Strategic Communication in Dictatorships: Performance, Patriotism, and Intimidation

Abstract

Research shows that dictators' public rhetoric shapes both elite and mass opinion and behavior. However, the determinants of dictators' strategic communication remain undertheorized and underresearched. Theoretically, we argue that: i) dictators primarily use three key communication strategies ("performance" and "patriotism," which serve to boost legitimacy, and "intimidation," meant to deter opponents); ii) they substitute between them depending on the situational context. Empirically, we introduce a novel corpus of post-Soviet leaders' legislative addresses, and then, employing semi-supervised text analysis, test our argument. We find that autocrats legitimize themselves as performance-focused leaders during economic upturns, emphasize patriotism during elections, and turn to the rhetoric of intimidation when facing protests and sanctions. We further validate our theory using a global set of authoritarian speeches, in a different language. The findings support but also contest some established assumptions regarding how and when dictators' communication changes.

Key Words: Propaganda; Dictatorships; Political Communication; Legitimation strategies; Post-Soviet; Signalling.

Dictators make substantial efforts to shape their images in ways they perceive as favorable (Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Gerschewski, 2018; Gilley, 2009). For this purpose, a leader's public speeches are a crucial communication channel. Through speeches, political leaders communicate information to their audience (Tulis, 1987) in an attempt to motivate listeners to think and act in particular ways (Simons, 1970).

Conventional wisdom holds that authoritarian talk is cheap because autocrats are not accountable. Yet dictators' speeches have much larger, often captive, audiences than those of their democratic peers; what is said, or not said, and even the expressed sentiment and tone often reveal information about policy and politics (Hodnett, 1975; Kotkin, 2014). Authoritarian rhetoric is also an invaluable source of information about regime legitimation (Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014; King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019), and research shows that authoritarian communication strategies have important consequences in the sense that the topics emphasized and the framings applied affect both elite behavior (Baturo and Mikhaylov, 2013; Schedler and Hoffman, 2016) and popular perceptions of the regime (Aytaç, 2021; Carter and Carter, 2021; Huang, 2015).

Knowing that authoritarian communication matters naturally raises the question of which communication strategies dictators typically apply in public speeches, and what explains variation in the choice of strategy at different points in time and across regimes. In this paper, we argue that contemporary dictators primarily rely on three rhetorical frames: One is related to economic performance legitimacy (Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Guriev and Treisman, 2019), another to patriotism broadly understood (Laruelle, 2009; Tudor and Slater, 2021; Weiss, 2014), and a third to instilling fear through intimidation (Carter and Carter, 2021; Huang, 2015; Wedeen, 1999). Moreover, we propose that it is the circumstances and challenges rulers face that dictate which strategies they emphasize. That is, autocrats use all three communication strategies—but they do so strategically.

We theorize which strategies rulers resort to when confronting three challenges typical of contemporary authoritarian politics — winning elections, managing the economy, and mitigating domestic and international threats. Specifically, we expect dictators to emphasize economic per-

formance legitimacy, portraying themselves as responsive managers of the state, primarily when positive economic conditions allow them to claim credit for recent progress. However, when the economy stagnates, there is no credit to claim for performance (Reuter and Gandhi, 2011). As blame attribution can be risky in systems where power is highly centralized (Aytaç, 2021; Beazer and Reuter, 2019), political leaders tend to avoid or downplay economy-centered rhetoric and instead turn to the two other main communication strategies. That is, they bolster their defenses by using more bullying and intimidating language in an attempt to dissuade opposition and instill fear and apathy in their audience, or they try to shift attention away from economic problems and instead embrace patriotic catch-all frames that often appeal to their main supporters (Aytaç, 2021).

We also expect the use of the intimidation strategy and the patriotic strategy to increase when dictators face other immediate threats to their rule. Thus, autocrats strike chords of fear more emphatically when the people revolt or they face international sanctions, and they invoke community-oriented patriotism more strongly when they are trying to secure the support of the people around elections and during international crises. That is, contemporary dictators skillfully operate within the menu of communicative manipulation, emphasizing one strategy over another based on careful calculation of functional needs connected to their political survival.

We test these hypotheses drawing from novel empirical data in the form of a text corpus of annual legislative addresses (or their closest equivalents) of 51 leaders in 12 post-Soviet countries and 6 unrecognized states from within the region in the period from 1991 to 2019. We further restrict the majority of analyses to post-Soviet autocracies, electoral and closed. All speeches were made in, or have been translated into, Russian, the post-Soviet *lingua franca*. We thus limit the sample to the most important, yearly, regularly occurring, and comprehensive speeches in terms of policy scope—public addresses that are found in a similar format within a group of comparable authoritarian regimes, within one of the most entrenched autocratic regions of the world. This makes it easier to compare results between countries and across leader spells, and it ensures that speeches are not endogenous to particular ongoing events such as international or national crises (Liu, 2021,

8). While scholars have studied the political logic of presidential addresses in democratic contexts in the United States or Latin America (Arnold, Doyle and Wiesehomeier, 2017; Benoit, Munger and Spirling, 2019), to the best of our knowledge this is the first comprehensive test of the strategic use of rhetorical frames across time and space in contemporary autocracies.[1] To assess the propensity to engage in particular rhetorical strategies, we turn to text-as-data methods (Benoit, Munger and Spirling, 2019; Proksch and Slapin, 2009), using primarily the latent semantic scaling approach (Watanabe, 2021). Next, we fit a series of regression specifications to predict the three main dependent variables with covariates relevant to our theoretical hypotheses.

Our results show strong support for the logic of strategic communication and the proposed explanatory factors driving it. Putting it simply, dictators use economic performance legitimacy strategies when the economy is good, they intimidate their audience when they feel threatened by domestic and international actors, and they apply patriotic frames when they need to mobilize supporters around elections and during international crises. The findings are robust to various model specifications and different text-as-data approaches. In addition, we show the broader generalizability of the theory of authoritarian speech by testing it in a different empirical domain, specifically by examining the determinants of communicative strategies of a global sample of authoritarian leaders and foreign ministers in the United Nations General Assembly.

These findings have broader implications. Not only do they underscore that autocrats do take public communication seriously, but they also imply that rulers seem to think that how they speak makes a difference (Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019). That is, their revealed behavior supports the view that authoritarian communication strategies are important and thus constitute useful tools for holding and extending power. While we verify some established arguments, other commonly held assumptions are challenged however. For instance, we show that performance legitimacy and the widely discussed "informational autocrats" model (Guriev and Treisman, 2019), according to which contemporary authoritarian rulers primarily portray themselves as

[1] See however Maerz (2019) on how autocrats incorporate the language of democracy in speech.

competent and responsive managers of the economy, is much less dominant than we thought. It applies mainly under certain favorable circumstances, and it must therefore be supplemented with two equally important communication models: the "patriotic autocrats" model and the "intimidating autocrats" model. In fact, patriotism, not performance, is what autocrats usually emphasize when during elections they try to mimic their democratic peers.

