Response to “Authority and Power in Russia”

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An argument can perhaps be made that all monarchies, no matter how absolute or authoritarian, cannot function without the consent of their subjects, whether tacit or active; proclaim that they act for the welfare (however defined) of their subjects; agree to abide by rules or laws that reflect social norms (whether they actually do abide by them or not); and are vulnerable to popular dissatisfaction. I was aware of the potential for such a general argument when I wrote *Byzantine Republic* and so deliberately set a specific threshold for “republican monarchies” in the Roman tradition, a threshold defined by the following four criteria: (a) a robust conception of the public interest and public property to which the monarch is subordinated in normative texts issued both by the monarchy itself and its elites; (b) a conception of a legally- or ethnically-defined populace whose material wellbeing forms the sole legitimating factor for the operation of government, even if that populace lacks formal institutions by which to take direct political action itself; (c) historical instances of popular intervention in the sphere of politics that were accepted by elites as legitimate, indeed often as constitutive of their own power and positions; and (d) documented continuity between that polity and the ancient Roman *res publica*, coupled with awareness of that continuity.

There is a single state in history that meets these criteria, namely the one that we (misleadingly) call Byzantium. For the purposes of our present discussion, we can drop criterion (d), as it pertains to the identity of the political community in question, rather than its formal characteristics, and the latter are more salient when it comes to theoretical analysis. Any monarchy may potentially be *like* the Roman *res publica* as defined by criteria (a)-(c), and so may be classified along with it, even if it is not Roman per se. (I personally do not accept continuity between the Roman polity and Muscovy based on the latter’s brief flirtation with the idea of a Third Rome, which was an aspect of court ideology and propaganda and did not embody actual Roman ideas.)

With penetrating insight and an impressive chronological scope, Oleg Kharkhordin’s paper forces us to ask whether the political traditions of Novgorod, Muscovy, and Russia in general might call for a paradigm shift away from the rubric of authoritarianism, in which they are often placed. Did its monarchies operate in a context where the power of the monarch was limited, whether in practice or even in theory, by popular institutions or conceptions of a lawful order? In other words, was there a separation of political power (the monarchy) and authority (the broader set of shareholders whose interests legitimated the operation of political power)? Even when power was centralized into the hands of one person, was that person still expected to conform to public norms and seek popular approbation?

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Kharkhordin's argument focuses on three moments in a long history: the function of public assemblies at Novgorod, which elected the *posadnik* but could also topple him; the debate on the relationship between the tsar and law that was sparked by Ivan IV's *oprichnina*, which Kharkhordin insightfully reads against Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the "state of exception"; and the fluctuating fortunes of a verse about popular acclamations in Aleksandr Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. We have, then, a triptych of popular institutions, contemporary debate about the power of the monarchy, and literature, all three of which are necessary to establish the overall case. However, I must remain on the fence about the argument as a whole because these three elements come from widely separated periods, which leaves us without a "thick description" of the political culture of any one of them. I see the potential in each of the three, but no definitive argument for any of them.

Part of the challenge here will surely be the limitations of the evidence that survives, especially for Novgorod. The histories tell us about its popular assemblies and the turbulence of its political sphere, but we lack the rich political literature, such as we have in abundance from Byzantium, that comment on the course of political life from so many personal and institutional angles that we can extract, or triangulate, its common ideological framework. Perhaps, in the case of Novgorod, we can partially recuperate them through philology. Does the specific language used to describe popular interventions give anything away? I am no expert here, but I imagine that the evidence has been carefully picked through. Do actions and institutions correspond to concepts that we can then situate within a framework that perhaps detaches authority from power? The argument must reach to a more granular level.

I was most intrigued by the debate between Ivan and Andrei Kurbskii regarding the legitimacy of the *oprichnina*, and so, in preparation for this response, I read their correspondence in the J. Fennell translation of 1955.[1] Kharkhordin rightly makes hay out of Kurbskii's substantial quotations from Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, the second of which is all about the fundamental principles of the Roman *res publica*, including law and the distinction between private and public. Kurbskii's choice certainly authorizes the questions that Kharkhordin poses. But I was struck, in reading the correspondence, by the complete absence of those ideas from the rest of the text. Ivan and Kurbskii themselves never refer to a public sphere and have no notion that the tsar is accountable to it; the tsar makes no commitment to advance the material welfare of his subjects; and there is no emphasis on legality as such and the lawful polity. There is a passing reference to the "common weal" (91) and an acknowledgment that it is not good to murder subjects, kill children, and rape maidens (245). This does not get us very far. More importantly, there is no conception of a polity defined by a specific populace to which the monarch is beholden and whose moral presence alone can legitimate (or delegitimate) his acts. All these elements, missing from the correspondence of Ivan and Kurbskii, are, by contrast, fundamental to Byzantine debates about the

1. Fennell, J. L. Jr., ed., *The Correspondence between Prince A.M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia, 1564–1579.* Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1955.

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rectitude of imperial actions, to how the emperors justified them, and how their subjects criticized them.

Ivan instead stresses dynastic continuity and divine favor, and the debate between him and Kurbskii focuses almost exclusively on whether they are being properly Orthodox. The emphasis is on personal moral failings, personal relations, and individual crimes and actions without any consideration for the impact that they may have on an impersonal polity that provides a moral framework for those actions. Winning or losing in warfare is seen as proof of Orthodoxy or as lack of Orthodoxy. Ivan does note that the power of the Greek emperors (Byzantines) waned when their rulers began to heed their counselors, and he says this to justify his repression of the aristocracy (57). But the danger that he sees for his position is not of falling into a consultative monarchy but rather a quasi-feudal subdivision of his realm (59). This is about consolidation, not the political stakeholders in a republican monarchy.

Kharkhordin does note the participation of some popular elements in the implementation of Ivan's *oprichnina* and, more importantly for our purposes, the fact that Ivan felt that, to some degree, he had to explain himself to them.[2] Ideally, I would like to see this fleshed out more in order to understand the ideological framework of legitimation implied by these actions. As they stand, I cannot discern the shape of the polity to which they gesture and the role of the popular elements within it. Kharkhordin also sees potential in texts outside the correspondence, such as in the use of Byzantine texts by St. Philip, Metropolitan of Moscow, who called on the tsar to preserve a lawful order. To be sure, these are stronger foundations on which to build the separation of authority and power than the four principles of tsarist power listed by Kharkhordin, namely that it comes from God; that subjects must therefore submit to the tsar; that the tsar will answer to God at the Last Judgment; and the tsar, as a shepherd, must preserve his flock within an Orthodox pen. Not even the Byzantines, who created Orthodoxy and Orthodox rulership, accepted these principles as a sufficient mission-statement for the conduct of their emperors: popular justice in Constantinople did not wait for the Last Judgment, while submission had to be earned on an ongoing basis.

2. Kharkhordin, *Authority and Power in Russia* (in this forum), 21–22.

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