

What and Why Cannot We Learn About Autocracies?

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Introduction

For most of global history, mankind has lived under autocracy. Even today, autocratic regimes rule over 40% of the world nations (Geddes, Wright, Frantz, 2018). Nevertheless, liberal democratic paradigm is so dominant that academic studies on autocracies are also susceptible to its covert or overt influence (Przeworski, 2022).

Liberal democracy confronts autocracies not only at normative and theoretical levels, as a better (the best) political regime, but at the level of ideological dispute as well. This inevitably bears influence on knowledge system to such extent that it is often transformed into bias. The form of knowledge about autocracies has been negative for long and autocratic regimes themselves were viewed in the lenses of their polemical contradiction with the liberal democracies and in conflict vis-à-vis the latter's normative requirements (Dimitrijevic, 2021).

Changes of approaches and methods over the course of the last decade have substantially increased knowledge about autocracies. Today, autocratic regimes and political practices are within the focus of myriad academic disciplines. Autocracies gained the status of independent study subject-matter, although still remain unable to fully achieve focus entirely independent from the prism of liberal democracy. The ritual that goes hand in hand with serious intellectual argument with the autocracies is often their moral and political condemnation again as well as illustrating their normative inferiority vis-à-vis liberal democracies.

This approach is problematic not necessarily because it is normatively flawed. Quite the contrary – we may believe in moral and political superiority of the liberal democracy, albeit assessment of autocracies from this perspective leads to relinquish knowledge about their unique characteristics. The ready-made liberal democratic normative framework is only partially helpful to condemn autocratic reality, although it is useless to explain and reflect on many elements of this reality.

Furthermore, what is inexplicable in this framework simply remains out of sight or gets neglected as something unimportant. Therefore, those who study autocratic regimes in order to confront them also cannot meet their goals. Condemnation alone barely inflicts any damage to such regimes. In turn, the less their enemies know about them, the more chances of survival the autocracies have.

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From moral and psychological point of view it is fully understandable that for a person of liberal and democratic values as well as for a person living in autocracy this is a counter-productive approach. Lengthy and futile struggle against the authoritarian regimes, particularly with their modern ramifications, is often followed by frustration and despair.

Emotions, including those with strong moral fundamentals, cannot be a good companion of knowledge and cognition (Sajó, 2021). There is still an approach in the social sciences that it is unacceptable to seriously study autocracies and take self-perceptions, practices, rules and institutions of such regimes as a given or analyze them without normative criticism. The motive behind this approach is also crystal-clear – study of the authoritarian regimes should not be transformed into their apology or attempt to offer some normative justifications for them.

These risks notwithstanding, subordinating the scientific methods to tight normative filter will still bring negative consequences. Shrinking and incomprehensive knowledge about autocracies cannot be advantageous neither from normative nor from practical viewpoint. This position does not mean that normative political theory should discontinue justification of liberal democracy and demonstrating its superiority. Knowledge about autocracies, retrieved from social and political sciences will only help the normative political theory to attain this aim.

It is possible to say that it is such a shift in approach that contributes expanding knowledge about autocracies in social and political sciences. However, there is still a strong liberal democratic normative filter, persisting at the level of implied methodological assumptions, that complicates study of the autocratic regimes.

In this article we will focus on several such problematic issues which is central to understand autocracies on the one hand and given the methodological hindrances described above, on the other hand these are the issues with most controversial knowledge. These issues are as follows: public support for autocracies, psychological mechanisms determining support for the regime as well as outcomes and reasons of the collapse of authoritarian regimes.

What the Controlled/Manipulated Elections Tell Us?

It is particularly difficult from the lenses of liberal democratic values to acknowledge that authoritarian regimes may enjoy public support (Sajó,2021). A fundamental assumption about vitality of autocracies stems from the belief that people acquiesce living in such regimes because of repressions and false perceptions, shaped by the propaganda. “Unless they are ‘brainwashed’ or ‘indoctrinated,’ how can people conceivably support an autocrat?” (Przeworski, 2022).

This idea is reflected in contemporary formal models of autocracy. In accordance with these models, autocrat (individual or collective), employs all instruments at his disposal (repression, co-optation, propaganda, etc) to keep power. According to a theoretical model of Stackelberg's equilibrium games, autocrat chooses optimal mix of these instruments subject to some constraints (Guriev and Treisman 2019).

According to Adam Przeworski's critical reflection, in this model of game theory, cost and benefit which an autocrat takes into consideration is exogenously given (Przeworski, 2022). From Przeworski's perspective this also highlights lack of knowledge about endogenous factors of autocracies by those who draw and make use of such theoretical models.

Przeworski spares no criticism for his earlier positions either, when he argued that dictators are dictators because they cannot win elections. In the last decades, this claim has been fully falsified empirically, including by Przeworski's studies, too (Przeworski, 2015). These works show that autocrats who hold elections in any form, including one-party elections, have higher chances to remain in power as compared to those who do not hold elections at all (Cox, 2008; Geddes, 2009).