In addition, while scholars have found that rulers both increase domestic repression (Heffington, 2021; Wood, 2008) and promote a "rally around the flag" discourse (Morgan and Schwebach, 1997), when involved in economic and military conflicts with other states, we show that the "patriotic autocrats" model is less prevalent than hitherto thought. When regimes face economic sanctions rulers tend to speak a more intimidating, rather than patriotic, language. And only in the global sample of speeches do we find evidence that interstate disputes make leaders rely more heavily on patriotic frames. We thus offer important insights into how contemporary autocrats use informational tools when dealing with central challenges to their rule.

How Dictators Speak: A Logic of Strategic Communication

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought on leader speeches in authoritarian regimes. One, and the perhaps commonsensical view, is that because autocrats are insulated from public opinion and lack significant constraints on their power, their speeches are largely meaningless as a source of information about politics and policy; they contain lies and propaganda. They may still be important in terms of ideological indoctrination (Arendt, 1951; Hassig and Oh, 2009) or depoliticization of politics (Linz, 2000, 162–65), but they do not reflect as such on the issues of the day and tend not to respond to changes in the political environment.

In contrast, another view emphasizes the logocentricity of what dictators accentuate when communicating. The assumption is that public communication is highly instrumental. Messages from the regime are meant to shape citizens' political attitudes (Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019) or can be used for sending signals on issues to elites (Baturo and Mikhaylov, 2013; Schedler and Hoffman, 2016), the broader population (Aytaç, 2021; Huang, 2015; Carter

and Carter, 2021; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019) and the outside world (Weeks, 2008; Zhang, 2019). Following this perspective, rhetoric is central and is important to study if we are to understand how autocracies work. Even when dictators employ rhetoric for propaganda and obfuscation, they do this strategically, acutely responding to their changing environments.

The Three Communication Strategies of Contemporary Autocracies

We propose that most autocrats today rely on three types of communication strategies, which we term "performance," "patriotism," and "intimidation." Although not the only strategies available to dictators, these three—drawn from the authoritarianism literature we examine below—are likely to be among the most prevalent ones, and as such, they serve as an important first test of the strategic communication logic we propose herein. Moreover, they represent more general rhetorical styles common to all dictatorships across regime types and over time, and may also be seen as orthogonal to other, more specific communication strategies.

The first two are best described as what are thought to be the dominant legitimization strategies for contemporary autocracies. We thus abstract from the few remaining monarchies that build on traditional authority (Lewis, 2000) and those, such as Iran and Afghanistan, that appeal to religion as the foundation for the regime (Wintrobe and Ferrero, 2009), or those such as Cuba and North Korea that still rely heavily on (Marxist) ideological doctrines. Instead, we focus on legitimation strategies that are relevant to all autocracies in the world. Indeed, the language of "performance" may be used by statist and pro-market dictators alike, while "patriotism" may be employed by secular and religious autocrats.[2] Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of what has been referred to as the "crisis of ideology" (Linz, 2000, 35–8), ideological and religious legitimization has waned greatly, and even those regimes that resort to such legitimization are likely to also employ the strategies of performance and patriotism. The third is a more classical strategy

[2]In addition, dictators may try to simulate democracy and pluralism (Maerz, 2019). This strategy is captured partly by "performance" that highlights responsiveness and "patriotism" that emphasises the people and its will. We thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.

based on the cultivation of fear and apathy, which also is likely to apply to dictatorships across the board as the use of and threats of repression is a core characteristic of authoritarian politics (Svolik, 2012; Wintrobe, 1998).

The first legitimization strategy involves discourses centered around economic performance legitimacy (Huntington 1991, 46; Geddes and Zaller 1989) — that is, rulers talk about the economy. The present-day popularity of this strategy is closely tied to the global spread of democracy and the proliferation of seemingly democratic institutions in autocracies (Morse, 2012). More than 80 per cent of all authoritarian regimes today have parliaments and hold regular multiparty elections (Andrea and Frantz, 2014). Dictators seek to portray authoritarian elections as competitive and their unconstrained decision-making as democratic to "reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy" (Schedler, 2002, 37). As a part of this democratic spectacle, they emphasize economic issues and thereby attempt to present themselves and their regimes as both responsive to voters and as conscientious providers of public goods (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017)—that is, they behave as what Guriev and Treisman (2019) term "informational autocrats."

Research on contemporary autocracies ranging from China (Chen, Pan and Xu, 2016; Lorentzen, 2013) to Vietnam (Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Schuler, 2020), Russia (Greene and Robertson, 2019; Treisman, 2018), Venezuela (Corrales, 2021), and Turkey (Aytaç, 2021) show how incumbents take a keen interest in what the people think and go to great lengths to at least appear as if they are accommodating public concerns and needs connected to socioeconomic issues. That is, dictators today often try to hide their authoritarian governance style in cheap but well-choreographed "democracy-like" talk meant to lull voters into thinking that they are indeed intent on doing the best for the public good, emphasizing successes in economic performance and public service provision (Cassani, 2017; Guriev and Treisman, 2019).

The second basic legitimization strategy is tied not to performance and procedures but rather to identity, and it centers around the discourse of the primacy of national unity and patriotism. The idea of nationalism (Kohn, 1945) and cultural group selection in general (Richerson et al., 2016)

has proved efficient in building the kind of community feeling that ties people together within a polity. While nationalism under the right circumstances can be an important driver for democracy (Beissinger, 2002; Tudor and Slater, 2021), a wealth of studies illustrate how today's authoritarian regimes use patriotic and nationalist appeals to foster broad popular support (Ciorciari and Weiss, 2016; Dukalskis and Lee, 2020; Laruelle, 2009; Sobhy, 2015; Weiss, 2014).

Patriotic discourse can create legitimacy as it constructs a bond between the ruler promoting the discourse and the people described as part of the culturally defined in-group. It also clearly defines out-groups—be it minorities, domestic opposition groups, or external actors (Bieber, 2018, 522)—which are instrumentally useful for targeting. Furthermore, an emphasis on such fluid but appealing ideas distracts attention from everyday hardships, and it glosses over ideological differences within the in-group, thus making it more difficult for opposition groups to mobilize broader segments of voters. Running or voting against a person depicted as the leader and protector of the nation becomes equivalent to standing against national unity (Goode and Stroup 2015; Linz 2000, 36).

Finally, and in addition to these two legitimization strategies meant to appease and mobilize the people, studies show that autocrats also use speeches and propaganda outlets more generally to instill fear and deter opposition. Unlike with the first two strategies, the goal for the ruler is not to legitimize the regime but rather to signal unassailability to would-be opponents among the elites and in the wider population (Huang, 2015; Schedler and Hoffman, 2016; Wedeen, 1999). Communication that stresses intimidation, relies on vocabulary related to violence and repression, and in which the sender issues explicit and implicit threats is not meant to foster support for the regime but rather to bully and scare off recipients of such information by reminding them of the consequences of unwanted actions. Such public communication signals the leader's resolve to elites, opposition groups, and the masses at large and, if found credible, deters resistance by instilling anxiety and apathy (Guriev and Treisman, 2019; Carter and Carter, 2021; Young, 2019).

Note that we do not argue that these three ideal-typical communication strategies are mutually exclusive. Instead, they are frequently used in combination—even if doing so entails some

rhetorical inconsistencies. That is, dictators may make broad patriotic appeals while simultaneously threatening and bullying those that do not toe the line; they may speak of the importance of economic reforms and public service provision while at the same time making patriotic claims to legitimacy. What we argue is that the relative weight and prominence of each strategy varies systematically depending on the situational context of the opportunities and challenges that authoritarian rulers face.

