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PARADOXES OF THE NEW AUTHORITARIANISM

Ivan Krastev

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In early 1991, as a young Bulgarian scholar still fired by the revolutionary passions of 1989, I sat in the library room of St. Antony’s College at Oxford reading Seymour Martin Lipset’s classic, Political Man. This was an unforgettable time when reading daily newspapers was much more exciting than reading political science, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Lipset’s analysis seemed to me to be, if sound, also a bit dull. Now I realize that this is the fate of any classic book in the social sciences. You feel that you have “read” it long before opening the first page, and the more revolutionary were its conclusions when they were first published, the more banal and obvious they seem decades later. So in my first encounter with Lipset’s work, I was neither particularly impressed by the book nor intrigued by its author.

Now, rereading Lipset twenty years on, I have discovered not only the originality of his mind but—what is even more striking—the amazing power of his personality. Lipset is the embodiment of the type of intellectual presence that we so badly miss today. He fascinates by both his curiosity and his seriousness. In his scholarly life, he succeeded in researching and publishing about any problem that concerned him. He crossed disciplinary boundaries with the ease of a Balkan smuggler. He was consistent without being dogmatic and political without being partisan, and he succeeded in influencing both his academic colleagues and the general public. In short, he was among the best representatives of the great generation of
In his autobiographical essay “Steady Work,” Lipset wrote:

As a Trotskyist or socialist from high school through graduate school, I became interested in three questions. The biggest one was—why had the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union led to an oppressive, exploitative society? . . . The second question that concerned me was: Why had the democratic socialist movement . . . failed to adhere to policies that would further socialism? . . . The third political question that interested
me greatly was why the United States had never had a major socialist
party. . . . Attempting to answer these questions was to inform much of
my academic career.²

Asking the right questions and struggling with them all his life was
Lipset’s way of engaging with the world. It is probably a good model
for the rest of us to follow, even when we are doubtful about the answers
that we find. Thus I would like to use the opportunity given to me by this
Lipset Memorial Lecture to try to address three questions that have been
haunting me recently: 1) Why are authoritarian regimes surviving in the
age of democratization? 2) Why did political science fail to anticipate
the resilience of these regimes? and 3) Why it is so difficult to resist
contemporary authoritarianism?

Most of my observations will be based primarily on Russia’s post-
communist experience. This focus on Russia in a lecture that tries to
reflect on the challenges of the new authoritarianism may come as a
surprise to many, for it is fair to say that Russia’s moment in history has
passed. Political scientist Stephen Holmes has argued that “the ideologi-
cal polarity between democracy and authoritarianism, inherited from the
Cold War, obscures more than it reveals when applied to Russian po-
itical reality.”³ This suggests that the dichotomy between democracy and
authoritarianism will not help us much in understanding the nature
of the current regime in Moscow—a weak state weakly connected to a
weak society. Russia is also not a good example to explain the attrac-
tiveness of the new authoritarianism, as it is not the trendsetter when it
comes to authoritarianism’s return to fashion. Russia’s authoritarianism
looks dull and tawdry compared with China’s capitalism with a com-
munist face. While the Chinese experiment and innovate, the Russians
are stagnant. Russia has lost not only its status as a great power, but also
its aura of mystery.

User-Friendly Authoritarianism

Why, then, since Russia is neither a trendsetter nor an intellectual mys-
tery, should we focus on Russia in order to understand the paradoxes of
modern authoritarianism? There are three good reasons to do so.

First, as Robert Kagan has observed, Russia was the place where his-
tory ended and also where it has returned.⁴ In this sense, Russia’s politi-
cal experience over the last two decades has been critically important
for our understanding of both democracy and autocracy. It was Russia’s
development in the 1990s that shaped our expectations about the global
advance of democracy, and it was Russia’s failed democratization in
the 2000s that led many to change their views about the prospects for a
global democratic revolution. So making sense of the confusing nature
of Putin’s authoritarianism may be more important for understanding
where the world is going than is explaining the sources of popularity of China’s authoritarian success.

