) conscripting young women into the armed services who did not give birth by the age of 20. There is not a single strategy coming from the Kremlin but rather a *zeitgeist* of biopolitics that is trendy at a time of a neo-conservative revanche.

A set of biopolitical initiatives followed in the wake of the crushed “Bolotnaya” opposition movement in 2011-12 that sought to discipline society and switch its focus away from electoral politics to unexpected but intriguing fields like sexuality, hygiene, and food security. In that era of unease, biopolitical methods proved to be effective tools for diverting political and social unrest over election fraud, corruption, and painful social reforms into fighting either vague or imaginary moral threats.² They were also useful as disciplining tools and loyalty tests for the elite. For example, in December 2012, the Kremlin twisted the arms of many deputies to make them vote for the so-called “Yakovlev law” – as if to chain them by the blood of Russian orphans (more on this below). Likewise, in 2018, the Kremlin made almost every deputy vote for the highly unpopular pension reform that raised the retirement age to 63 for women and 65 for men.

Russia’s recent pension reform posed a biopolitical dilemma for the government. Faced with demographic pressures, an ageing population, stalled economic growth (1.5 percent in 2018), Western sanctions, and severe budgetary constraints, the authorities had no choice but to put greater pressures on the labor force, which includes demanding productivity at a later age. In some of Russia’s poorer regions, the retirement age for men is now higher than the average life expectancy there. The state increases pressure on its subjects as a biological mass in order to extract higher value. There is a well-known joke in Russia along these lines: The Russian populace is the state’s “second oil” for generating budget revenue.

Biopolitics is also a way of constructing the Russian political community in the post-Crimean setting. Biopolitical interventions began a year or two before the annexation as a pre-emption of the emergence of an organic discourse focused on the human body. These fed the later geopolitical discourses about the “Russian world” and “divided body” of the

² See: Andrei Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev, “[Biopolitics and Power in Putin’s Russia](#),” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 62:1, 2015, pp. 45-54.

Russian nation that informed the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's missive is that management of human bodies leads to the reconstruction of the political body of the nation. This approach is a central pedestal of the current regime and one that seeks to define Russia's place in the world for many years ahead. Like so often in Russian history, the state turns to regard the population as a resource that can be exploited in times of crisis, especially so during times of "external threat."

Biopolitical normalization thus raises the bar of sovereignty, a core concept of Putin's presidency. Having toyed with the dubious idea of "sovereign democracy" in the mid-2000s, the Kremlin turned to the hardcore concept of "territorial sovereignty" beginning from the time of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and especially from the time of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014. Biopolitics is yet another territorialization of state sovereignty, this time placed inside the human body. It is a claim by state authority on the private life and physical existence of the individual. This is an important departure from the social contract that had existed since the late Soviet period.

The biopolitical interventions by the Russian state began to take place in the mid-2000s. These included various demographic policies aimed at reinforcing the institution of marriage, increasing birth rates, and promoting physical exercise in schools. The state took various actions to promote the organic "bond" (*skrepa*) of the nation and a distinctive feature of the Russian way of life.³ One intervention was the "Concept of Family Policy" that introduced the notion of a "normal family" that has at least three children and two generations living in a common household, but which the Helsinki Watch Group [surmised](#) was mainly "to bring about an increase in population growth."

The Kremlin gave a special role to the Russian Orthodox Church in ruling on family and juvenile delinquency matters and it opened the door to localized proposals such as limiting the number of a person's official marriages to three or imposing hefty divorce taxes. In recent years, some municipal clinics where abortion should be free and covered by state medical insurance have either dissuaded women from abortions or simply denied it to them.

The real biopolitical crusade of the Russian state started during Putin's third term in office largely as a response to the political protest and social turmoil in Russia in 2011-12. In June 2013, a Russian Law banned the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors." In fact, it criminalized homosexual discourses (homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia in 1993) and increased social and political pressure on LGBT communities and individuals. In some cases, the move resulted in the persecution and killing of LGBT individuals, such as the assassination in St. Petersburg in 2016 of gay journalist Dmitry Tsilikin. The Russian parliament has considered legislation that would

³ Russian *skrepy* or "bonds" can be compared to Roman *fascēs*, wooden rods bundled with an axe, which in turn gave birth to the Italian term *fascismo*.

strip LGBT people of parental rights and some local councils in the south of Russia have allowed paramilitary Cossack units to identify and whip gay people. Especially serious is the situation with LGBT rights in Chechnya where, [according](#) to reports, the authorities have abducted LGBT people from their homes and off the street and established a prison where they are tortured and executed. Meanwhile, famous state television entertainer/newscaster Dmitry Kiselyov is known for his insulting remarks about gay people, having once [suggested](#) in a nationwide talk show that their hearts should “be burned after death, as unfit for continuing anyone’s life.” In this sense, the biopolitical intervention of the state and the official propaganda together with the patriarchal prejudice of a large part of the population have been stigmatizing LGBT people as second-class citizens, with the predominant rationale being that they can’t make a “normal” family.

