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Conditional Criticism: Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Executive in Russia

Do parliaments in authoritarian states meaningfully scrutinise the executive? Popular images of capricious dictators and rubber stamp parliaments would suggest not. Recent work has, however, found evidence of substantive criticism of executive actors in non-democratic regimes, as well as specified the conditions under which such criticism is likely to take place. This work has largely focussed on features of legislative actors when explaining the propensity for needling questioning. We know much less, however, about the features of executive actors that make them more vulnerable to critique. In this paper, we draw on a new dataset regarding “Government hour” sessions in the Russian Federal Assembly, 2005 to 2017 – events during which federal government ministers, and other senior executive officials, answer questions from members of parliament. We theorize that, contrary to existing research, legislative criticism is not directed at the autocrat. Rather, the autocrat encourages parliament to criticise executive bodies that are not directly supervised by the autocrat. Legislative scrutiny is, therefore, a monitoring device to keep tabs on autocrat-delegated executive bodies. We leverage a rare combination of features found in the Russian case: variation in the identity of the head of state (Vladimir Putin or Dmitrii Medvedev); persistence in the identity of the autocrat (Putin); and the existence of president- and government-controlled bodies. The findings presented add to our knowledge of legislative politics and intra-executive relations under authoritarianism, as well as contemporary Russian politics.