Second, Russia is an interesting case because it highlights the key features of the new competitive authoritarianism. Russia’s regime is only moderately repressive. Putin’s authoritarianism is a “vegetarian” one. While political repression exists and human-rights organizations have documented the persecution of journalists and other opponents of the regime, it is fair to say that most Russians today are freer than in any other period of their history. They can travel, they can freely surf the Web—unlike in China or Iran, the government is not trying to control the Internet—and they can do business if they pay their “corruption tax.” Unlike the Soviet Union, which was a self-contained society with closed borders, Russia is an open economy with open borders. Almost ten-million Russians travel abroad annually.

Putin’s regime is also a nonideological one. The fate of the concept of “sovereign democracy,” the Kremlin’s most ambitious attempt to date to come up with an ideology, is the best demonstration of this. Like any political regime, Putin’s Kremlin is doing its best to construct some collective identities and to exploit nationalist sentiments or Soviet nostalgia, but the insistence that you do not want to be lectured by the United States is not an ideology. The ease with which Russian elites recently shifted their slogan from “sovereign democracy” to “modernization” exemplifies the postideological character of the current regime. It presents itself as a variant of, and not as an alternative to, Western democracy, and it has managed to adapt some key democratic institutions—most notably elections—for its own purposes.

Third, unlike the Chinese regime, which survives because both the elites and the people perceive it as successful, Putin’s regime survives even though elites and ordinary people alike view it as dysfunctional and uninspiring. The latest survey by Russia’s Levada Center shows that a majority sees the current situation as one of stagnation. The paradox of Russian authoritarianism today is that its backers no less than its foes consider it a flop, yet it slogs on, oblivious and unmoved. Why are people ready to accept such “zombie authoritarianism” rather than opt for democratic change? This is the real question that Putin’s Russia poses to the world.

It is the contradictory nature of Russia’s authoritarianism—stable and dysfunctional, open and nonideological—that can best help us to understand why authoritarianism is surviving in the age of democratization, and why it is so difficult to resist contemporary authoritarian regimes.

An Unexpected Resilience

First, however, let us address the question of why democratic theorists were blind to the resilience of authoritarianism.

Among Seymour Martin Lipset’s many books and articles, there is
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one that remains mostly unknown. It is a tiny booklet that he wrote in 1994 together with the Hungarian philosopher and former dissident György Bence. This essay was meant to contribute not to theory, but to the self-knowledge of theorists. The question it addressed was why political science had failed to anticipate the collapse of communism.

Lipset pointed to two major reasons for this dismal failure of political science. First, during the Cold War an ideological consensus prevailed in the West that presumed the stability of the Soviet system. The political right believed that the Soviet system was stable because of effective repression, and always tended to portray Soviet institutions such as the KGB or the army as ruthless, smart, and efficient. This was the delusion of the right. The political left, accepting the view that the Soviet Union was an egalitarian society providing free education and health care, tended to overestimate the social legitimacy of the Soviet system. This was the delusion of the left. So even though the left and the right in the days of the Cold War were in disagreement about almost everything when it came to communism, both agreed that the Soviet Union was there to stay.

Lipset and Bence’s second reason was the institutional bias of those who studied the Soviet world for a living. Political scientists were experts on how the Soviet system worked, but were blind to the possibility that it could collapse. Cold War political science simply took the continued existence of the Soviet Union for granted. It was those outside the academy—journalists, dissidents, political activists—who foresaw the coming crash.

As history showed, the Soviet Union was not as stable as the Sovietologists had assumed it to be. It seemed destined to last forever until it suddenly began to crumble. The divine surprise of 1989 revealed to scholars that the USSR’s seemingly rock-solid “stability” had always been a fragile thing. What was thought to be made of steel turned out to be made of paper.

Like mirror images of the Sovietologists who once assumed communist regimes to be inherently stable, many theorists of democratization have since the end of the Cold War come to see today’s authoritarian regimes as inherently fragile. Thus any serious rethinking of the nature of new authoritarian regimes such as Russia’s or China’s should start with a critical examination of the assumptions that make us rate authoritarianism as bound for the ash heap of history.

Samuel P. Huntington best captured the prevailing mood about the transitory nature of these regimes when he observed in 1991 that “liberalized authoritarianism is not a stable equilibrium; the halfway house does not stand.” If authoritarian regimes “do not perform, they lose legitimacy since performance is their only justification for holding power. But . . . if they do perform socioeconomically, they tend to refocus popular aspirations around political goals for voice
and participation that they cannot satisfy without terminating their existence.”

