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Conditional Criticism: Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Executive in Russia

Do parliaments in authoritarian states meaningfully scrutinize 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 focused 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 database of “Government hour” transcripts from the Russian Federal Assembly, 2000 to 2017 – sessions during which federal government ministers 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 criticize ministries that are directly supervised by the government. Legislative scrutiny is, therefore, a monitoring device to keep tabs on autocrat-delegated ministries. We leverage 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 ministries to show that: when Putin is head of state, parliament criticizes president-controlled ministries (PCMs) less than government-controlled ministries (GCMs); and, when Medvedev is head of state, PCMs receive more criticism. Findings from content analysis of these query sessions add to our knowledge of legislative politics and intra-executive relations under authoritarianism, as well as contemporary Russian politics.