Determinants of Communication Strategies

Just like dictators choose from the menu of manipulation when trying to secure electoral victories (Schedler, 2002), we argue that they can choose informational strategies—what to emphasize or deemphasize—from a communications menu in an attempt to secure and boost their political standing. That is, we expect that autocrats are attuned and strategically responsive to their environments; in turn, instrumental concerns lead them to stress particular communication strategies over others. While some dictators may gravitate to particular strategies and on average speak more like, for example, patriots or performance-focused informational autocrats,[3] we expect them to respond in similar ways when faced with similar challenges or opportunities, making more use of those strategies that help them mitigate a particular challenge and less of those that are either not helpful or make problems worse. Thus, contrary to the widely accepted "informational autocrats" model as the predominant communication strategy of contemporary autocrats (Guriev and Treisman, 2019), we propose that dictators are, given the right circumstances, just as or even more likely to turn to other strategies as their assessments of risk and opportunities reverberate in their rhetoric.

In what follows, we discuss which of the three main communication strategies dictators are most likely to apply during their rule. Specifically, we focus the discussion on what they are likely to emphasize when dealing with three tasks that contemporary authoritarian leaders typically face. The first task is connected to the challenge of winning and re-claiming power in national elections; the second is tied to governing, in particular to the task of managing the national economy; and

[3]In the appendix we account for personal backgrounds that may influence individuals' speech.

the third concerns the protection of power and how to handle specific conflicts with domestic and international actors that directly challenge their rule.

Certainly, autocrats face other challenges as well. However, as we explain below, research shows that the ability to manage elections and the economy and to effectively thwart off domestic and international opponents is central to authoritarian survival. We, therefore, expect that rulers will deliberately opt for those communication strategies that are considered most useful for successfully dealing with these specific challenges.

Winning Elections

Some scholars argue that elections serve as an effective stabilization tool for autocracies (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni, 2006), while others underline that elections are sometimes risky endeavors (Howard and Roessler, 2006; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). Still, there is a consensus that dictators are aware of the challenges they face and seek to mitigate them by deploying various tools, including choosing communication strategically.

As most autocrats hold elections to "reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy" (Schedler, 2002, 37), we should expect them to "talk the talk" of democracy and be more responsive in election years. Election time is therefore when we expect authoritarian rulers to most eagerly present themselves as democrats. In democracies, the economy is almost always among those topics that voters deem most salient (Clarke and Stewart, 1995). Recent studies indicate that the same likely applies to voters in autocracies (Lucardi, 2019; Reuter and Szakonyi, 2019). As suggested by Guriev's and Treisman's (2019) "informational autocrats" model, contemporary dictators aspire for legitimacy primarily through the lens of socioeconomic performance. We therefore hypothesize that around elections, dictators, like their more democratic peers, speak even more about challenges connected to managing the economy in order to appear responsive and conscientious in the eyes of the public. On this basis, we formulate our first hypothesis:

- H_{1a}: *During elections, dictators emphasize the communicative strategy of performance.*

However, there are also good reasons to expect that around elections authoritarian leaders may find a different communication strategy even more appealing. Playing the "nationalist card" is a

well-known electoral strategy in weak democracies and hybrid regimes (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995; Snyder and Ballentine, 1996). This should not be any different in more autocratic settings, where modern rulers also struggle to mobilize voter support during elections. Focusing on broad patriotic appeals, similar to populist appeals in more democratic settings, allows the autocrat to steer clear of the difficult discussion of substantive issues and the solving of salient socioeconomic problems. Making use of patriotic discourse during elections can thus be thought of as a strategy meant to partly depoliticize the vote while simultaneously making it salient in ideational terms, disarming ideological opponents (Goode and Stroup, 2015). Thus, an alternative election-related hypothesis is that rulers talk more like "patriotic autocrats" than like informational autocrats:

- H_{1b}: *During elections, dictators emphasize the communicative strategy of patriotism.*

Managing the Economy

Scholars have long argued that economic performance legitimacy is central for authoritarian leaders (Huntington 1991, 46; Geddes and Zaller 1989), and studies show that poorly performing autocrats are more likely to lose popular support and, eventually, power (Djuve, Knutsen and Wig, 2020; Lucardi, 2019; Reuter and Gandhi, 2011). When the economy is good, we can assume leaders—be they authoritarian or democratic—will try to claim credit for the socioeconomic progress that voters experience (Rozenas and Stukal, 2019). Thus, we expect the following:

- H_{2a}: *During good economic times, dictators emphasize the strategy of performance.*

However, when the economy is stagnating or shrinking and crisis hits, the existing literature suggests two very different expectations. According to the "informational autocrats" model, we should expect rulers to continue to try to appear responsive before voters, just like more democratic leaders would do. That is, by at least paying attention to if not addressing salient economic problems, autocrats acknowledge a performance problem and can invite (limited) debate on the issue in the public sphere to release tension and assuage the worst buildup of grievances (Lorentzen, 2013). At the same time, the airing of socioeconomic problems allows them to put pressure on state bureaucrats to come up with solutions (Schuler, 2020), and they can always exploit their control

over media outlets and evade blame by attributing the responsibility for economic policy failures to other domestic or international actors (Rozenas and Stukal, 2019).

A contrasting perspective emphasizes that in political systems characterized by highly centralized power, blame attribution is not necessarily credible (Beazer and Reuter, 2019) and therefore not particularly effective (Aytaç, 2021). At the same time, because authoritarian leaders are insulated from the scrutiny of free media, they—unlike leaders of more democratic countries—have the leverage to ignore economic problems when the economy is bad. Following this reasoning, we should instead expect authoritarian leaders to rather avoid economic issues altogether and instead stress alternative communication strategies. In addition, research shows both elite defection (Reuter and Gandhi, 2011) and popular protest (Brancati, 2014) are more likely when the regime is underperforming economically. Dictators may therefore find it necessary to preemptively foreclose such initiatives and act in accordance with the "law of coercive responsiveness" (Davenport, 2007, 7)—not only in deed but also in rhetoric (Dukalskis and Patane, 2019; Josua, 2021). They do this by turning up the public scolding and intimidation of opposition forces, regime renegades, and disobedient segments of the population more generally. Doing so sends a clear signal of the ruler's resolve and reminds all potential opponents of the consequences connected to going up against the dictator. Thus, we formulate an additional hypothesis related to economic performance:

- H_{2b}: *During bad economic times, dictators emphasize the communicative strategy of intimidation, not that of performance.*

Mitigating Domestic and International Threats

Finally, we turn to the task of manifest threat mitigation. Dictators often find themselves in a direct stand-off with domestic and/or international actors. When rulers of authoritarian regimes are pressured by foreign states either economically (in the form of sanctions) or militarily (in the form of interstate disputes) or when they face domestic challenges in the form of mass protests, we again expect them to bolster their defenses in an attempt to survive the crisis. This communicative defense, we argue, simultaneously includes patriotic rhetoric that aims to rally supporters to legitimate leaders' claim to power as well as the intimidating language to scare off their opponents.