Why should we believe that today’s authoritarian regimes are so unstable? The first argument comes from the core of modernization theory and might be termed the “Lipset hypothesis.” Modernization theorists tend to view democracy as a necessary element of the modernity package, in the same way as urbanization, industrialization, or secularization. In his major work, Lipset asserts that high incomes and economic development enhance the chances for democracy to be sustained. He also insists on the elective affinity between democracy and capitalism. So, the global spread of capitalism and the unprecedented rise in incomes in developing countries strengthen the expectation that authoritarian regimes are a transitory phenomenon. The latest research supports the notion that as societies grow wealthier, values begin to change in democracy-friendly ways.

The second argument about the obsolescence of authoritarian regimes can be described as “the effect of openness.” Ian Bremmer spoke for many when, in his widely read book The J Curve, he argued that under conditions of free trade, free travel, and the free flow of information, only democracies can be stable. If autocratic regimes want to achieve stability, they must either close their “borders” (meaning not only their geographical frontiers but also their multifarious forms of exposure to the wider world) or open their political systems.

The third argument that made us deem authoritarianism doomed to obsolescence is the “imitation argument.” As we have already shown in the case of Russia, over the last two decades authoritarian rulers have tried to imitate democratic institutions and to adopt democratic language. Holding elections, the rulers calculated, would gain them acceptability and less international pressure for real change. Advocates of the imitation argument insist that by adopting democratic institutions in some form and to some degree, such rulers unavoidably put their electoral authoritarian regimes at risk. “If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall,” Anton Chekhov once reportedly advised his fellow playwrights, “then in the following one it should be fired.” Political scientists contend that if authoritarians adopt elections and other democratic institutions—even in a limited, manipulative way—at some point these institutions will “fire.” The presence of democratic institutions, even if perverted ones, will eventually bite authoritarian regimes where it hurts.

The change in the international environment—that is, the effect of “geopolitical warming”—offered still another argument for expecting that authoritarian regimes would not survive the age of democratization, just as dinosaurs had been unable to survive the Ice Age. The demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War deprived autocrats of their foreign protectors.
For all these reasons, political scientists at the end of the twentieth century tended to believe that autocratic regimes were doomed to fail. But while the end of authoritarianism has long been forecast, it has yet to occur. Why authoritarian regimes can survive and even flourish in an age of democratization is a question that should be asked anew.

The Search for Explanations

In recent years, scholars such as Jason Brownlee, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Way have made significant contributions toward determining what factors contribute to the survival of twenty-first-century authoritarianism. Brownlee has demonstrated that “the shift to authoritarianism with multiparty elections . . . does not represent an unwitting step toward full democratization, but neither do manipulated elections automatically protect rulers by reducing international pressure and corralling the opposition.” In short, faking democracy can both strengthen and weaken authoritarian regimes.

Levitsky and Way have concluded, based on a study of numerous cases of competitive authoritarianism, that authoritarian regimes have the best chance of surviving in countries where Western leverage is limited and where linkages with the West are low. The existence of a functional state with a capacity for repression and the presence of an efficient ruling party are other critical factors that boost the survival chances of authoritarian regimes. Such regimes are harder to dislodge in big, nuclear-armed countries that have never been Western colonies, that are governed by a consolidated ruling party, and that are ready to shoot when students come to protest on the main square. Authoritarians are less likely to stay in power in states that are small and weak, that are located near the European Union or United States, that need IMF loans, that are economically and culturally connected with the West, that lack a strong ruling party, and that cannot or will not shoot protesters.

While enhancing our understanding of the survival capacity and strategies of twenty-first-century authoritarians, Levitsky and Way are not particularly interested in the question of why resisting these regimes is so difficult. Why do even unpopular nondemocratic regimes in most cases not face mass political protests? Thinking exclusively in terms of the opposition between democracy and authoritarianism threatens to trap democratic theorists within the two assumptions that this opposition implicitly contains: first, that when an authoritarian system collapses, democracy will naturally arise by default; and second, that if democracy fails to develop, authoritarian forces must be to blame.

Paradoxically, in order to understand the survival capacity of contemporary authoritarianism, we should be very careful in using the di-
chotomy of authoritarianism versus democracy. The truth is that today authoritarianism survives best in the no-man’s land *between* democracy and authoritarianism.

