Conceptualising, Measuring and Mapping Global Authoritarianism

12.00-17.00, 8 March 2023
Forum Seminar Room 9, University of Exeter

Authoritarianism, broadly conceived as a political process or relationship characterized by control, hierarchy and obfuscation, is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it has formed part of human activity for centuries. Yet today, 34 years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, it is widely agreed that authoritarianism is on the rise around the world (Boese et al. 2022; EUI 2022; Freedom House 2022), and scholars concur – despite their different explanations as to why – that authoritarianism is one of the defining trends of the 21st Century (Geoghegan 2020; Krastev and Holmes 2020; Rosenberg 2019). In contrast to earlier iterations, however, 21st century authoritarianism is an inherently transnational phenomenon, which affects the operational quality of established democracies, limits the prospects for good governance in unstable polities, and enhances the capacity and reach of despots and other anti-democratic forces.

This workshop brings researchers, policy-makers and NGOs working on different aspects of authoritarianism into conversation with methodological specialists to debate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of existing conceptions of authoritarianism and to pinpoint knowledge gaps. These intentionally loosely structured and free-flowing discussions will feed into a bid for an ESRC Centre for the Study of Global Authoritarianism, based at the University of Exeter.

The proposed centre has four conceptually driven, overlapping workstreams, plus a data mapping stream:

Ideas of authoritarianism: explores the ideologies and normative visions underpinning authoritarian regimes, identifying commonalities and examining; explores/maps how these ideas are communicated to domestic and international audiences; traces how these ideas spread, and where they take root.

Practices/spaces of authoritarianism: explores authoritarianism through the lens of what certain sets of actors do to undermine accountability and subvert democratic institutions in specific regions; explores how authoritarian practices work in and through, as well as link, state and non-state actors and networks.

Economies of authoritarianism: collects new data on the transnational business, financial and legal services provided to kleptocratic elites; explores how globally networked financial systems enable authoritarian consolidation in various domestic locales;

Technologies of authoritarianism: explores the ethics, uses and regulation of technologies, e.g. AI, digital surveillance tools etc., and how these may be used to shape, drive and augment authoritarianism; explores how authoritarian states are using data and digital technologies to consolidate and/or expand power.

Data Mapping: gathers and standardizes the data collected by the other streams to create a new database of global authoritarianism. In contrast to virtually all existing datasets, which invariably present country-level indicators, we plan to *map flows, connections, and relationships between authoritarian economies, technologies, ideologies and practices.*

Structure of the day

12.00 – 12.45: Buffet lunch

12.45–13.00: Welcome and introduction (Catherine Owen)

13.00 – 13.50: Panel One: Researching Global Authoritarianism
This panel brings together researchers mapping social dynamics related to authoritarianism in novel ways. Panel members will introduce their work in a 10 minute summary before opening up to whole-group discussion.

Weisi Guo, Professor and Director of the Smart Living Grand Challenge and Head of Human Machine Intelligence Group, Cranfield
Fabio Angiolillo, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg
Felix Wiebrecht, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg

13.50 – 14.10: Break

14.10 – 15.00: Panel Two: Making Policy on Global Authoritarianism
This panel brings together policy-makers from two different areas of government, as well as the Foreign Policy Centre think tank, to discuss the challenges and knowledge gaps when addressing authoritarianism through policy. Panel members will summarise how they see the state of play in a 5-10 minute summary before opening up to whole-group discussion.

Tom Crofts, FCDO
Susan Coughtrie, Foreign Policy Centre
Olivia O'Sullivan, Open Innovation Team, Cabinet Office

15.00-15.30: Coffee break

15.30-16.30: Round table: Capturing the Dynamics of Global Authoritarianism
This round table brings together Exeter-based academics with different areas of methodological expertise to discuss projects they have worked on and reflect on how elements of global authoritarianism might best be captured and measured.

Federico Botta, Lecturer in Data Science
Lewys Brace, Senior Lecturer in Computational Social Science
Travis Coan, Associate Professor in Computational Social Science
Michele Scotto di Vettimo, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Politics Department
Andrei Zhirnov, Lecturer, Politics Department

16.30 – 17.00: Closing discussion: how can our ESRC Centre contribute to this field?
This session brings the workshop to a close with an informal discussion in which ESRC centre members reflect on the insights of the day and how these might be incorporated into the centre proposal.

7.30: Dinner – please let us know if you would like to join some of the team for dinner.

Instructions for Joining Discussion via Zoom

Gao, Eleanor is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Studying Global Authoritarianism Workshop
Time: Mar 8, 2023 12:45 PM London

Join Zoom Meeting
https://Universityofexeter.zoom.us/j/94960818796?pwd=NGhxaTAzUnZ2VzFVelFlZVdYL09hdz09

Meeting ID: 949 6081 8796
Password: 056147

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