**Title**:

Probing Strongmen’s Inner Circles from Their Interconnected Public Appearances: A Comparative Study of Russia and China

**Abstract:**

Recently a major international challenge to the UK has been the global rise of the strongman authoritarian regimes like Russia and China. However, elite politics in authoritarian regimes tend to be opaque and volatile. This introduces great difficulties for us to understand elite power-sharing where it is most needed. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, this project introduces a big data approach to probing Putin’s and Xi’s inner circles. We first develop algorithms to automatically collect elite appearance at various political events from the state media, TASS and Xinhua. We then introduce a latent network framework to systematically analyse how elites are interconnected via these key events. Our multidisciplinary approach allows us to disentangle key aspects of elite power-sharing under Putin and Xi. The findings from this project could significantly contribute to our understanding of future challenges to the UK.

**Principal Aims of Project:**

This multidisciplinary project introduces a novel big data approach to unravel how elites are interrelated in authoritarian regimes like Russia and China. It thus falls closely in the scheme of “Conflict, Stability, and Security.”

How the ruling elite arrange and maintain their power sharing is key to our understanding of authoritarian politics. Only one in ten autocrats cede power due to popular uprisings — most authoritarian rulers instead fall due to plotting by regime insiders. Existing studies attempt to uncover the inner workings of authoritarian regimes by using a wide range of data such as anecdotes, interviews, media coverage, and biographical archives. However, due to limited available data, we find few attempts to synthesize different aspects of elite dynamics, leaving us only a fragmented view about power sharing in authoritarian regimes.

The problem is particularly acute when we turn to Putin’s Russia and Xi’ China. By 2005, Freedom House had downgraded Russia’s ranking to “not free,” a result of Putin’s concentration of executive power. Since 2012, Putin has continued to accumulate power by monopolising his control over the media, hollowing out the legislature, systematically disempowering civil society organizations, and marginalizing potential competitors both in and out of government. While some scholars estimate that Putin and a circle of 20 to 30 trusted advisors with ties to the military and security services make most of the decisions in Russia, we only have limited information about actual power sharing within Putin’s inner circle.

Similar personalized politics have emerged in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. While the CCP regime has been commonly accepted as one of the most institutionalized and “machine-like” authoritarian regimes, many China scholars emphasize that institutional rules are epiphenomenal to elite politics. After Xi Jinping became the general secretary of CCP in 2012, the interest in elite power-sharing has been rekindled and become even more heated. Xi’s first term was marked with major elite reshuffles, swift institutional changes, and wide-ranging policy alterations.

Politics in Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China have become increasingly personalised. However, until now we still lack a systematic framework to collect reliable data and analyse the actual power-sharing dynamics in these authoritarian regimes. Our lack of a systematic framework has much to do with (1) the highly secretive nature of authoritarian politics and (2) the complex interpersonal networks.

In this project, we take a multidisciplinary approach to probing Putin’s and Xi’s inner circles. We first use a big data approach and develop algorithms to automatically collect elite appearance at various political events (e.g., ceremonies, policy meetings, and state visits) from the state media, TASS and Xinhua. Our new framework and data allow us to disentangle three key questions of elite power-sharing under Putin and Xi: (1) who are in charge, (2) who do I work with, and (3) who are my friends.

The question of “who’s in charge” focuses on the power and influence of individual elites. The answer to this question is of critical importance in authoritarian regimes where formal political institutions are vulnerable to elites' manipulation. Moving beyond individual and monadic elites, the question of “who do I work with” points to the dyadic relationship between a given pair of elites (e.g., collegial ties and patronage connections), which serves as the very basis of coalitions and factions. However, a simple dyadic “who do I work with” approach will, we argue, overlook the indirect and latent relationships between elites and forgo important information about latent coalitions. For instance, elites may send the underlings to events where their friends will be present, but not to events sponsored by rivals. The question of “who are my friends” then captures such indirect latent interdependences between elites.

**Proposed Programme:**

1. Data Collection: Public Appearances and Big Data

In this project, we turn to what we call power foci, i.e., important political events and meetings as well as elites’ appearances at them. The concept of foci is originally introduced to explore people’s complex and embedded social circles in a community. A focus is usually defined as a social entity or event around which joint activities are organized (e.g., voluntary organizations, hangouts, and families). Since it is around these foci that individuals organize their social relations, we can learn the essential features of their latent social space by studying the observable foci. Similarly, we argue that political events like ceremonies, policy meetings, and state visits can be treated as power foci, around which the ruling elite signal and manage their power relationships. For instance, an elite’s presence in a policy meeting would suggest her or his involvement in the decision-making activities and thus convey valuable information about the actual processes of influence. As the ruling elite coordinate with each other via numerous such events, we can approximate their latent space of power-sharing by examining how these foci are interconnected.

The interlocking network of power foci reveals both positional and relational attributes about the ruling elite. It is positional in its ability to uncover individual elites’ relative activeness and prominence in events where the actual processes of influence are at work. Moreover, the particular patterning of an elite’s appearance defines her or his points of reference in the nebulous ruling group. The interlocking foci network is also relational. Beyond specific events or individual elites, it shows how elites are connected via a variety of political events. Political elites intersect with each other within different political events, which are created based on shared policy problems or personal affinities. These links are not only able to channel important resources like information, but also can support mechanisms through which elites monitor and sanction each other.

