Aglaya Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin: A critical perspective*

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1. A leading specialist on contemporary Russia’s security issues, Senior researcher at the Center For Security Studies at ETH in Zurich, Aglaya Snetkov has been working on Russia’s security issues for many years. She has focused in particular on the situation in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in the 2000s as a highly revealing case of the way Security Policy has been thought and undertaken since Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999 and of the role it played in both the domestic and external agendas of the Russian regime.

2. So if Aglaya Snetkov’s book, published in 2014, may sound like one more expert book on foreign policy or security issues in contemporary Russia, it certainly is not. It provides the audience with reflections derived from a rather precise and formalized theoretical agenda, based on her doctoral thesis (University of Birmingham).

3. A. Snetkov reminds us that a lot of scholarly attention has been directed to, on the one hand, the role of Russia as a major and renewed security actor throughout the 2000s (“making Russia strong again”, p. 2) and, on the other hand, the internal evolutions of the political regime and institutions. Nevertheless, she notes that research has been carried out mostly in separate ways, thus failing to consider domestic and international issues together in the broader nexus of security policy.

4. Aiming at filling a gap which she sees as being partly the result of disciplinary division, A. Snetkov relies on a theoretical approach that refers explicitly to the field of Critical Security Studies, a perspective that she has adopted in subsequent publications¹, and that she explains in a detailed, relevant and convincing way in her two-fold introduction. Referring to a consistent range of literature on Critical Security Studies, the author recalls that this trend has developed to challenge the field of International Relations by going beyond the traditional approach of Security as an external threat to the states —
thus “black boxing” the internal dimension— and by putting forward domestic factors. This has proved quite relevant in analysing domestic insecurities, including terrorism and counterterrorism, new modes of governance, biopolitics, borders and migrations control, etc. One of the founding works in building a securitization model remains Buzan and Waever’s *Security: a new framework of Analysis* (1998), but the “French School”, led by Didier Bigo and the journal *Cultures & Conflits*, among others, has provided prominent research in that trend and has contributed to inspiring the author’s reflection.

One of the main challenges of the study, as A. Snetkov puts forward, is the fact that the majority of studies using this background comes from Western cases, while works on Russia Security issues remain inspired by classical IR models. The second part of the introduction is thus dedicated to the specific issue of analysing security of a non-western actor, in a “post-cold war” context, whereas the bipolar division of the world was instrumental in consolidating the theoretical framework. Since the end of the cold war, new conflicts and new security threats have led to new thinking and new knowledge, such as the securitization paradigm used by the author: “this study seeks to consider the full cycle of (de)securitization by investigating not only the precise moments of securitization or de-securitization but also the constituted processes, discourse and practices in between them” (p. 6-7).

Directly deriving from this general perspective, the “post-positivist” approach chosen by the author clearly stands out from the mainstream “realist” approach applied to Russia security issues. Referring to Checkel and Hansen among others, she builds her “case plus study” relying on Chechnya with inductive and qualitative methodology. Basically, A. Snetkov examines in great details one single case over a long period of time in order to reconstruct the official discourses, taking into consideration the context of their production and its evolution. The main material upon which the research is built are official Russian public sources on Chechnya over the period 2000-2014; it allows an analysis at the same time of the official discourse on state identity, of the state’s proclaimed security priorities and of its policy in Chechnya and the Caucasus.

This explains the subsequent and rather classical division of the book in four chronological chapters, corresponding to the main turning points of the situation in Chechnya, seen as an object of (de)securitization policy: from the peak of the war (1999-2000) up to the so called normalization of the whole North Caucasus, or, as the author words, a "securitized North Caucasus". The author notes the changing environment when it comes to V. Putin’s third term marked by a re-securitization move in which the imbrication of domestic and external issues has never been so blatant than with the annexion of Crimea and the new wave of patriotism that seized both the Russian elites and the overwhelming majority of public opinion. In each chapter, the description and analysis of internal security agenda is confronted to external security concerns voiced in official discourses. Remarkably enough, the theoretical issues are not only addressed in the introduction, as is often the case in IR books, but are analysed in detail in each chapter: this level of detail throughout is really what gives the book its added-value.

In the conclusion, Aglaya Snetkov points out the changes in the Russian national security agenda. While the Russian state evolved from “weak” to “strong” during the first terms of V. Putin in office, and is now rather in a both “weak and strong” situation, she reminds us that these changing agenda and wavering actions can only be understood if considering domestic challenges in detail. Further on, she stresses how the focus of security agenda –
i.e. what has to be “securitized” - has changed over time. The major shift in this respect is one from state stability as the main concern to regime stability as the main security issue. On Chechnya itself, the author argues that Putin’s policy in the region has been “filtered through its wider national priorities” (p.195), which explains this idea of the region being “securitized” at the beginning of the period, then “desecuritized” i.e. reframed in the category of normalisation. However, the persistence of instability in the North-Caucasus region has led to a third option, which the author could have more explicitly articulated with her overall perspective: if Chechnya and the North Caucasus have been at the same time downgraded in terms of existential threat, but are still considered as a security challenge, the main consequences in terms of policies (at least in Chechnya) have been a growing delegation of state prerogatives, in the first place law enforcement tasks, to the local regime of R. Kadyrov. The growing power and autonomy that he has benefited from this policy, could, in turn become a new security issue for the Russian state. The difficulty to analyse in the same realm Chechnya and the whole North Caucasus in terms of local political regime and as a wider security issue is probably one of the challenge further research could address.

No doubt that the perspective of securitization paradigm could also shed light on new challenges that have emerged since the publication of the book, such as the continuing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, or issues around the war on information. A few weeks before a 2018 presidential election that will most probably see the election of V. Putin as a president for a fourth term, and as rumours and disputes continue to spread about Russia’s role in US 2016 presidential campaign, one of the author’s concluding remarks on constant interrelation and interconnection between the two security realms, sounds particularly relevant: “while much of the popular attention maybe taken up by the perception that Putin is seeking to challenge Western Actors on international affairs, many of the factors underlying such discourses stem from the domestic, rather than the foreign security context” (p.197).

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