From the international relations literature, we know that rulers become more resolute and increase domestic repression when involved in economic and military conflicts with other states (Heffington, 2021; Wood, 2008). Likewise, they are said to drum up patriotic sentiment and promote a "rally around the flag" discourse to reduce domestic audience costs (Morgan and Schwebach, 1997). Thus, we should expect dictators to speak more like both intimidating and patriotic autocrats during such episodes. Most recently, we have seen Vladimir Putin doing this in Russia immediately prior to and following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In his speeches, he has drummed up patriotism and also issued stark warnings to his domestic opponents.

A similar logic can be expected when autocrats face threats from domestic actors in the form of public protests. During demonstration episodes, dictators portray the mobilized group in a negative light (Pop-Eleches and Way, 2021; Williamson and Malik, 2020) while simultaneously resorting to repression and warnings to stop the mobilized citizenry from further advances and deter passive supporters from joining their ranks (Bellin, 2012).[4] In addition, they likely strike patriotic chords to rally their own supporters and stop further societal mobilization. Thus, in the context of both domestic and international stand-offs, we expect dictators to speak more in accordance with the "intimidating autocrats" and "patriotic autocrats" models and less like "informational autocrats":

- H_3: *During domestic and international conflict episodes, dictators emphasize the communicative strategies of both intimidation and patriotism.*

Introducing the Corpus of Legislative Addresses of Post-Soviet Rulers

For the empirical analysis, we rely on novel empirical data consisting of 304 annual legislative addresses of 51 post-Soviet leaders from 1991 to 2019, from all 12 non-Baltic post-Soviet nation-

[4] In his 2020 address, Lukashenko of Belarus, anticipating the mass protests in the wake of the sham presidential election, issued a severe warning: "I repeat to parents: at this critical moment, pay serious attention to your children, keep them from destructive actions. [...] These "puppeteers" will not succeed, but our people will suffer. [...] We demand nothing extraordinary. Follow the law of the land, if you break it, our reaction will be instant, and rebuff will be most severe."

states and six non-recognized, de facto republics. We further restrict the majority of analyses to electoral and closed autocracies. On the one hand, the countries in the post-Soviet region all share a common, recent history, allowing us to keep potentially important unobservable factors "constant", which otherwise might be difficult to control for. On the other hand, the autocracies of this highly authoritarian region vary between extremely personalist and more institutionalised regime types, which makes the setting comparable to most other authoritarian parts of the world.

The annual legislative address ("poslanie" in Russian) is the most significant and, often, performative and ritualized tool of public political communication that leaders use. The yearly addresses by post-Soviet leaders are comprehensive policy texts in terms of their scope and are similar in form to the annual State of the Union addresses given by US presidents to Congress (Benoit, Munger and Spirling, 2019; Cohen, 1995) and presidential addresses in Latin America (Arnold, Doyle and Wiesehomeier, 2017).

In most post-Soviet countries, presidential addresses are made in person to the parliament and other elites and are broadcast live to the nation. Importantly, the speeches are also strongly referenced in the national media and are indeed "consumed" by the broader population. For example, in Russia, regional and local authorities organized mass viewings of the 2020 address by Vladimir Putin in municipal buildings, on large outdoor screens, and even on public transport, and in Kazakhstan, students and teachers are often required to watch and discuss a live broadcast of the president's address.[5] In addition, research on Russia shows that elite actors also pay careful attention to the policy signals received from the president's speeches (Baturo and Mikhaylov, 2013).

As further evidence of the importance of these speeches, we used the *Factiva* database to estimate the number of monthly references to the annual addresses relative to other important national events. Figure 1 shows these trends for the past four years for two countries in our dataset. First, we see that the spikes in coverage correspond to the months in which the speeches were held. That

[5]See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 January 2020, `https://www.svoboda.org/a/30376838.html`, and `https://sm.nis.edu.kz/en/shkolnye-novosti/7307`, respectively.

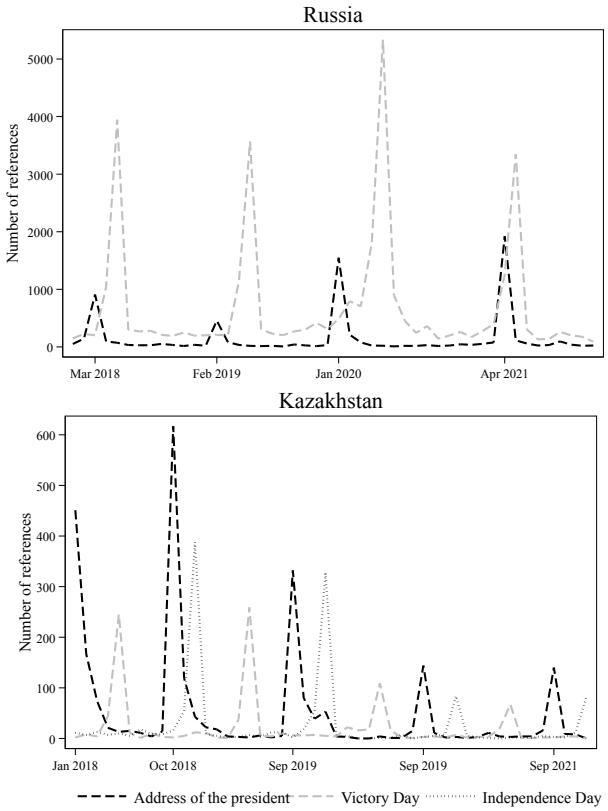

Figure 1: *Media Coverage of Presidential Address*. *Note:* Total number of references to "presidential address" in national media in Russia and Kazakhstan, in comparison to references to "Victory Day", "Independence Day," spikes are visible for the months of addresses; based on *Factiva* database search.

is, media attention increases considerably when addresses are made. Second, the figure shows that the media coverage is indeed quite substantial. In Russia, the presidential address receives on average around 20 percent of the media coverage received by one of the biggest national holidays, Victory Day (the celebration of the victory over Nazi Germany). For a political speech, this is an incredibly high level of attention. In Kazakhstan, the coverage of the presidential address is even more extensive—exceeding both that of Victory Day and Kazakh Independence Day.[6]

These speeches thus receive ample attention and have wide political repercussions. On these grounds, it seems fair to assume that rulers carefully consider how they speak and the subjects

[6]Because the database includes fewer media from Kazakhstan, the total number of references is lower than in Russia. In the appendix, we analyze the coverage by rescaling references in relation to the commonly covered subject of "sport."

they emphasize. This makes the annual legislative addresses ideal for studying the communicative strategies of authoritarian rulers. While research exists that discusses the role of the presidential address, or that uses discourse analysis on speeches in particular dictatorships (e.g., Frear and Mazepus, 2021), studies that apply text-as-data methods are much rarer.

We located speeches from various sources. First, we scraped legislative addresses from presidential or legislative web pages. Second, we sourced speeches from the archives of national newspapers or official publications whenever they were not available from official web pages. If speeches were not available online, we relied on national interlocutors to locate and scan hard copies of the relevant documents.[7] While in the early to mid-1990s not all presidents were required to address the parliament, over time the institution of the presidential address has become the norm, and the majority of post-Soviet presidents are now required by the constitution to make an annual report. Only on rare occasions, and despite formal requirements, did presidents skip their duty in a given year, as Putin did in 2017. Fortunately, these dropouts are randomly distributed.