Russia has also banned select products from countries with which Russia was having political disputes—for example Moldovan wine, Georgian mineral water, and American chicken legs. A peculiar biopolitical regulation was introduced in 2015 when the government, beset by the stalemate in Ukraine and a deepening confrontation with the West, introduced sanctions against certain types of foods originating in the EU (meat, fish, poultry, cheeses, fruits, and vegetables). This was intended as a blow to EU agricultural sectors and a clear political signal to the West. Even though it helped some Russian agribusiness sectors to develop, it compelled European farmers to re-orient toward other markets and the end recipient of the measures was the Russian population whose product choices were significantly curtailed. In justifying the counter sanctions, the government’s official propaganda used biopolitical arguments: The banned products were [toxic](#) and [dangerous](#) for one’s health and do not conform to Russian traditions and national character. The offered conclusion was that therefore consuming them would be unpatriotic.

The Foreign Front

Russian biopolitics happens at a time when part of the world has turned away from globalization and liberalism to nationalism, protectionism, and all sort of fundamentalisms, as signified by the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the rise of far right movements in Europe and beyond. Russia’s moves have been accompanied by new forms of foreign biopolitical directives such as the separation of children from parents in detention camps near the U.S.-Mexican border by the U.S. government, the building of walls and fences against migrants in Eastern Europe, and the severe biopolitical adjustments committed by the Islamic State and now in China’s Xinjiang province where, effectively, at least one million Uyghurs find themselves in re-education concentration camps.

In 2013, in response to the Magnitsky Act by the U.S. Congress, Russia passed a law that forbade American families to adopt Russian orphans. The authorities claimed the law was

substantiated by several cases of adoptee deaths in the United States, even though these incidents were a tiny percentage of the roughly 60,000 Russian children adopted in the United States. Moreover, a child adopted by a local family in Russia stands a much higher risk of accidental death statistically than those in the United States. The legislation was called the “[Dima] Yakovlev Law” after the name of one of the Russian adoptees who died but it was immediately dubbed the “scoundrels’ law” (*zakon podletsov*) because it effectively denied hundreds of Russian orphans who were already selected for adoption a new home and a family. It eventually doomed some of them to death since U.S. adopters often chose sick children whose complications could not be properly treated in Russian orphanages. (Nearly half of the Russian orphanage population, about 165,000 children, [live in](#) state orphanages for children with disabilities.) The fact of the matter is that the state treated Russian orphans as a biological resource employable for political purposes: a lever in a sanctions war and as a punishment of American society.

The international implications of Russian biopolitics have to do with the general anti-Western drift of the authorities, the rituals of “othering,” and the construction of convenient enemies. The Russian discourse became based on a dissociation from the supposedly decadent, liberal West with its principles of tolerance, multiculturalism, political correctness, and betrayal of traditional morality and family values. One of the key divides between Russia and the West came to lie in discourses of the “other” human. As we have seen, at least before the Trump era, Kremlin rhetoric has been contesting the West on subjects involving homosexuality, masculinity, and femininity (allowing some Russian commentators to [speak](#) about the “sexual sovereignty” of Russia). These biopolitical cleavages are now heavily securitized. It is [claimed](#) that the West corrupts Russian culture and society by deliberately exporting and imposing cultural patterns that undermine Russia’s morale, family structure, and demography. It is claimed that Russia’s demographic security is at stake in view of future wars. The word “security” is the most commonly used here: family security, food security, reproductive security, etc.

A distinctive case comes from Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 when over 2 million Crimean residents’ citizenship was automatically changed from Ukrainian to Russian. To paraphrase political prisoner Oleg Sentsov: they were transferred like slaves (*krepostnye*) attached to land. The state simply forced their bodies into a new nationality. Meanwhile, the very annexation of Crimea, like the support for the Donbas separatists, was portrayed by Russian propaganda (in 2014-15) as an organic, biological act of nature, the reclaiming of a lost body part (“Donbas is the *heart* of Russia”), and the reuniting of the torn body of the nation. In this sense, a clear “Russia world” nexus between biopolitics and geopolitics took hold in Russian discourses after 2014.⁴

⁴ For more, see: Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, “[Biopower and geopolitics as Russia’s neighborhood strategies: reconnecting people or reaggregating lands?](#)” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 45-1, 2017.

Russia's biopolitical discourse has also been an export commodity trying to reach out to "moral majority" groups internationally from paleoconservatives in the United States to far right segments in Europe. As U.S. political commentator Pat Buchanan [wrote](#) in an op-ed titled "Is Putin One of Us?": "Nor is he [Putin] without an argument when we reflect on America's embrace of abortion on demand, homosexual marriage, pornography, promiscuity, and the whole panoply of Hollywood values." The Russian leadership created a war of values with the West to try to form a new domestic character, and it has reached out to neo-conservative forces abroad to expedite a fundamentalist international that might, in turn, encourage increased relations with Moscow.

Conclusion

The biopolitical turn in Russian politics marks a new contract between the leadership and the population based on an organic kind of unity that stresses blood, kinship, heritage, and faith. This push is quite similar to the one that occurred 100 years ago in the wake of World War I that resulted in a number of nationalist, fascist, and corporatist regimes across Europe. Likewise, in its post-Cold War resentment, having relapsed into self-pity about losing an empire ("the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," as Putin [said](#)), Russia turned to more prescriptive forms of bonding based on blood and soil, and it is in this context that biological discourses came to the fore.

The biopolitical normalization in Russia occurs in the connective space between the popular sentiment of an uprooted society beset by failed transitions and halted globalization, retrograde, neo-patriarchal responses, and the deliberate strategy by authorities of using biopolitical language and interventions for social and political control. From a mere government technology detected and described by Foucault, biopower in the hands of Russia's authoritarians spreads disruptive forces through domestic and international affairs. It is an essential part of Moscow's 21st century hybrid warfare.