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Introduction

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Studying Russia's Authoritarian Turn
New Directions in Political Research on Russia

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Abstract

Between 2011 and 2016, the Kremlin altered its strategy to maintain elite coherence and shore up social support. The papers presented in this volume argue that these changes in formal rules, informal practices, state policy, and ideational narratives constituted a second authoritarian turn since 2000. In comparison to the first regime shift in the mid-2000s this strategic change combined tactics designed redefine the Kremlin's core support and construct electoral majorities that could deliver victories in the 2016 national parliamentary election and the 2018 presidential election. While the outcome of the 2016 election suggests overwhelming regime success, these papers raise important questions about the long-term efficacies of these strategies, their unintended consequences, and the contradictions that are evident in social attitudes. In the context of the growing literature on contemporary autocracy, these papers present a strong case for increased focus on social attitudes and behaviors as well as the ideational and informal elements of the state's mechanisms to maintain regime stability.

In September 2016, just as this journal issue was being submitted for publication, Russian voters went to the polls to elect a new national parliament, the State Duma. The regime's victory was undeniable and impressive. The state party, United Russia, secured a constitutional majority, 76 percent of the seats, increasing its legislative fraction by 105 deputies. This success stands in sharp contrast to the previous election in December 2011 where UR secured 49 percent of the vote and 53 percent of parliamentary seats amid significant evidence of fraud. The large numbers of fraud allegations in 2011 sparked the largest post-election protest, the For Fair Elections (FFE) movement, since the August 1991 coup that led to the dissolution of the Soviet system. In contrast, UR's overwhelming victory in 2016 met with very limited social protest despite overwhelming pre-election manipulation by the Kremlin and the same type of evidence of Election Day ballot stuffing.

The articles in this issue address the puzzles raised by these two electoral campaigns that were marked by the rapid and radical transformation of regime capacity to control elections and a seemingly profound shift in voter behavior and social response to fraud. Regina Smyth and Irina Soboleva define the nature of the problem the Kremlin faced between elections, focusing on opposition electoral innovation in Aleksei Navalny's 2013 campaign for Moscow mayor. Despite the regime's confidence that Navalny had limited popular support following the FFE movement, over the course of the campaign Navalny's support increased from a very low 2–3 percent to 28 percent of the vote. The regime once again was forced to resort to fraud to avoid placing its candidate, Sergei Sobyanin, in a second round run-off that would have generated intense public interest.

Smyth and Soboleva argue that the transfer of resources, political frames, and tactics from the FFE protest to the electoral arena provided an unexpectedly strong challenge to the regime's electoral control system and demanded an immediate response. The additional papers in the issue focus on regime strategies to win mass support and contain opposition forces and the societal response to these efforts. Our goal is to not only to illustrate the steps that the Kremlin took to produce the state's victory in 2016, but also to underscore the recent systemic changes that have become known as Putinism. We are interested in exploring the gaps in our understanding of how this new system works, social response to systemic change, and the evolving nature of state-society relations. While these studies are not exhaustive, they provide some guidance on important new areas of research on Russian state and society and the potential sources of change and stability in the regime.

The Authoritarian Turn in Russian Politics

The post-Soviet period witnessed a significant increase in contemporary autocracies that persist, with some genuine popular support, in the context of modern politics and industrialized economies. Contemporary autocrats do not rule predominantly through state violence, although repression remains a palpable threat to be pulled out as necessary, rather they rule by building core support, coopting and channeling opposition sentiments, and even encouraging disengagement of opposition voters. Between 1999 and 2016 there has been a steady evolution of Russia's regime in the authoritarian direction. Studies of this trend stress the mechanisms through which the Kremlin reasserted its control over political elites in the regions as well as at the center. Vladimir Gelman (2008) points to the formation and consolidation of the state party, United Russia, a critical element of the first authoritarian shift that became clear in 2005.[1] Graeme Gill (2006) argues that combination of Yeltsin's hegemonic presidency bolstered by charismatic rule eliminated barriers to control under the Putin regime.[2] Mindful of the distinction between state-building in 2002 and authoritarian deepening in 2005, Grigorii Golosov (2011) focuses on the centralization of state power in the Federal center, distinguishing between state actions that are best thought of as state-building and those that shifted the nature of the regime.[3]

In the period between recent Russian parliamentary elections (2011–2016), the regime continued to renovate formal and information institutions to shore up elite support, but it also became increasingly focused on containing social forces and reshaping the foundation of state-society relations. Collectively, the articles in this issue argue that the period between 2011 and 2016 is defined by a renewed focus on societal forces. As Kathryn Hendley illustrates in her paper on the political attitudes of young law graduates, the regime took these steps in a context of significant existing mechanisms of socialization, patterns of training, and conflicting messages that all shape political behavior. The state's strategy relied on new practices and also increased its deployment of existing practices to limit opposition organization and latent opposition attitudes. A good example is the reliance on nationalist or patriotic frames noted in

1   Gel'man, Vladimir. "Out of the frying pan, into the fire? Post-Soviet regime changes in comparative perspective." *International Political Science Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 157–180.