Not all speeches included carry the title of a formal legislative address. In such cases, we ascertain the most important speech that most closely resembles the annual address in terms of its comprehensive coverage of topics and the saliency of the occasion. In countries where the constitution does not require such addresses, leaders do still make annual reports to the people (e.g., Kyrgyzstan) or report to the cabinet of ministers (Uzbekistan) or the Military Council (Artsakh).

We were able to locate almost all addresses made in the 1991–2019 period. The majority of speeches (81 per cent) were originally made in Russian. For the remaining addresses delivered in national languages—such as in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—we either used the official Russian translation available from the presidential web pages (11 per cent) or we had the text translated into Russian (8 per cent) (details are in the appendix). Following translation, dig-

[7]We thank Svetlana Chetaikina on Kyrgyzstan, Lasha Gvelesiani and Tornike Zurabashvili on Georgia, Vasily Vashchanka on Kazakhstan and Aytan Gahramanova on Azerbaijan. The majority of texts were collected in 2016-17, since updated.

italization, and optical text recognition whenever required, the speeches were transformed into a machine-readable format and pre-processed, as explained in the appendix.[8] On average, speeches are quite long and typically delivered for over an hour; they have 290 sentences on average, and 2,100 types, or unique forms of words. Texts from Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Abkhazia are the longest. The supplementary appendix provides further details.

Methods and Data

We extract information about communicative strategies by employing a semi-supervised machine learning method, Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS), which can classify documents based on specific pre-defined dimensions of theoretical interest (Watanabe, 2021). LSS has certain advantages over both supervised and unsupervised techniques. While the former demands significant resources as it requires training complex models on a large number of documents that have to be hand-coded (e.g., Nielsen, 2017), the latter is not well suited to analyzing pre-defined dimensions or categories like the ones we are interested in.[9]

The Dependent Variables

LSS is a document scaling technique that uses a relatively small number of so-called "seed words" as a form of weak supervision, and estimates semantic proximity of words through word-embedding method, to capture specific subtle dimensions (Lankina and Watanabe, 2017; Watanabe, 2021). We therefore first carefully read a random sample of speeches and then select as seed words a small set of words to define our three main variables of interest: performance-related, intimidation-centered, and patriotic communication strategies. For instance, to capture intimidation language, we include such words as "adventurist," "opposition," "extremist," "traitor," "enemy," and the like; patriotic speech is represented by "people," "independence," "homeland" (motherland), "unity," "patriotism," etc.; while performance language is "economy," "development," "budget," "debt," "crisis,"

[8]For pre-processing, we used the Quanteda package (3.0.0) in R (Benoit and Nulty, 2013).

[9]In the appendix, we discuss these methods in greater detail; and as a robustness check we include the results of sentiment, dictionary-based analyses, as well as of the structural topic model.

and similar terms. The supplementary appendix provides more details on the seed words used.

Next, polarity scores for all words are estimated on a unidimensional scale based on their semantic proximity to the chosen seed words. This is done separately for all three types of communication strategies. Then, for each strategy, we compute average scores for each speech, where more positive values stand for a higher propensity to engage in performance-, patriotism-, or intimidation-centered rhetoric.

With these scores, we can compare speeches on the three communicative dimensions of interest within and across ruler spells. To illustrate how strategies of performance, patriotism, and intimidation vary, Figure 2 plots local polynomials for the scores extracted from speeches held in six representative countries. The figure shows, for instance, that the intimidation in speech of Kyrgyzstan's Presidents Akaev and Bakiev grows in the years of the popular revolutions of 2005 and 2010. Before the mid-2000s, the light grey line representative of economic performance rhetoric dominates, but then Akaev and also Bakiev who follows substitute to the strategy of intimidation. In contrast, the speech of Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev is largely dominated by rhetoric centered on responsiveness to economic conditions, as well as on unity and patriotism, which is perhaps not surprising given the very large proportion of ethnic Russians in the country and the challenges for nation-building this presented. In Belarus, by contrast, intimidation language has always been stronger than the emphasis on the economy, but still, we see substantial variation across time.

On the whole, we find that the estimated scores have face validity and the observed variation demonstrates the usefulness of applying text analytics to the positions of post-Soviet autocrats. In the appendix, we present similar figures for the remainder of countries, as well as visualizations for the full corpus for each communication strategy.

Independent Variables and Controls

We explain the substitution logic of authoritarian communication by relying on the following explanatory variables, which capture the three types of challenges discussed in the theory section. First, to investigate the election-related hypotheses, we use binary indicators for *Presidential elec-*

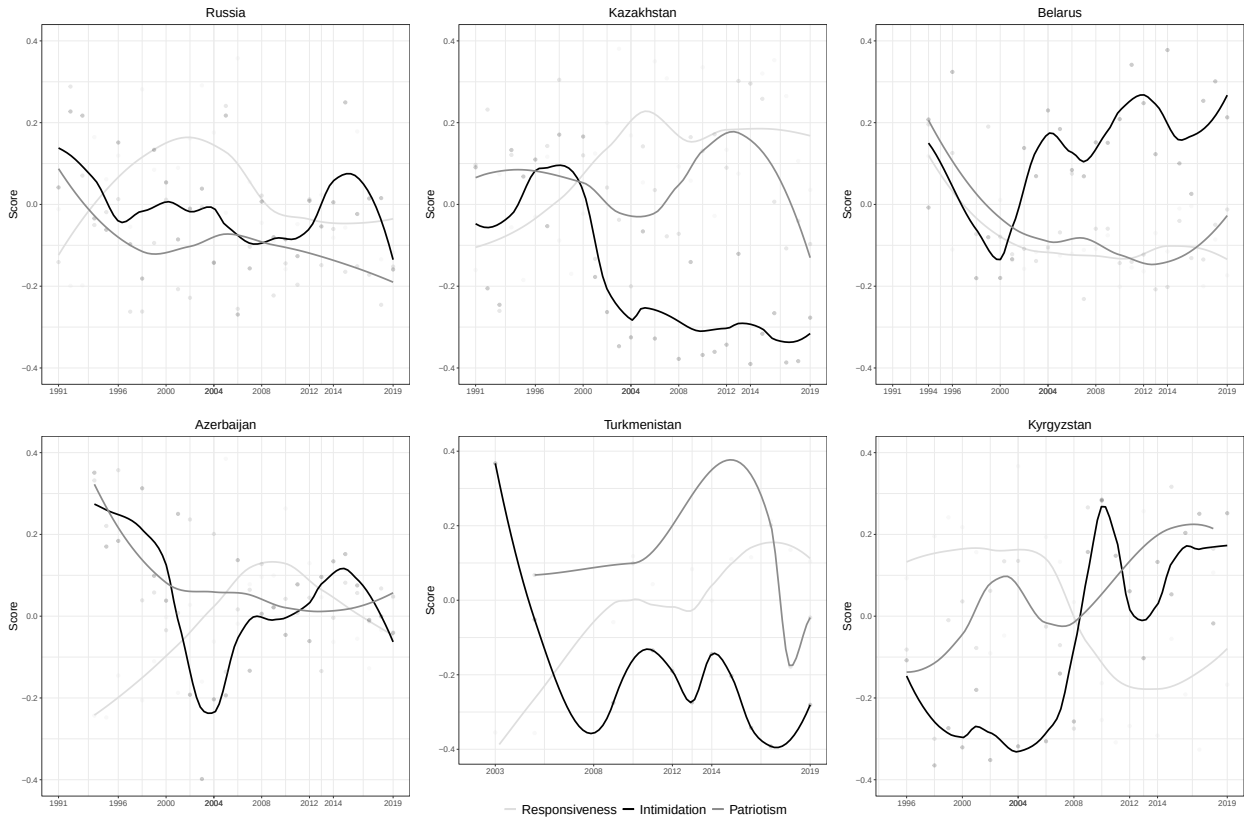

Figure 2: *Communicative Strategies Over Time*. *Note:* Local polynomials for scores on three communicative strategies on y-axes; six representative countries.