What I want to argue is that the weakness of the resistance to contemporary authoritarian regimes is less a fruit of effective repression—the fear factor—than it is of the very openness of these regimes. Contrary to the usual assumption of democratic theory, the opening of borders can actually stabilize rather than destabilize the new authoritarian regimes. In a similar fashion, I will try to demonstrate that the nonideological nature of the new authoritarian regimes can also strengthen them rather than increase their vulnerability.

**The Perversity of Ideology**

In her famous November 1979 article in *Commentary*, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that totalitarian regimes grounded in revolutionary ideology are not only more repressive than traditional authoritarian regimes but are also much harder to liberalize or democratize. In her view, ideology is a source of transcendental legitimacy for these regimes, giving them some of the qualities of theocracies.

Ideology also served as a means of securing the ruling elite’s coherence. The notion of “the correct party line,” as Ken Jowitt has argued, did for Leninist regimes what democratic procedures did in the West. The existence of a ruling party rooted in an ideology was vital to solving the problem of succession, the most dangerous source of instability in autocratic regimes. The ruling ideology also served as a tool for political mobilization. As the history of the Soviet Union shows, it was sometimes easier to die for the regime than to live under it. The heroism of the Soviet people during World War II provided the ultimate demonstration of the power of the ideological authoritarians.

The notion of ideology as a source of strength for autocratic regimes is so much a part of the Cold War’s legacy in the West that one is surprised to encounter the post-Soviet elite’s view of communist ideology as one of the old regime’s weaknesses. The USSR’s collapse showed that ideology corrodes autocratic regimes in two ways: It feeds the reformist delusions of the elites, and it gives the regime’s opponents a language and a platform by holding up an ideal against which the regime can be measured and found wanting.

During the last twenty years, thousands of books have been published on the nature of Mikhail Gorbachev’s revolution. But for my argument, the key point is that Gorbachev started his reforms not because he had lost faith in communism, but because he remained a true believer who was firmly convinced that the genuine socialism he hoped to install would prove itself decisively superior to the democratic capitalism of
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the West. Reforms from above often are generated by rulers’ misperceptions, not their accurate grasp of reality.

Ideology not only breeds reformist delusions on the part of elites, it also gives the opposition a discourse that it can use to press the regime from below. As a rule, dissidents in the Soviet bloc were former believers; before opposing Marxist regimes root and branch, they had often criticized these regimes in the language of Marxism itself. One cannot fully understand the power of the Prague Spring or of Solidarity’s “self-limiting revolution” without understanding the self-consciously “dialectical” nature of these movements. The revolutions of 1989 were the joint product of communist elites who contributed to the demise of their own regimes by genuinely trying to reform them and of oppositionists who fueled the regimes’ demise by pretending to want reform when in reality they had come to desire complete uprooting.

Resisting Putin’s regime is so difficult precisely because of its lack of any ideology beyond a meaningless mélange of Kremlin-produced sound bites. Public-relations experts are not fit for the role of ideologues because an ideology, unlike an ad campaign, is something in which its authors must believe. The new authoritarian regimes’ lack of any real ideology explains their tendency to view themselves as corporations. In order to stay in power, they try to eradicate the very idea of the public interest. In this context, the glorification of the market does not undermine the new authoritarian capitalism; it can even strengthen it. If the public interest is nothing more than the unintended outcome of millions of individuals pursuing their private interests, then any sacrifice in the name of the public interest is a waste.

The new authoritarian regimes’ lack of any ideology also partly explains why the democratic world is reluctant to confront them. They do not seek to export their political models, and hence they are not threatening. The new authoritarian regimes do not want to transform the world or to impose their system on other countries. So the axis of conflict today is no longer the free world versus the world of authoritarianism—it is more the free world versus the world of free riding.

The Perversity of Open Borders

Also lurking behind the belief that authoritarianism is doomed to the slow death of reform or the sudden death of collapse is the assumption that the opening of borders must be fatal to autocracy. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Marquis de Custine, the French aristocrat who went to Russia in 1839 looking for arguments to support his conservatism and came back as an advocate of constitutionalism, had already claimed that “the political system of Russia could not withstand twenty years of free communication with Western Europe.”

His proposition is a common belief today—open borders allow people to see a different
way of life and to struggle to achieve it, thus encouraging demands for change. Open borders also make it easier for people to organize with help from abroad.