2   Gill, G., 2006. "A new turn to authoritarian Rule in Russia?" *Democratisation*, 13, no. 1: 58–77.

3   Golosov, Grigorii V. "Russia's regional legislative elections, 2003–2007: Authoritarianism incorporated." *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 3 (2011): 397–414.

several of the articles in this issue. The Kremlin used patriotic narratives to define loyal and disloyal citizens and to brand the opposition as anti-Russian. While these efforts have increased over the entire period of the Putin regime, they became more strident after 2011 and linked to very visible policy actions, from the annexation of Crimea to the ban on international adoption. Importantly, the Kremlin's effects to contain popular opposition took two forms: shoring up political support and encouraging popular disengagement from formal politics. As these studies illustrate, these changes were wide ranging across formal institutions, informal practices, state policies and appeals to the mass public.

This period of regime evolution defies the predominant approach to studying contemporary autocracy. Political scientists generally approach the study of these regimes in terms of their stability or durability.[4] Yet, stability is defined in very simplistic terms as the presence or absence of a particular autocrat or ruling party or an opposition victory. As a result, our community often conflates durability with stability and regime endurance with strength and stasis. In reality, there is growing evidence that contemporary autocrats are constantly experimenting with new ways to ensure elite compliance, limit social pressures, and preclude opposition organization. These changes might be small, as in the dismissal of individual elite actors, or profound as in the redefinition of the autocrat's electoral base by changing patterns of redistribution or the rewriting of key constitutional provisions. They may also move the regime towards pure authoritarianism or pure democracy. In this volume, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova demonstrates how the Kremlin intervened in regional politics through changes in formal and informal institutions, and in state policy, to extend control over regional elites. Similarly, Sarah Oates characterizes the evolution of the Kremlin's media strategy in the face of a complex media ecology.

As Paul Goode notes in his article, political science studies of contemporary autocracy also stress elite-level analysis and state strategies over societal forces and social responses to state strategy. With notable exceptions, particularly around the study of mass protest, society is largely considered to be quiescent

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4   The concept of stability derives from the agenda articulated within the regime change literature. For examples see: Howard, Marc Morjé, and Philip G. Roessler. "Liberalizing electoral outcomes in competitive authoritarian regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006): 365–381 or a later example, Kaya, Ruchan, and Michael Bernhard. "Are elections mechanisms of authoritarian stability or democratization? Evidence from postcommunist Eurasia." *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 03 (2013): 734–752.

until there are signs of elite divisions.[5] This elite-centric focus persists despite the considerable resources and effort that autocrats invest in maintaining social support and suppressing mass opposition. The Kremlin's focus on popular attitudes also belies much of the work on autocratic stability, which emphasizes the potential for elite conflict and elite defection rather than changes in social forces or state-society relationships. In this volume, Goode, Hendley and Smyth and Soboleva begin to redress this gap by exploring how different parts of Russian society are evolving in a context of increased authoritarianism.

Whatever Works: Institutional Change, Informal Practices, and the Importance of Ideas

A growing body of political science literature addresses how contemporary autocrats maintain regime stability over long periods.[6] Much of the literature focuses on the effects of democratic institutional structures such as elections, parties, and legislatures on regime durability. More generally, this growing body of work on the effects of authoritarian institutions explores the ways in which autocrats manipulate formal rules, informal institutions, and other political instruments to build a stable core of loyal supporters and marginalize, co-opt, or repress the remaining opposition.[7] The papers by Smyth and Soboleva and also Sharafutdinova engage this authoritarian institutions

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5   The scholarly work on colored revolutions in the region provides important exceptions to this generalization, including Bunce, Valerie J., and Sharon L. Wolchik. "Defeating dictators: Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes." *World Politics* 62, no. 01 (2010): 43–86 and Beissinger, Mark R. "The semblance of democratic revolution: coalitions in Ukraine's orange revolution." *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 03 (2013): 574–592.

6   See for excellent examples of the empirical work on autocratic survival see: Gates, Scott, Håvard Hegre, Mark P. Jones, and Håvard Strand. "Institutional inconsistency and political instability: Polity duration, 1800–2000." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006): 893–908, Knutsen, Carl Henrik, and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård. "Institutional Characteristics and Regime Survival: Why Are Semi-Democracies Less Durable Than Autocracies and Democracies?" *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 656–670, and Wright, J. and Escriba-Folch, A., 2012. "Authoritarian institutions and regime survival: transitions to democracy and subsequent autocracy." *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(02), pp. 283–309.