tions and *Referendums* (Coppedge et al., 2019). Second, to capture changes in economic performance, we use *GDP growth* and *GDP income per capita*, logarithm (in constant 2010 USD), sourced from the World Development Indicators. Finally, to measure domestic and international conflicts, we include *Protests*, which is the number of anti-governmental protests in a given year (Clark and Regan, 2016); *Interstate dispute*—whether a country is a party to a militarized interstate dispute in a given year—from MIDB 5.0 (Jones, Bremer and Singer, 1996); and *Sanctions*, sourced from Felbermayr et al. (2020), which is operationalized as the proportion of states in the international system that impose sanctions on a given country.

As additional controls, we include *Closed autocracy* as a measure for whether a country is considered an entrenched autocracy (Coppedge et al., 2019); whether incumbent presidents are in their *First term*—because non-consolidated and more vulnerable dictators may be more prone to resort to repression (Licht and Allen, 2018); and a variable called *Color revolutions* capturing

the six-month periods after four distinct regional democratic diffusion waves, which may have inflamed the rhetoric of authoritarian leaders across the post-Soviet region.[10]

Results

We now turn to the empirical tests of the proposed hypotheses. The full sample consists of 304 country-year observations; since the majority of indicators are not available for unrecognized states, the estimation sample is reduced by about a quarter. In the analyses that follow, all specifications are estimated with country fixed effects and annual dummy variables included.[11]

Table 1 presents models that test which communication strategies dictators prefer when they face either of the three main challenges discussed in the theory section: winning elections (H_1a–H_1b), managing the economy (H_2a–H_2b), and mitigating domestic and international threats (H_3). We analyze one communication strategy at a time: performance (Columns 1–3), patriotism (Columns 4–6), and intimidation (Columns 7–9). For all three strategies, Table 1 presents base models with the main predictors only (Columns 1, 3, and 5) alongside fully specified models that include all control variables (2, 4, and 6). In Columns 3, 6, and 9 we use the full sample of post-Soviet countries, while in Columns 1–2, 4–5, and 7–8, we exclude those post-Soviet country years not coded as authoritarian by *V-dem* to account for potential differences between authoritarian and more pluralist hybrid regimes.

The results included in Table 1 indicate that authoritarian leaders turn to, or increase their use of, the performance-related communication strategy only under certain scenarios (Columns 1–2). For one, we find strong support for H_2a: When the economy is good, authoritarian leaders are

[10]Oct 2000–Mar 2001, Nov 2003–May 2004, Nov 2004–Jun 2005, and Dec 2010–Jun 2011.

[11]One possible concern is whether rhetoric is influenced by overall regional policy agenda changes at different periods or even by conceptual changes, known as agenda shifts (Proksch and Slapin, 2009). In the appendix, we additionally account for possible time effects by including the plot of average LSS scores over time, which reveals that while leaders were somewhat more reliant on the strategy of intimidation in 1991–93, from the mid-1990s the average scores remain relatively flat, indicating that the differences are not determined by structural conditions of transition.

	Performance			*Patriotism*			*Intimidation*		
	autocracies		*all*	*autocracies*		*all*	*autocracies*		*all*
	1:	*2:*	*3:*	*4:*	*5:*	*6:*	*7:*	*8:*	*9:*
Economic growth	0.009**	0.009**	0.011**	-0.005	-0.005	-0.006	-0.007	-0.007	-0.007+
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Election year	-0.026	-0.026	-0.027	0.156**	0.159**	0.164***	-0.037	-0.035	-0.029
	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.034)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.046)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.040)
Referendum	-0.144**	-0.140**	-0.118**	0.147+	0.155+	0.101	0.244***	0.251***	0.195**
	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.053)	(0.084)	(0.085)	(0.072)	(0.071)	(0.072)	(0.061)
Protests	-0.005**	-0.005**	-0.004**	0.005+	0.005+	0.003	0.006**	0.006**	0.006**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Sanctions	-0.735**	-0.709+	-0.561+	-0.345	-0.185	-0.419	1.125**	1.190**	0.864**
	(0.352)	(0.368)	(0.320)	(0.493)	(0.511)	(0.436)	(0.420)	(0.435)	(0.372)
Interstate dispute	-0.039	-0.038	-0.036	0.065	0.052	0.048	0.054	0.034	0.037
	(0.045)	(0.047)	(0.039)	(0.063)	(0.065)	(0.053)	(0.054)	(0.055)	(0.045)
GDP pc, log	0.260**	0.274**	0.231**	-0.225	-0.166	-0.225+	-0.173	-0.127	-0.184
	(0.110)	(0.119)	(0.099)	(0.154)	(0.165)	(0.135)	(0.131)	(0.141)	(0.115)
Closed autocracy		-0.015	-0.049		0.034	0.048		0.115	0.125
		(0.080)	(0.075)		(0.112)	(0.101)		(0.095)	(0.087)
First term		0.018	-0.011		0.038	0.026		0.031	0.017
		(0.045)	(0.037)		(0.062)	(0.051)		(0.053)	(0.043)
Color revolution		0.025	0.031		-0.173	-0.180+		-0.103	-0.055
		(0.077)	(0.071)		(0.107)	(0.096)		(0.092)	(0.082)
Constant	-2.036**	-2.169**	-1.793**	1.855	1.314	1.842+	1.213	0.754	1.291
	(0.880)	(0.983)	(0.819)	(1.233)	(1.363)	(1.113)	(1.050)	(1.161)	(0.952)
Year dummy variables	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
rmse	0.186	0.188	0.183	0.261	0.261	0.249	0.222	0.222	0.213
σ_u	0.252	0.261	0.226	0.365	0.329	0.328	0.245	0.230	0.261
ρ	0.646	0.658	0.604	0.661	0.613	0.634	0.548	0.518	0.601
N	181	181	220	181	181	220	181	181	220
N countries	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12

Table 1: *What Influences Communication Strategies? Note:* Models 1–9 are panel linear models with country fixed effects; RMSE is root mean squared error, ** p <0.05, *** p <0.01.

more inclined to discuss economic performance and public goods provisions more generally. That is, when rulers can claim credit for good performance, they willingly go along pretending that they are conscientious, responsive rulers committed to the public good. However, when the economy contracts, responsiveness does not seem to be the preferred strategy and dictators instead turn to the strategy of fear, as we discuss below.

