

The Kremlin's Compulsion for *Whataboutisms*

WESTERN EXPERIENCE IN THE PUTIN REGIME'S POLITICAL RHETORIC

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Sergei Golunov

University of Tartu, Estonia

From time to time, Russian authorities appeal to Western experience for different reasons. While they sometimes do this to signal the need to adopt advanced managerial or other best practices, in many cases they employ such references to neutralize Western criticism and justify undemocratic (and unpopular) moves by pointing to the West's own imperfections. In 2008, the *Economist* labeled this tactic *whataboutism*, and it has become one of Vladimir Putin's favorite rhetorical devices (alongside his denial of a leading role in initiating non-democratic or repressive measures against his opponents). In what ways have references to Western practices been used in Russian pro-governmental rhetoric during the post-Soviet period? What are the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of such moves? How has the West responded to *whataboutist* Russian claims? These are the key questions this memo addresses.

The Soviet Period and the 1990s

During the Soviet period, positive references to Western experience were generally rare, as official Soviet ideology and propaganda proclaimed the superiority of the socialist system over the capitalist one. When Western opponents harshly and convincingly criticized Soviet reality, Soviet counter-propaganda stressed Western shortcomings in some non-pertinent sphere, such as problems with minority rights in the United States.

The situation changed during the *perestroika* period. It became unfashionable to proclaim the superiority of the Soviet system and fashionable to draw self-deprecating comparisons between Soviet and Western realities in terms of technical achievements, quality of management, treatment of human beings, and so forth. From then on, the perception of Western countries' practices and achievements as generally more advanced than Russia's own became rooted in social discourse, so much so that it has survived until now, despite the pervasiveness of anti-Western rhetoric in the Putin era.

During the 1990s, official references to Western experience were made mainly to criticize Russian deficiencies and to indicate ways for Russian development—basically

to encourage audiences that Russia is already close to at least some Western standards. Ironically, some ideas and practices that were borrowed in the 1990s turned out to have a significant anti-Western potential—including classical geopolitics (Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard* became a pattern for Alexander Dugin and other newly emerged Russian adherents of geopolitics to follow), the notion of a "sphere of vital interests" (borrowed from U.S. doctrines and official statements), and a concept of "national security" that focused on numerous perceived threats, some of which were associated to a greater or lesser degree with Western policies or influence on Russia.

Putin's Regime: The Early Years

During the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, modernizing and pro-Western rhetoric was prevalent in Russian authorities' references to Western experience. Such rhetoric was sometimes controversial for Russia's Western partners. This was the case, for example, with Moscow's attempts to neutralize international criticism of Russia's human rights violations by equating Russian military operations in Chechnya with U.S. and allied counterterrorist operations.

The turning point came in the middle of the 2000s, when Moscow began to systematically engage in counter-criticism of Western states after the latter began leveling criticism at Russia for its non-democratic practices, particularly regarding human rights violations and political persecutions (of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and others). Alarmist about Western support of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin responded to these occurrences with Vladislav Surkov's concept of "sovereign democracy," which posits that Russia should choose its own political model and not copy devices imposed by Russia from outside. However, this rejection of the Western model continues to be combined with statements about Russia's commitment to that model when it is useful or profitable to the regime. References to Western practices taken out of context have become one of the government's favorite rhetorical devices to justify non-democratic or repressive moves while rejecting opponents' claims that Russia is an increasingly non-democratic country.

The Russian government has systematically resorted to criticism of the United States and some EU member states in the global information space. To improve the country's image abroad, the Kremlin established the international television network Russia Today ("RT") in 2005. While this channel does not avoid moderate criticism of Russia, it places a major emphasis on harshly criticizing the domestic and foreign policies of the Kremlin's Western opponents—all with an intent to portray Russia's problems with democracy and lawlessness as ordinary.