Given the abovementioned, it is unsurprising that many autocracies hold regular elections. Some of the well-established regime types in the parlour of political science, such as "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler, 2013) or "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2010) constitute yet another proof of such development. Although academia has taken elections hold in autocracies as a given, it still struggles to accept them seriously, let alone explain them and offer interpretation.

The first response vis-à-vis elections hold in autocracies from the lenses of liberal democratic value is to ignore their importance. However, studies illustrate that even one-party and uncompetitive elections hold by the closed authoritarian regimes tend to increase attention of authorities with respect to people's concerns. In this manner, closed autocracies seek to validate their competence in the eyes of their own population and increase their level of public support (Lueders, 2022).

The picture is further complicated in such electoral autocracies which hold multi-party and competitive, albeit controlled and manipulated elections. Those authors, who refer to such elections as a spectacle (Schedler, 2013), acknowledge the essential importance of such elections for internal "constitution" and vitality of the regime.

In turn, it is very hard to interpret controlled/manipulated elections, particularly to measure public support to the regime based on election results. It is nearly impossible to differentiate authentic support for the regime from that of obtained by violence and manipulation. However, this impossibility

should not serve as a basis of claim that controlled/manipulated elections does not at all reflect public support to the regime.

Then, how should we understand manipulated/controlled elections? Timothy Frye tries to answer this question at the example of paradigmatic electoral autocracy – Putin’s Russia. As clarified by Frye:

“Autocratic elections involve more than an all-powerful ruler dictating the final tally or a passive public meekly accepting the results. They signal the strength of the ruler and opposition. Elections are often less about choosing who will hold power (they are rigged enough that we usually know that in advance) than about gauging the popularity of the incumbent and their party relative to potential rivals. Turnout levels, the margin of victory, and the amount of fraud needed to achieve victory can tell us a good deal about the relative strength of the incumbent and challengers.

... [the] Kremlin has managed the inherent trade-offs of autocratic elections. Recent research shows that the Kremlin uses fraud in ways both big and small—but fraud is not the whole story. The Kremlin also recognizes the risks of excessive cheating, and tries to generate “honest support” and emphasize the legitimacy of electoral outcomes” (Frye, 2021, 68-69)

It is the regime that determines equilibrium between an “honest support” and “necessary rigging”. Frye does not offer a formalized game theory model, although endogenous picture of cost and benefit calculus still remains unknown for an observer. Therefore, despite simplicity, this explanation of importance of manipulated elections is also subject to Przeworski’s abovementioned criticism. According to Frye, since 2012, Putin’s regime has been regularly increasing the share of “necessary rigging” to avoid any surprises. However, this does not mean complete evaporation of “honest support” from the equilibrium.

Autocratic elections are neither true measure of regime’s support nor a sole generator. However, what current knowledge demonstrates, they can be a partial indicator and one of the generators of such support. Nevertheless, serious studies in controlled/manipulated elections are hindered not by liberal democratic prejudices alone, but by objective methodological difficulties which go along with differentiation between “authentic” support and manipulative results.

Psychological Linchpin and Mechanisms of Autocratic Support

After all, is it possible for autocracy - particularly repressions carried out by autocracy - to have authentic public support? Social scientists have gone beyond the simple image of brainwashed with

propaganda and distanced from the truth by censorship population. Identification of authentic support for autocracy and empirical demonstration is easier than explaining factors behind it.

Autocratic regimes are able to mobilize population that support repressions when they exploit difference between the groups in public and when oppressing a certain group, succeed in mobilizing support of another group which is hostile to the group being oppressed. (Przeworski, 2022; Gronfeldt, et al, 2021). However, modern autocracies are increasingly less inclined to use open violence and form of repression in the equilibrium of instruments. (Scheppelle, 2018).

In order to create dependency, autocratic regimes use such methods that does not involve coercion and repression. This happens despite the fact that dependency has increasingly psychological character (Furedi, 2021) and uses manipulative techniques (beyond other methods of propaganda information manipulations). The problem with manipulation is that for a certain degree it is always a part of interpersonal communication. Then what is the difference between propagandas in democratic and autocratic societies?

Can we argue that Przeworski's criticism is accurate and it is because of prejudice that something considered as "persuasion" in democratic regimes is portrayed as "manipulation" in autocracies? Przeworski himself does not deny the effect of propaganda, censorship and other information manipulations on regime's resilience in modern "information autocracies" (Guriev, 2019). However, he again emphasizes that there is no evidence that would rule out the leading role of achievements of autocracies, including economic achievements, in support and resilience of regime as opposed to manipulations (Przeworski, 2022).

It is empirically proven that modern autocracies, such as China or Putin's Russia, do have economic achievements. The role of the regime itself in these achievements could be disputable, but these achievements are noticed by large part of the population, since corruption and massive inequality notwithstanding, socio-economic well-being of many living under these regimes has been improved.