More surprisingly perhaps, we find no support for H_1a. Certainly, authoritarian rulers still do address socioeconomic issues in their speeches during elections, but no more than they do in non-election years. That is, in election years, leaders do not appear to pick up on the most salient issue for the majority of voters around the globe: the economy. It may thus be that most of today's

dictatorships have introduced formal democratic institutions, but in terms of rhetoric they do not (yet) copy the democratic world in appealing to voters during elections by signaling responsiveness and economic responsibility. What, then, do they emphasize in election years?

The results in Columns 4–5, showing when leaders are most likely to use the communication strategy of patriotism, cast more light on how autocrats deal with elections. In support of Hypothesis H_1b, we find that in election years authoritarian rulers do not speak like performance-focused democrats but instead increase their use of the language of national unity, independence, and patriotism when they try to mobilize voters to win re-election. Making broad nationalist and patriotic appeals that gloss over the ideological difference between voter groups thus seems to be the dominant, catch-all electoral strategy in post-Soviet autocracies.

Another finding on the usage of patriotic speech relates to international disputes more generally. Following H_3, we expected that leaders would be more likely to emphasize a patriotic, unifying discourse when in conflict with another nation-state. Based on the results in Columns 4 to 6, we do not find support for a "rally around the flag" effect in speeches, even if the coefficient has the expected direction of effects. On the other hand, though scholars have found that repression increases both during military and economic international conflicts (Heffington, 2021; Wood, 2008), we only find an increase in the use of intimidating language when rulers face sanctions (Columns 7–9).

Indeed, turning to the more divisive rhetoric in Columns 7–9, we see that leaders are more likely to use nastier language when the economy is doing badly, as indicated by the negative coefficient on *GDP growth*. However, the coefficient is not statistically significant, indicating no support for H_2b. In contrast, as expected by H_3, results show that dictators turn to a more aggressive and intimidating communication strategy when they are confronted by a larger number of street protests (Columns 7–9). When rulers feel threatened by domestic groups and sanctions, and they are incapable of claiming credit for policy successes, they turn to fear and intimidation as their main rhetorical strategy.

Notably, dictators also turn to intimidation language when they make their address in a referendum year. At face value, this contradicts Hypotheses H_1a and H_1b, which stipulate the emphasis on performance or the turn to a more unifying message at elections. However, the majority of referenda in the region are aimed at increasing executive power and/or extending and overturning term limits (Hale, 2015, 71–75), and they are often accompanied by opposition campaigns, resistance from other political parties, and international criticism, which put pressure on autocrats and which are likely to lead to more intimidating rhetoric, as just discussed. In the appendix, we examine this further and find that power-grabbing referenda are indeed what drive the results. We also show that the intimidation language is a feature of a pre-referendum campaign only, and then it largely disappears following the incumbent's victory. More generally, these findings indicate that when post-Soviet autocrats extend their rule and tighten their grip on power, they do so not by claiming legitimacy through patriotism or performance but rather by whipping up an atmosphere of anxiety, signaling that resistance will be futile and costly.

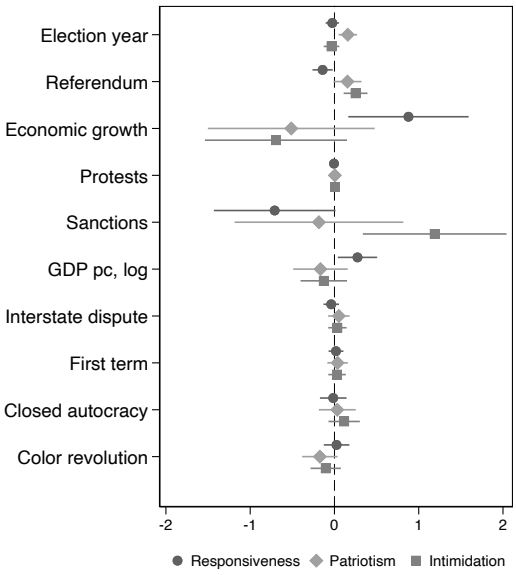

Figure 3: *The Effects of Predictors on Authoritarian Communication*. *Note:* Marginal effects estimated following Model 2, 5, and 8, Table 1. Annual dummy variables are estimated but omitted for this figure.

Figure 3 reports marginal effects of predictors on the three different communication strategies. It shows that in terms of substantive significance, *Referendum* and *Sanctions* are the most impor-

tant predictors for divisive language centered on intimidation. Speeches become more divisive by 0.23 in a *referendum* year, and by 0.51 when there is an increase in anti-governmental demonstrations from none to the maximum number in the estimation sample—a rather significant change in rhetoric given that the latter is almost two standard deviations on the intimidation scale. In turn, *GDP growth* and *GDP income per capita* are the strongest predictors of performance-centered language. When the economy is bad, leaders reduce their emphasis on the economy by 0.25, or just over one standard deviation on the performance scale. In turn, in election years, the appeal to national unity increases by 0.15, or close to half of one standard deviation on the scale. This further supports our theory regarding the strategic logic of communication in dictatorships.

In the appendix, we include a battery of additional tests. We measure communication strategies using different approaches, including sentiment, dictionary, and topic analyses; we conduct additional studies that account for speech properties and alternative control factors, and that include non-recognized states, among others. Our main findings remain robust to all additional tests. We additionally examine whether a similar logic extends beyond the annual addresses to all public speeches made by a ruler. Using a text corpus of 5,979 speeches made by the Russian President Vladimir Putin over time, we find further support for our main findings, as explained in the appendix. We show that Putin's rhetoric centered on performance declines when Russia's economy rapidly slows down, that on patriotism is prominent around 2008 and 2012 elections, as well as from the beginning of the war against Ukraine. We also observe a notable increase in a more intimidating rhetoric following the 2011–protests.

Authoritarian Communicative Strategies on the International Stage

Do these results have external validity? Can the same explanatory factors also predict variation in the political discourse of dictators beyond the post-Soviet region? We do not have similar corpora of presidential addresses in French or in Arabic to test whether African or Middle Eastern dictators, for instance, are equally sensitive to their external environment in speech. Instead, as a critical test of the model of authoritarian communication strategies, we turn to a very different forum for

speeches from that of legislatures, and in a different language. Specifically, we turn to speeches of high-profile national representatives of authoritarian regimes in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) during the General Debate. Countries are almost always represented at the debate by either foreign ministers or political leaders. The texts of the UNGA are sourced from Baturo, Dasandi and Mikhaylov (2017). For more information on this text corpus, see the appendix.

In testing our hypothesis related to the propensity to use performance and patriotic rhetoric in speech, we rely on the same LSS method as described above; the seed words in English are almost identical to those in Russian and only vary if we cannot find the equivalent term. However, for the intimidation rhetoric, we must use a different approach. As the UN debate is a highly ceremonial affair, where speakers tend to use diplomatic, sometimes technical, language (Peterson, 2006), we do not expect them to use the same language of intimidation they use when broadcasting their message to a domestic audience. In addition, different autocrats may rely on derogatory terms that are not encountered in a post-Soviet political context, and because it is a global forum, they may be more prone to attacking, instead of domestic opponents, international actors as sponsors of domestic opposition, or to scold them for sanctions imposed on their regimes. As an alternative strategy, we therefore examine the intimidation strategy through whether rhetoric is generally more negative in its sentiment. In the appendix, we test the viability of this approach; using the post-Soviet text corpus, we show that negative sentiments and the intimidation rhetoric are indeed related. We also show that UNGA speeches often touch on domestic issues as well and are generally reproduced — often in full length — in domestic media. That is, authoritarian speakers at the UNGA are likely to have both domestic and international audiences in mind, and thus likely to be sensitive to the strategic communication logic highlighted in this paper.