7   This approach has also been used to understand Russian political evolution, see Reuter, Ora John, and Thomas F. Remington. "Dominant party regimes and the commitment problem the case of United Russia." *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 501–526 and Reuter, Ora John, and Graeme B. Robertson. "Subnational appointments in authoritarian regimes: Evidence from Russian gubernatorial appointments." *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 04 (2012): 1023–1037.

approach, and explore the role of institutional change on regime stability in response to distinct challenges.

Smyth and Soboleva argue that in the face of a significant electoral challenge in Moscow, the regime needed to redefine its core support to win elections with fewer votes. To do so, the regime transformed national electoral rules, moving from proportional representation to a unlinked mixed system, with the goal of winning a national majority of seats with a plurality of votes.[8] Sharafutdinova explores the effects of electoral rule changes at the regional level, arguing that rule changes increased incumbents' control over electoral processes as well as Kremlin control over regional cadres.

In her paper, Sarafutdinova extends this analysis in an important direction. She considers the effect of policy tools, in this case, the aggressive foreign policy in Crimea, on elite loyalty in the regions. Importantly, she underscores that federal policy had a different effect across the Soviet space. First, some of these decisions created new logics for regional leaders to mobilize support on the basis of international policy—appeals that have not worked to their advantage in shoring up social support. Similarly, foreign policy actions such as the Russian sanctions against Turkey in response to the downing of a Russian plane compounded political and economic challenges in crucial regions such as Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, Turkic-speaking Muslim regions. The fact that the Kremlin relies heavily on these regions to produce strong vote totals in national elections may have led to rapid changes in policy once the costs became clear. This interaction reveals the potential pitfalls of national policy in a multi-ethnic and economically diverse Federation.

As a complement to the literature on formal institutions and authoritarian durability, Edward Schatz describes the authoritarian toolkit that defines the core elements of contemporary authoritarian stability.[9] The elements of the toolkit include the development of a core of loyal support, the capacity to mobilize support through redistribution, carefully deployed coercion, control over information and political frames. Each of these elements has spawned a

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8   In unlinked mixed electoral systems, voters elect two types of candidates. Party based candidates are elected through proportional representation while district candidates are elected in single member districts. A party's legislative representation reflects the total number of seats won in both types of races. This electoral system is the same system adopted by Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. For details see, Smyth, Regina. *Candidate strategies and electoral competition in the Russian Federation: Democracy without foundation.* Cambridge University Press, 2006.

9   Edward Schatz. "The Soft Authoritarian Toolkit." *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (2009): 203–222.

considerable disciplinary literature and a corresponding literature in Russia studies.

Perhaps the most extensive literature on soft authoritarian control in Russian politics focuses on the last two components of the authoritarian toolkit: control over information as a way to maintain control and the increase in the reliance on coercion to silence opposition. This approach to the problem of authoritarian stability considers the nature and control of the state media, laws that restrict free speech, as well as limits on digital media. It increasingly focuses on the significant role of digital media in challenging the state-owned media's depiction of political reality.[10] Even so, this literature shows that autocrats increasingly rely on symbolic politics and the projection of a stark political reality to shape popular preferences.[11] Control of media outlets, robust mechanisms of censorship, and persecution of alternative voices contribute to regime stability by masking social preferences and demand for change.[12] Thus, the battle over the message presents a significant challenge to soft authoritarian regimes.

In this volume, Sarah Oates characterizes the Kremlin's response to the need to control information in a complex media environment. She argues that digital media challenges the obsolete information control model focused on state dominance of television, but these challenges do not render the regime powerless.[13] Invoking the concept of rewired propaganda, Oates rejects the dichotomy between traditional and online media. She argues that in the face of digital media challenges, the Russian regime has resorted to new tactics of disinformation and manipulation—sometimes relying on digital media to

10   Following Evgenii Morozov's work second generation of work on the political effects of digital media is skeptical that it will lead to regime change. For examples see, Evgeny Morozov. "The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom." *PublicAffairs*, 2012, Koesel, Karrie J., and Valerie J. Bunce. "Diffusion-proofing: Russian and Chinese responses to waves of popular mobilizations against authoritarian rulers." *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 03 (2013): 753–768 and Gunitsky, Seva. "Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability." *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 01 (2015): 42–54.

11   Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. *How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism. No. w21136.* National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015.

12   Gehlbach, Scott, and Konstantin Sonin. "Government control of the media." *Journal of Public Economics* 118 (2014): 163–171.

13   For an assessment of digital media influence on protest behavior in Russia, see Smyth, Regina and Sarah Oates, "Minding the Gap: Lessons on the Relationship Among the Internet, Information, and Regime Challenge from Russian Protests." *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 2 (2015): 285–305.

implement those tactics. These efforts involve scrambling opposition messages and creating uncertainty among media consumers. Oates concludes that this new strategy transforms the media control from winner take all situation to a battle over different social groups and their interpretation of Russian political reality.