When such an improvement is visible and an empirical fact, then as per Przeworski's claim, propaganda acts as a "sweetener". The aim of propaganda is to give credit exclusively to the regime for that improvement. It can also be achieved by ascribing all negative things to the opponents of the regime.

Frye provides a meticulously precise description of such strategy at the example of Putin's Russia. In 2000s, higher oil prices were the main driver of Russia's economic boom. The propaganda succeeded to make sure that the boom and its positive consequences were perceived entirely as the regime's merit. As described by the observers of Russian propaganda, bad news was not subjected to censorship,

although they were fed to the public in such a way to undermine their negative effect and most importantly shift the blame for them to the internal and external enemies of the regime (Frye, 2021).

Therefore, to paraphrase Przeworski, a Russian citizen who benefited from substantial improvement of his economic situation, does perhaps (owing to propaganda manipulation), mistakenly believes that credit should go entirely to Putin and his regime. However, improvement in material well-being is not manipulated by propaganda and is not therefore fake.

If this is true, when a Russian national approves Putin in public opinion polls or votes for him in the elections, can we consider his/her support manipulated? The absence of a straightforward answer to that question is yet another manifestation of difficulty to study autocracies.

And even beyond manipulation, people may have different cognitive strategies to justify regime-supporting and regime-accommodating (both active and passive) behavior. The supporter or representative of the regime does not necessarily need to believe in the kindness of the regime or its ideology. Moreover, they may even admit shortcomings of the regime and justify their participation by the necessity to “transform from within”.

It is even easier for the so-called “silent masses” to justify their adaptation with the regime. People feel themselves less manipulated when they are given a possibility to choose. It is much easier to acquiesce with a fact that the spectrum of choice is limited rather than having no choice at all. As indicated by Przeworski, modern autocracies score success exactly at the level of limiting the spectrum of choice (Przeworski, 2022).

It is important for the autocracies to evade responsibility for limiting the spectrum of choice. If they succeed, it makes it cognitively easier for the people to opt for the status-quo offered by the autocracies (even through passive adaptation) and do not feel that the choice was imposed on them.

Fall of Autocracies and Accidentality of Democratization

Autocracies are able to achieve stability and vitality. However, similar to other political regimes they suffer from many weaknesses, that may lead to their collapse. The liberal democratic viewpoint has been inclined to see mass democratic protest mobilization as the major cause of collapse as well as to anticipate post-collapse democratization as an inevitable process.

Current knowledge about the trajectories of the authoritarian regimes significantly refutes the abovementioned ideas. Mass protest mobilization does not always cause regime collapse. In addition, disruption of the regime from within by the authoritarian elites is not an exclusive source of collapse of such regimes either. Sometimes protest movements are bolstered by the disruption of authoritarian elites or those

elites crumble under the pressure of protest movements. Therefore, the result arises by simultaneous impact of these two factors (Przeworski, 2022).

In turn, later democratization of the authoritarian regimes is not also something inevitable. It is important that internal tremors of the regime be followed by change in leadership that does not change the regime. Even then when change in leadership is followed by changing the regime, it is not a democratization but often merely a transition from one type of autocracy into another.

Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) analyzed trajectories of 280 authoritarian regimes in existence from 1946 to 2010. According to their findings, only about 45 percent of leadership changes in autocracies led to regime change, and more than half of regime breakdowns were transitions from one autocracy to another. Finally, only in fewer than 25 percent of leadership changes resulted in democratization.

Geddes, Wright and Frantz also provide a distinction of authoritarian regimes between personalist and institutionalized (party-led and military) ones. Subtype of an authoritarian regime is important to determine chances of democratization. Party-led and military autocracies have relatively higher chances of democratization after regime collapse whereas personalist autocracies have lower chances.

The fate of former authoritarian leaders in the post-transition period also depends on this predicament. In military and party-led regimes, given their institutionalization, there is a higher chance that former leaders will not end up badly (death, imprisonment, exile) even when there is a transition into a different type of autocracy. As opposed to that, deposed leaders in the personalist autocracies will almost assuredly face the worst and there is a very low probability of their survival.

Therefore, new knowledge about the trajectories of autocracies pushes us to deal with more caution to the possibilities of regime change - most particularly democratization - in the autocratic regimes, specifically in the personalist autocracies.

Conclusion

Despite a substantial progress, our knowledge about autocracies still remains rather limited. Cognitive and ideological prejudices partially are the reasons behind this, although they are underpinned by some objective factors that hinder study of the autocracies.

A serious academic approach vis-à-vis autocracies does not necessarily imply granting legitimacy to autocracy, as a political regime. Those social and political scientists who study autocracy do not simultaneously work to produce normative theory for autocracy.

The difficulties delineated in this article are certainly not comprehensive, although illustrate how limited our knowledge is about central issues of autocracy which in turn complicates normative criticism of autocracy as well as a real political confrontation with the authoritarian regimes.

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