Table 2 presents the results of fixed effects regression models that are fitted in the same manner as those in Table 1. First, we estimate models on the sample of UN speeches made by representatives of the post-Soviet regimes only (Columns 1, 3, and 5) and, second, by all authoritarian representatives from across the world (2, 4, and 6). The region-specific variable *Color revolutions*

is only included in the post-Soviet sample.

	Performance		*Patriotism*		*Negative sentiment*	
	1:	*2:*	*3:*	*4:*	*5:*	*6:*
Economic growth	0.021**	0.005**	-0.021**	-0.007**	-0.010+	-0.002+
	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.005)	(0.001)
Election year	-0.013	-0.092	-0.137	0.041	-0.106	-0.034
	(0.116)	(0.057)	(0.114)	(0.057)	(0.064)	(0.026)
Referendum	0.140	0.139	0.600**	0.292**	0.139	0.085
	(0.232)	(0.138)	(0.228)	(0.138)	(0.129)	(0.063)
Protests	-0.161	-0.080	0.412**	0.283***	0.246**	0.092***
	(0.170)	(0.056)	(0.168)	(0.056)	(0.095)	(0.026)
Sanctions	-0.507	-0.253**	1.772	0.071	2.048**	0.097**
	(1.115)	(0.104)	(1.099)	(0.104)	(0.622)	(0.048)
Interstate dispute	-0.110	-0.056	0.032	0.117**	-0.011	-0.016
	(0.140)	(0.052)	(0.138)	(0.052)	(0.078)	(0.024)
GDP pc, log	-1.820**	-0.015	-0.178	-0.050	0.142	-0.025
	(0.673)	(0.216)	(0.664)	(0.216)	(0.375)	(0.099)
Autocracy	0.296	-0.111	-0.006	0.236**	-0.141	0.094**
	(0.233)	(0.072)	(0.229)	(0.072)	(0.130)	(0.033)
Color revolution	-0.259		0.227		-0.729+	
	(0.746)		(0.735)		(0.416)	
Constant	7.470**	0.095	0.595	-0.214	-1.016	-0.951**
	(2.780)	(0.796)	(2.739)	(0.796)	(1.549)	(0.365)
Year dummy variables	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
rmse	0.643	0.728	0.634	0.727	0.359	0.334
σ_u	0.659	0.607	0.426	0.679	0.333	0.275
ρ	0.512	0.410	0.311	0.466	0.463	0.405
N	231	1655	231	1655	231	1655
N countries	12	100	12	100	12	100

Table 2: *Communicative Strategies at the International Stage* *Note:* Models 1, 3 and 5 are estimated on a sample of post-Soviet autocracies; Models 2, 4 and 6 — on a sample of all world autocracies, post-Cold-war. Models 1–6 are panel linear models with country fixed effects; RMSE is root mean squared error, ** p <0.05, *** p <0.01.

Despite gauging communication strategies in a very different setting and a different language, we again find strong support for the validity of the strategic theory of authoritarian speech. The results in Table 2 suggest that authoritarian speakers, whether post-Soviet only or all other dictators speaking to an international audience, are all more likely to use performance language when their domestic economy is doing well, and they are more likely to substitute to a more patriotic rhetoric as well as that laden with negative sentiment (proxying intimidation) when their economy is doing badly, although the latter is not statistically significant at 0.05 level.

Furthermore, for the global sample, we do find that dictators and their lieutenants drum up the language of patriotism when they face interstate conflict but not during sanctions or protests. In-

stead, the use of more negative rhetoric—proxying the communication strategy of intimidation—increases when regimes face mass protests and are under international sanctions. To summarize, the results from the main analysis appear to have strong external validity. Dictators around the world move between different rhetorical strategies based on changes in their strategic environments. Rhetorical adaptation is clearly an important but much less systematically analyzed authoritarian survival strategy.

Conclusion

Previous studies of political rhetoric in democracies through text-as-data methods have revealed important insights about agenda setting, preferences, and the strategic language of emotions, among others (Benoit, Munger and Spirling, 2019; Proksch and Slapin, 2009). However, authoritarian speech has long been undertheorized and empirically examined much less thoroughly. This paper breaks new ground by not only offering new theoretical perspectives on authoritarian speech but also by introducing recent methodological tools to the study of public communication in dictatorships, allowing for a first comprehensive test of the strategic use of rhetorical frames across time and space in contemporary autocracies.

We add to this new research tradition by theorizing how contemporary dictators strategically use three broad ideal-typical communication strategies. Using new, comprehensive data from leader speeches in one of the most autocratic regions of the world, we show that dictators do use all three rhetorical ideal types, but they instrumentally adapt to changes in their strategic environments by switching between the informational tools they have available. Most surprisingly, we find that dictators use the communication strategy of speaking like performance-focused, would-be democrats much less than hitherto thought (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). Autocrats today only speak like responsive providers of public goods when the economy is good. When economic conditions turn for the worse, they instead come out as "intimidators," making overt threats and using aggressive language more generally. Not even around elections do autocrats speak like democrats by exclusively attending to socioeconomic issues. Instead, they first and foremost appeal to voters

with increased use of broad patriotic discourses that distract the electorate from pressing domestic issues. Patriotism, not issue responsiveness, is the primary electoral communication strategy in dictatorships today.

Another interesting finding that is in contrast with common wisdom, concerns the expected dual use of patriotic and intimidating rhetoric during international and domestic conflicts. Our results, in both the post-Soviet and the global analysis, only partly corroborate the 'rally around the flag'-thesis. We find that while dictators in the global sample try to rally their supporters by increasing the intensity of their patriotic appeals during military disputes, this does not hold for the sample of post-Soviet autocrats. However, during sanctions and domestic protests, all dictators —across our different samples—primarily resort to the language of intimidation.

Ultimately, we show that dictators intentionally switch between appearing in one moment as responsive informational autocrats, the next as old-fashioned brute oppressors, and the next again as community-invoking shepherds of the nation. If we are to better understand how dictatorships work and evolve, we would greatly benefit from taking advantage of the analytical utility of these authoritarian informational tools. We have validated our approach using a different text corpus, in a different language, by looking at speeches delivered in a very different forum. We invite future research to expand the availability of text data in other dictatorships and hope that the scholars of comparative authoritarianism will be able to apply our theoretical framework to other important texts, other important political actors, and other languages in different regions. Another fruitful endeavor would be to analyze the scope conditions of our argument, e.g., in relation to similarities between autocracies and newly emerged minimalist democracies, or backsliding democracies, which may follow some of the logics we highlight. Finally, we urge scholars to eventually test whether the observed changes in rhetorical strategies matter for authoritarian survival and stability more generally as expected.

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