Human Rights and NGOs

Since the mid-2000s, Moscow began to use *whataboutism* rhetoric regarding the torture of terrorist suspects in the U.S.-controlled Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. Russian authorities used this line of argument despite the fact that in Russia the mistreatment of all types of prisoners is so common that journalists and human rights activists readily

applied “Russian Abu Ghraib” metaphors toward especially notorious Russian prisons and colonies.

Initially, Russian official rhetoric did not actively use Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo as Moscow did not want to damage the discourse of Russian-U.S. antiterrorist cooperation. Moreover, at the beginning of the 2000s, the United States had softened its criticism of human rights violations in Chechnya. Russia’s counter-rhetoric hardened over the decade, becoming particularly forceful after the regime placed restrictions against civic activists and opposition members on the eve of the 2007-2008 electoral cycle, provoking Western criticism. Notably, in July 2007, during a press conference for journalists from G8 member states, Putin called himself an “absolute and pure democrat” who “has nobody to talk to after Mahatma Gandhi’s death,” while accusing the United States of torture, maltreatment of prisoners, and a failure to care about a huge number of homeless persons, and EU member states of the violent suppression of demonstrators.

In October 2007, Putin decided to institutionalize such counter-criticism, announcing during an EU-Russia summit the establishment of the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation to monitor violations of human rights in the EU and the United States. In setting up the Institute, with offices in Moscow, Paris, and New York, Moscow aspired to respond symmetrically to the EU’s support of civic activists in Russia. Evidently inspired by Western NGO reports criticizing human rights problems in Russia, the Institute issued a series of annual reports focused on human rights issues in the United States, as well as some reports on U.S. issues like illegal immigration, possession of firearms, and problems of the penal system.

A new rise in criticism of Western states for human rights violations occurred in 2010-12 in connection with the extradition of Konstantin Yaroshenko and Vladimir Bout to the United States, international criticism of the crackdown against Russian opposition protests in 2012, and U.S. sanctions against human rights violators including those suspected of involvement in Sergei Magnitsky’s murder. Russia responded not only with official statements but also human rights reports including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ “About the Situation with Human Rights in Some Countries,” echoing U.S. State Department annual human rights reports. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs subjected to criticism the state of human rights in the United States, Canada, some EU member states, Georgia, and human rights violations by the anti-Gaddafi coalition in Libya (not surprisingly, Italy, then headed by Silvio Berlusconi, was not mentioned). In particular, the United States was accused of racial discrimination, xenophobia, unjustified use of the death penalty, and widespread corruption. Another remarkable document was the law “On Sanctions against Individuals Violating Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms of the Citizens of the Russian Federation” (informally known as the Dima Yakovlev Law), which targeted not only perceived violators but also U.S.-sponsored politically active NGOs and notoriously prohibited U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children.

While resorting to counter-accusations, those in power continued to refer to the practices of Western states to justify the regime’s repressive measures. In 2006, after a

law was adopted tightening control over NGOs and widening the ground for their compulsory liquidation, Putin told his EU negotiating partners that the novelty fully conformed to EU standards.

In June 2012, as the government's reaction to mass protests against election fraud was toughening, a law was adopted that significantly increased fines for violating laws governing demonstrations; rally organizers now could be given a heavy fine or compulsory community service. Responding to domestic and international critics, Russian authorities and their supporters argued that these novelties conformed fully to the corresponding legislation of EU member states. While these arguments had some basis in fact, authorities failed to acknowledge that Russian law-enforcement and court practices are far more biased against protesters than those in Western states.

In July 2012, NGOs receiving foreign funding became the next target of the regime's restrictive measures: amendments required NGOs involved in loosely defined political activities to register and label themselves as "foreign agents," an expression that has a strong negative connotation in Russian political discourse. This time, Russian officials pointed to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) of 1938. However, FARA covers a far narrower range of cases, specifically lobbying on behalf of foreign countries or other actors, while the Russian amendments were designed to cover any political activities by NGOs receiving any foreign support, such as election monitoring by Golos, which was an irritant to those in power during the electoral cycle of 2011-2012.

