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# Narrative Strategies in an Authoritarian Setting: Moscow's Urban Policy Debates

ECPR conference 2020

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# Introduction

- Narrative Policy Framework (NPF): a framework to empirically study the role of narratives in the policy **process** (Jones & McBeth 2010; Jones, McBeth & Shanahan 2014; Shanahan, Jones, McBeth & Radaelli 2018)
- *Gap*: No empirical NPF applications in authoritarian settings
- *Research Question*: What narrative strategies do governmental and nongovernmental actors use in an authoritarian setting?
- *Argument*: An authoritarian setting fosters distance between narrative strategies used on both sides of a debate

# The NPF

- Narratives are composed of generalizable structural narrative elements (setting, characters, plot, moral of story)
- Actors strategically use narrative elements to promote their policy preferences. The NPF studies 2 narrative strategies:
  - **Devil-angel shift:** demonizing opponents or emphasizing the own heroic role
  - **Scope of conflict:** expand or contain an issue by presenting diffused or concentrated costs and benefits of the policy

# Debates in authoritarian settings

- Authoritarian settings allow for less space for public discourse: limitation of arenas of debate (media, NGOs, academia...)
- Critical policy debates mostly on interne, relatively free, even intended by policymakers → autonomous online spaces

# Expectations

- Separation of public discourse into two debates with pro- and anti-government position
- Governmental actors employ angel shift and issue containment strategies
- Oppositional actors employ devil shift and issue expansion strategies

# Expectations

- Low interactivity and exchange of arguments between two sides → The differences between governmental and oppositional narrative strategies are high.
- The difference is lower the more actors talk to each other
  - Amount of conflict in a debate
  - Actors involved
  - Online space examined

# Policy context

- **Russia: electoral autocracy** (Cassani and Tomini 2018; Gel'man and Starodubtsev 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2018)
- **3 salient urban policy debates in Moscow**
  - *Renovation program*: destruction of Soviet building blocks, resettlement of residents to new high-raising buildings
  - *Public transport*: infrastructure investments, new metro & suburban trains, replacement of trolleybuses with electro-buses
  - *Waste management*: Introduction of recycling and waste incineration

# Data Collection

- Texts from websites and social media of most relevant actors in the debates – government & administration, NGOs, opposition politicians, bloggers, citizen groups, experts



	Government	Opposition
Renovation		
Government	154	0
Citizens	0	74
NGO / Experts	0	0
Politicians / bloggers	0	7
Transport		
Government	136	0
Citizens	0	0
NGO and Experts	13	21
Politicians and bloggers	0	105
Waste		
Government	65	0
Citizens	0	4
NGO and Experts	3	73
Politicians and bloggers	0	102

	Government	Opposition
Renovation		
Social media	0	88
Websites	154	0
Transport		
Social media	0	94
Websites	149	32
Waste		
Social media	6	132
Website	62	47

# Coding

- Coded texts using an NPF coding scheme
- *Main variables*: characters and allocation of costs and benefits of policies
- *Inter-coder reliability*: Krippendorff alpha 0.71-0.84 (satisfactory-good)

# Data analysis

- Descriptive statistics (t-tests,  $\chi^2$ , Cramer's V)
- Calculation of devil-angel shift:
  - Oneself as hero – others as villains / total number of heroes + villains
  - a results in a score ranging from  $-1$  (= strong devil shift) to  $1$  (= strong angel shift)
- Differences between sides of the debates:
  - Net devil-shift score (= devil shift score – angel shift score)
  - **Scope of conflict**

# Findings: devil-angel shift

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	Government Mean	Opposition Mean	Test Statistic	Net devil shift score
Renovation	0.922	-0.504	t= 25.404***	- 1.426
Transport	0.788	-0.352	t= 23,408***	- 1.140
Waste	0.474	-0.281	t=17,652***	- 0.755

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# Findings: use of characters

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	Government Mean	Opposition Mean	Test Statistic
Renovation			
Heroes	1.32	0.25	$t = 14.977***$
Villains	0.00	1.38	$t = -23.862***$
Transport			
Heroes	1.12	0.78	$t = 5.018***$
Villains	0.07	1.31	$t = -18.262***$
Waste			
Heroes	1.75	0.67	$t = 9.090***$
Villains	0.21	1.50	$t = -11.222***$

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# Findings: costs & benefits

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		Government n (%)	Opposition n (%)
Renovation	issue expansion	42 (28%)	47 (54%)
	issue containment	103 (67%)	16 (19%)
Transport	issue expansion	5 (4%)	54 (43%)
	issue containment	139 (93%)	49 (39%)
Waste	issue expansion	1 (1%)	156 (92%)
	issue containment	42 (61%)	41 (23%)

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# Findings: costs & benefits

		Government n (%)	Opposition n (%)
Renovation	Diffused costs	1 (1%)	36 (41%)
	Concentrated benefit	41 (27%)	11 (13%)
	<b>Total issue expansion strategy</b>	<b>42 (28%)</b>	<b>47 (54%)</b>
	Concentrated costs	5 (3%)	5 (6%)
	Diffused benefits	98 (64%)	11 (13%)
	<b>Total issue containment strategy</b>	<b>103 (67%)</b>	<b>16 (19%)</b>
Transport	Diffused costs	4 (3%)	23 (18%)
	Concentrated benefit	1 (1%)	31 (25%)
	<b>Total issue expansion strategy</b>	<b>5 (4%)</b>	<b>54 (43%)</b>
	Concentrated costs	6 (4%)	10 (8%)
	Diffused benefits	133 (89%)	39 (31%)
	<b>Total issue containment strategy</b>	<b>139 (93%)</b>	<b>49 (39%)</b>
Waste	Diffused costs	0 (0%)	97 (54%)
	Concentrated benefit	1 (1%)	68 (38%)
	<b>Total issue expansion strategy</b>	<b>1 (1%)</b>	<b>156 (92%)</b>
	Concentrated costs	3 (4%)	9 (5%)
	Diffused benefits	39 (57%)	32 (18%)
	<b>Total issue containment strategy</b>	<b>42 (61%)</b>	<b>41 (23%)</b>

# Discussion and conclusion

- Overall, NPF hypotheses on narrative strategies can also be confirmed in an authoritarian context
- Difference between devil-angel shift larger than in previous NPF studies in democratic settings
- Highest difference devil-angel shift in renovation debate:
  - Highest amount of texts from social media
  - Lowest involvement of experts



# Discussion and conclusion

- For the scope of conflict strategy? Waste the highest difference
- Large differences between governmental and oppositional narratives → adversaries in debates are not responsive to opposing arguments
- Interactivity is important for high quality public discourse and for democracy

# Open questions

- How to formulate a hypothesis on the large difference between narrative strategies of the two sides (due to low interactivity of debates)
- What factors influence this difference for the two strategies:
  - Involvement of experts
  - Use of social media
  - Degree of conflict