But do open borders really destabilize authoritarian regimes? Joseph Stalin, of course, very much believed so. He sent to the gulag millions of Soviet soldiers whose only crime was that they had seen Western or even Central Europe. But Putin is not Stalin. He does not try to govern Russia by preventing people from traveling; he governs it by allowing them to travel. While open borders place some limits on a government’s ability to manipulate and persecute, they also afford opportunities to promote the survival of the regime.

Almost forty years ago, economist Albert O. Hirschman, in his brilliant little book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, explained why railways in Nigeria had performed so poorly in the face of competition from trucks and buses:

> The presence of a ready alternative to rail transport makes it less, rather than more, likely that the weaknesses of the railways will be fought rather than indulged. With truck and bus transportation available, a deterioration in the rail service is not so serious a matter as if the railways held a monopoly for long distance transport—it can be lived with for a long time without arousing strong public pressures for the . . . reforms in administration and management that would be required. This may be the reason public enterprise . . . has strangely been at its weakest in sectors such as transportation and education where it is subjected to competition: instead of stimulating improved or top performance, the presence of a ready and satisfactory substitute for the services public enterprise offers merely deprives it of a precious feedback mechanism that operates at its best when the customers are securely locked in. For the management of public enterprise, always fairly confident that it will not be let down by the national treasury, may be less sensitive to the loss of revenue due to the switch of customers to a competing mode than to the protests of an aroused public that has a vital stake in the service, has no alternative, and will therefore “raise hell.”

In Hirschman’s view, consumers or members of organizations can offer two opposing responses to the deterioration of the goods they buy or the services they receive. The first is *exit*—simply the act of leaving, such as buying another shampoo, resigning from the party, or departing from the country. *Voice*, by contrast, is an act of complaining or protesting. As Hirschman points out, however, the easy availability of exit tends to diminish the use of voice, because exit requires less time and commitment.

Exit is particularly attractive for middle-class Russians who have managed to become consumers and at the same time are discouraged about the potential for collective action. Russia’s demographic situation—its aging and shrinking populace—and Russia’s weak national identity have made exit a very natural option for those who are disap-
pointed with the regime. The emergence of an exit-minded middle class in Russia is at the heart of the regime’s survival capacity. Russian economist Leonid Grigoriev recently suggested that more than “two million Russian democrats have left the country in the last decade.” Voting with one’s feet to leave Russia because it is undemocratic is not the same as voting to make Russia democratic.

In fact, Hirschman’s explanation of why the Nigerian railways performed so poorly in the face of competition from trucks and buses may be the key to understanding why it is so difficult to resist Putin’s authoritarianism. It explains the failure of reforms and the resulting loss of the reformist spirit in Russia. Paradoxically, the opening of the borders and the opportunity to live and work abroad have led to the decline of political reformism. The people who are the most likely to be upset by the poor quality of governance in Russia are the very same people who are the most ready and able to exit Russia. For them, leaving the country in which they live is easier than reforming it. Why try to turn Russia into Germany, when there is no guarantee that a lifetime is long enough for that mission, and when Germany is but a short trip away? The opinion polls demonstrate that Russia’s middle class prefers to work abroad and to come home to Russia during the holidays to see their friends and relatives.

Comparing the outburst of reformist energy in the 1980s with the lack of such energy today makes me believe that, while the sealing of the borders destroyed Soviet communism, the opening of the borders helps the new Russian authoritarianism to survive. The Soviet system locked its citizens in. Changing the system was the only way to change your life. Today’s Russia, on the other hand, very much resembles the Nigerian railways—it will remain inefficient as long as there is enough oil money to compensate for its inefficiency. The major reason why Russians are reluctant to protest is not fear; it is because the people who care most have already left the country or have resolved to do so in the near future—or they may simply have moved to the virtual reality of the Internet (Russians on average spend twice as much time using online social networks as do their Western counterparts). The consequence is that there is no critical mass of people demanding change.

Where will all this lead? It is not easy to predict. But I would say that the future of dysfunctional authoritarian regimes like the one we see in Russia today is less likely to eventuate in democracy than in decay. It is not “after Putin, the deluge,” but “after Putin, the dry rot.”

NOTES

1. This phrase is from the title of the 1997 documentary Arguing the World, directed by Joseph Dorman for Riverside Film Productions.


