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## *The Politics of Dictatorships*

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In February 2022, Vladimir Putin suddenly invaded Ukraine killing dozens of thousands, totally ruining his country's economy overnight, and putting the world on brink of nuclear winter. This eccentric and irrational move came unexpected for both the general public and the social scientists. Yet, it was coherent with the scholarship of the dictatorial politics. In fact, upon reaching a certain stage of their reign, dictators are very likely to get involved in irrational wars that frequently lead to their overthrow. Putin's actions are no exception in this case. When autocrats repress dissent within their elites and population, they lose the ability to collect feedback. Gradually, very repressive regimes end up in the information vacuum where most of the data are gathered by the security services. Such autocrats find themselves in their own strange reality of false mirrors, from which they fight neo-Nazis in Ukraine, or free semi-inhabited Falkland Islands from the British rule. At the same time, their intelligence systematically overestimates their chances to win and underestimates the possible costs. In other words, the behavior of Putin was taking its roots from the institutional organization of his regime and was coherent with it – which implies that any closed autocracy can (and does) end up doing the same.

This course seeks to shed light on the internal organization of undemocratic regimes. Why do dictators go to wars? Do they behave differently in the realm of international politics? Who can remove an autocrat from power? Are autocrats popular? What and who creates or undermines autocratic rule? Which countries have overgrown dictatorships? What are the possible types of dictatorships? Why do some countries hold competitive elections but remain autocratic? How can we then distinguish between democracy and dictatorship? What autocratic regimes are the most economically prosperous?

Autocracies are very heterogeneous: non-democratic societies vary among each other more than democracies do. Politics and policies in these regimes range from complete deinstitutionalization and despotism to having a strong bureaucracy and clear rules of the game. Some dictatorships can deliver economic miracles better than democracies do – but others bring about economic disasters leading to humanitarian catastrophes.

Democratization attempts there face different tasks to be solved and the chances of success also vary dramatically. In addition, more and more stable democracies reveal the threatening tendency of democratic backsliding. Although this used to be relatively rare in the past, the trend became increasingly widespread in the last 20 years.

## Course Design

This course is designed for students with a solid background in social and political sciences but with little or no knowledge of the topic of autocratic politics. It can be considered a crash-course into the study of political regimes, democratization, and backsliding.

The course consists of seven weeks and 7 90-minutes teaching sessions. The first part is a series of interactive seminars based on and covering the existing literature. We address the major questions of autocratic politics and try to understand how autocratic regimes work and what choices dictators face in times of political and economic crises. Students familiarize themselves with and analyze the most influential classifications of non-democratic regimes, including the current debates on hybrid regimes and the way the existing regimes affect the pathways towards democracy. Furthermore, we investigate the influence of structure, agency, and foreign influence on a country's political regime and chances to democratize. Then we discuss the problems of the last 20 years: democratic backsliding with its uncertain origins and hybrid regimes, which have seemingly democratic institutions but yet exhibit authoritarian practices.

The last 25 minutes of each day are devoted to student presentations, for which students are asked to apply the theories studied to a chosen country case. The presentations are followed by a 5 minute wrap-up session in the last class.

## Learning Outcomes

After taking this course, students shall be able to:

- understand and distinguish between ideal types of political regimes, especially autocracies;
- apply their knowledge of different political regimes on real-world empirical cases;
- critically engage with the literature on autocratic regimes;
- analyze real-world events with the toolkit of the studies of autocracy
- estimate a country's perspective of democratization/democratic backsliding.

## Activities and Evaluation

Reading the texts presented in the syllabus is crucial for having a fruitful and interesting discussion in class. Therefore, it is necessary for every student to do the readings. That is why every student will have to send a half-page text that summarizes the readings assigned for the class: it can be a long text about one reading, or a short summary of every reading. The deadline is until midnight before each of the classes. Having sent these three texts is necessary for achieving credits.

Each student will have to deliver a 20-minute presentation on a chosen case of an autocratic regime: how did it come about, how was it organized, how did it end. To prevent the presentation from becoming a mere recitation of the past events, students should put the main focus on analyzing the connection between the regime and the existing theories. To facilitate that, every student will be provided with a specific guideline of advice and questions. A presentation should answer the questions such as:

- How was an autocratic regime established?
- Who were the main actors and organizations involved in the creation of an autocratic regime?
- Which kind of regime was before an autocracy under study? (In case the previous regime is a democracy – what were the (possible) institutional gaps that allowed for the democratic backsliding?)
- Define the winning coalition of an autocratic regime.
- What would be your estimates in a possible democracy report?
- What is the mode of the collapse of a regime according to the theories presented in class?
- What is the country's level of development?
- Which branches of theories does a case support or contradict and why?

Every presentation will be followed by a 5-minute class discussion. After the discussion, each student will receive written feedback by e-mail from the instructor. For presentation and attendance, students get [a certain number] of ECTS.

In addition, it is possible to write a term paper for this class that covers any democratization or democratic backslide after WWII from a theoretical perspective. In this case, a student gets [a large number of] ECTS.

## Readings

The required readings are available through the University's e-learning platform in advance of the seminar. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the content of the readings. Each week will have 1-2 readings introducing the topic of approximately 30 pages size.

## Topics, Literature, and Schedule

*Week 1. Patterns of democracy and autocracy. 90 minute class.*

Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of democracy*. Yale university press. Introduction (pp 1-9), Conclusion (pp 295-304).

Linz, J. J., Stepan, A. (1996). *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe*. JHU Press. Chapter 3 (pp 38-55).

Geddes, B., Wright, J., Wright, J. G., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction (pp 1-17)

*Week 2. Measuring democracy and autocracy. 90 minute class.*

Dahl, R. A. (2008). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale university press. (pp 1-16; especially page 3)

Coppedge, M., & Reinicke, W. H. (1990). Measuring polyarchy. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 25(1), 51-72.

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction (pp 3-16).

*Week 3. Why some countries are democracies while others are not? Modernization theory – people and inequality, social classes and resource curse. Voluntaristic approach. 90 minute class.*

Boix, C. (2011). Democracy, development, and the international system. *American Political Science Review*, 105(4), 809-828.

O'Donnell, G., & Schmitter, P. C. (2013). *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*. JHU Press. Required: Introduction; Chapter 4 (pp 37-47).

Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and research methods*. Cambridge University Press. Optional: Chapter 7, (pp 158-192).

*Week 4. Foreign influence. 90 minute class.*

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction, (pp 3-30).

Hale, H. E. (2014). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction, (pp 1-16)

*Week 5. Autocratic politics: Selectorate, winning coalition, inequality and regime stability. 90 minute class.*

Wintrobe, R. (2000). *The political economy of dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press. Required: Chapter 2, pp 20-39.

De Mesquita, B. B., & Smith, A. (2011). *The dictator's handbook: why bad behavior is almost always good politics*. PublicAffairs. Required: Introduction.

*Week 6. Autocratic politics: Economic growth and wars. 90 minute class.*

Geddes, B. (2009). How autocrats defend themselves against armed rivals. In APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper.

Wright, J. (2008). Do authoritarian institutions constrain? How legislatures affect economic growth and investment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(2), 322-343.

*Week 7. Democratic backsliding: Origins and causes. 90 minute class.*

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2015). The myth of democratic recession. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 45-58.

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5-19.

Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. Broadway Books.