Paul Goode's paper also considers the regime's attempts to construct a patriotic narrative to win social support. All of the papers in this volume note the Kremlin's increased reliance on symbolic politics and framing to redefine regime support. Goode underscores that this attempt to build national unity and a new basis of regime legitimacy based in patriotism can be risky for the regime. First, it shifts the locus of legitimacy to the people who comprise the nation. Second, the stress on patriotism provides a basis for nationalist critique of the regime. To assess these potential risks, Goode uses unique focus group and interview data to understand how top-down patriotism influences citizens' every-day practices and discourse. He addresses the question, what do citizens do with regime narratives? The answer, he finds, depends both on the context in which the question is asked and also the distinction between public and private action. Overall, Goode's findings resonate with Lisa Weeden's work on the effect of public ritual in Syria where public ritual served as a mechanism of control rather than a means to generate regime support.[14] Many Russians are engaged in public performances of patriotism without accepting the content of those messages for their thinking and private lives. This gap between behavior and belief obscures popular attitudes without fulfilling the goal of regime legitimacy.

Kathryn Hendley continues this focus on societal forces in the face of political change by addressing the attitudes of 2015 graduates of law faculties across Russia. Hendley notes that while lawyers are in the vanguard of opposition movements in many authoritarian states, they have not played that role in Russia. Relying on unique individual level data, she demonstrates that most young Russia lawyers strongly support the regime, even if they entered the legal profession to foster social change. In fact, the social change group endorses key elements of Putinism, including centralization and the willingness to deploy legal processes for political purposes. At the same time, this group is also more likely to be politically active, including participation in protest and charitable work. As Hendley argues, understanding these attitudes are crucial for identifying the longer-term regime trajectories, and, particularly in the lead up to 2018 presidential elections, support for President Putin.

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14   Wedeen, Lisa. "Acting 'as if': symbolic politics and social control in Syria." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 03 (1998): 503–523.

Each of these papers focuses on a different aspect of Russian state-society relations between 2011 and 2016. Oates and Sharafutdinova focus predominantly on the revolution of the state's mechanism to shape political loyalty among masses and elites. Smyth and Soboleva, Goode, and Hendley are more concerned with the effect of strategies on social groups. Each of the papers underscores the interactive nature of regime evolution in which an increasingly authoritarian state endeavors to shape social support.

Russia as a Critical Case in the Study of Contemporary Autocracy

As a conversation, these papers demonstrate the broad nature of the second authoritarian turn in Russian politics after 2011, highlighting both the state's strategies and the reaction of key social groups. All of the papers underscore the critical role that society plays in regime evolution and suggest important new paths for social research. A theme that emerges in Hendley's contribution as well as in Goode's analysis is the emerging evidence of Soviet-style double-think among Russian citizens. Each of these authors draws different conclusions from the evidence of contradictions that appear to exist within social attitudes, raising a particularly important and interesting puzzle for future research. They also raise a dilemma for social scientists in that the unique and innovative data that they present to support their claims is becoming progressively more difficult to collect.

Another interesting insight that emerges from these articles is the nuanced understanding of autocratic politics that can be gained by exploring the interaction among different approaches to the study of autocratic stability. Three of these papers, those by Sharafutdinova, Goode, and Oates, focus explicitly on the interaction between domestic political control and foreign policy across very different political arenas. As a whole, they suggest that the connections between international relations and domestic politics are critical to the understanding of regime function. These insights augment the argument that international patterns of linkage-leverage shape regime trajectories, and show how foreign policy decisions interact with other instruments of regime control to create new challenges for the regime.[15] However, these papers also suggest caution in concluding that these challenges will lead inevitability to new episodes of regime change.

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15 For the linkage-leverage argument that is in debate with the democratization literature, see Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. "Linkage versus leverage. Rethinking the international dimension of regime change." *Comparative Politics* (2006): 379–400.

Similarly, almost all of the papers consider the interactions between personalism, leadership and broader regime support. These connections are of particular interest to students of Russian politics, who are faced with explaining the disparities in support for the President, the government, and its resulting policies. As Sharafutdinova writes, the personalization of Russian power at all levels of government also undermined regional machines and their connections to the populace. This process undermined regional machines and their capacity to produce votes, a process that is likely to continue as anti-corruption campaigns further weaken the ties among clients and patrons. More generally, as a whole, these papers illustrate the host of unintended consequences that accompany different mechanisms of authoritarian control and the importance of recognizing these effects and their implications for the future.

The interaction between Russia-focused research and broader comparative theories of contemporary autocracy provide important insights for both literatures. The Russian case has produced new directions for theorizing 21st-century autocracy by focusing scholarly attention on ideational approaches, symbolic politics, and frames and narratives, alongside more conventional approaches that stress institutional engineering and patterns of repression.