Elections

Whataboutism is especially high during Russian elections, which Western states and Western-based election monitoring organizations systematically criticise for being non-democratic and for favoring pro-governmental candidates. While denying these accusations, Russian officials claim that elections fully conform to the highest standards and that countries that criticize Russia commit serious violations themselves. The main target in this case was the United States, which was particularly attacked for the 2000 Bush-Gore presidential elections and the Florida ballot-recount controversy.

Such disputes were especially heated during the Russian electoral cycle of 2011-2012. In February 2012, the head of the central electoral commission, Vladimir Churov, called the Russian electoral system one of the most advanced, open, and trusted systems in the world. By way of comparison, Churov and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented reports in autumn 2012 that severely attacked the U.S. electoral system for its indirect system of presidential elections, lack of a single system for voter registration and counting, non-admission of some international observers, and other perceived flaws. In one public speech, Churov said that he was astonished by the insolence of the United States, which tries to teach Russia democratic values while "there are no more poorly organized elections than the American ones." Finally, during a press conference in December 2012, when Russian elections were condemned by Western observers, Putin himself noted that early voting, the subject of one criticism, was actually more widespread in the last U.S. presidential election. Although such statements do contain some facts, they come off as unconvincing attempts to compare apples and oranges.

Kosovo vs. Abkhazia/South Ossetia

Russia was strongly against NATO operations in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the subsequent withdrawal of Kosovo from Yugoslavia's control. Russia was also against the proclamation of Kosovo's independence and its recognition by mainly Western states at the beginning of 2008. Russian officials accused the United States and the EU of using double standards in recognizing Kosovo while rejecting the independence of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Before the August 2008 military conflict with Georgia, Moscow denied that it would use the "Kosovo precedent" to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, it did just that one month after the conflict. Responding to some Western states' objections, and emphasizing that recognition should take into account historical and other circumstances, then-President Dmitry Medvedev argued that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were special cases. Moscow thus employed the West's own tactic of recognizing independence based on unique criteria to legitimize its own controversial political move.

The Reaction of the West and Russian Opposition

Western states periodically react to controversial Russian references to their own practices. Yet these objections are usually poorly heard in the Russian information space, as are Russian references in the information spaces of Western states. Western states (like Russia) are generally reluctant to be even slightly self-critical during such disputes even when criticism has some foundation.

For their part, Russian opposition figures are usually highly sceptical of official references to Western practices and suspect that these references herald the introduction of undemocratic or repressive measures. Domestic (especially liberal) opponents of Putin's regime typically try to prove that such references are unfounded. Unfortunately, they are also usually poorly heard in the Russian information space and not very persuasive in refuting pro-government arguments that are based on careful examination of U.S. or EU experiences (as in the case of financial penalties for protesters). Ironically, opposition figures are skeptical even of those references that authorities plausibly invoke to improve management by Western standards. They thus denounce Western-inspired anti-corruption measures (such as official declarations of income) as mere simulation and the introduction of electronic identification cards (as was done in Estonia many years ago) as an attempt to closely monitor Russian citizens.

Conclusion

The tactic of systematically pointing out an opponent's perceived faults without attempting to be self-critical in response is unethical whether in individual or international relations. Russian authorities increasingly employ such tactics, but in doing so they often disregard political and legal contexts, manipulate examples, and arbitrarily cite different countries and practices.

As Russian domestic policy tightens, however, Moscow's references to Western practices and the counter-criticisms it employs to justify this policy have become more detailed and argument-based. An effective response to such criticisms calls for

professional analyses of Russian counter-reports and communication of Western responses to Russian audiences. When Russian counter-criticism is just, Moscow's Western opponents should regard it seriously and constructively. The problem is that responding to Russian claims requires a degree of self-criticism, and politicians in Western states may not be so interested to admit policy imperfections that could degrade their image in the eyes of domestic audiences. Taking this into account, Russian authorities may be able to successfully continue making arbitrary references to Western practices, even as their policies continue to move the country away from Western democracy.

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