Specifically, to construct the interlocking network of power foci in Russia and China, we use tools from computer science and develop algorithms to automatically collect news coverages from the state media, TASS and Xinhua. The role TASS and Xinhua play in covering political affairs is particularly important, and it is not solely a function of readership size. Computer algorithms allow us to automatically collect new corpora from TASS and Xinhua. Analyses of news corpora then permit us to identify if two elites co-appear in the same event. We further use we use innovations in natural language processing, that is, named-entity recognition (NER) methods. Rather searching for a pre-determined list of terms, named-entity recognition (NER) automatically detects the individuals that appear in a news story. It is thus particularly useful in identifying media occurrences of different political elites. Together, our use of different tools from computer science allows us to construct the interlocking elite network in Russia and China.

2. Data Analysis: Complex Dependence and Latent Network Model

How can we approximate the latent space of power-sharing from the interlocking foci network? We treat the foci network as a product of both stochastic and strategic factors. We further disaggregate the strategic factors into three questions: who are in charge, who do I work with, and who are my friends – these correspond to the individual level characteristics, dyadic links, and latent affinities. Generally speaking, our approach can be summarized as follows: after controlling for random noise, powerful elites (i.e., who are in charge) are more likely to make appearances; elites who are in the same and related policy domains (i.e., who do I work with) are more likely to appear together; and finally elites who share latent affinities (i.e., who are my friends) are more likely to show up together. Together, the “three” who questions help us to approximate the latent space of elite power-sharing.

The first two who questions are quite consistent with the existing studies of elite politics. The question of who are in charge is focused on network dynamics that are stemmed from characteristics of individual elites. In our case of elite politics, this suggests that powerful elites are more likely to preside and participate in important ceremonies and meetings. On the other hand, the second who question examines if two elites attend the same event. Its focuses directly on the observable direct and dyadic links. The question of “who do I work with” then highlights whether there are a direct coordination and collaboration between a pair of elites. However, it should be noted that we cannot equate “who do I work with” with “who are my friends.” Simply using direct and dyadic links as a proxy of the latent affinity could lead to two types of errors, the incorrect rejection of a true friend and the false acceptance of a real enemy.

We argue that these problems stem from the prevalence of indirect ties in elite politics. Our approach to build on this literature involves examining the more complex and indirect relationships elites form. We thus turn to the question of “who are my friends,” which is commonly referred to as a third order dependency in network analysis. For example, if two elites in Russia are both protégés of Putin, then they are both more likely to make co-appearances with Putin and his other protégés, and less likely to make co-appearances with Putin’s rivals and his rivals’ protégés. To answer the question of “who are my friends,” we utilize a latent factor model (LFM). The LFM positions actors in a k dimensional latent vector space based on third order dependence patterns. In this space, actors whose vectors point in similar dimensions are more likely to share similar preferences and be members of the same latent coalitions. The angles between these vectors then provide a measure of the extent to which the preferences and factional links are similar.

**Plan of Action:**

Feb 2019

Coordinate the four participants of the project and recruit a research assistant.

Mar 2019

Dr. Nagaraja (Reader, Computer Science) and the research assistant develop and test algorithms of collecting news corpora from TASS and Xinhua.

Dr. Nagaraja (Reader, Computer Science) and the research assistant develop and test algorithms of named-entity recognition in Russian and Chinese.

Apr 2019 to Jul 2019

The research assistant collects and maintains data collection and named-entity recognition of news corpora from TASS and Xinhua for a four-month period.

Aug 2019

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, and Dr. Minhas clean the collected data, construct the interlocking elite networks, and conduct a latent factor analysis.

Sep 2019 to Oct 2019

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, and Dr. Minhas write two paper drafts (one about Russian elites, and the other Chinese).

Nov 2019 to Dec 2019

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, Dr. Minhas, and Dr. Nagaraja disseminate and revise the first two papers.

Jan 2020 to Mar 2020

The research assistant collects and maintains a second round data collection and named-entity recognition of news corpora from TASS and Xinhua for a eight-week period.

April 2020

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, and Dr. Minhas clean the collected data, construct the interlocking elite networks, and conduct a latent factor analysis.

May 2020

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, and Dr. Minhas write a paper draft comparing Russian and Chinese elites.

Jun 2020 to July 2020

Dr. Huhe, Dr. Max, Dr. Minhas, and Dr. Nagaraja disseminate and revise the first two papers.

Conclude the project

**Planned Research Outputs:**

This project will produce programs, datasets, and journal articles, which will be publicly available to both policy and academic circles.

Two Programs

Program 1: a program executes the algorithms that automatically collect news corpora from TASS and Xinhua

Program 2: a program executes the algorithms of named-entity recognition in Russian and Chinese

Two Datasets

Dataset 1: a dataset of public co-appearances of Russian elites

Dataset 2: a dataset of public co-appearances of Chinese elites

Three Papers

Paper 1: a paper on how elites are interrelated under Putin

Paper 2: a paper on how elites are interrelated under Xi

Paper 3: a paper that compares the elite structures of Russia and China

**Plans for Publication and Dissemination:**

To disseminate the project’s findings in a variety of means, including:

1. The media.

2. Politicians/clerks/committees.

3. Academic conferences (e.g. annual conferences of American Political Science Association, Political Studies Association, and Midwest Political Science Association).

4. Public events (e.g. annual Festival of Social Science).

5. Academic journal articles in 4-star peer review journals (e.g., American Political Science Review, World Politics, and British Journal of Political Science).

6. A workshop on elite politics at Strathclyde.

**Other Participants:**

Max Gallop, Lecturer, University of Strathclyde

Shishir Nagaraja, Reader, University of Strathclyde

Shahryar Minhas, Assistant Professor, Michigan State University

**Role of Other Participants:**

Max Gallop, specialised in network analysis, will analyse the interlocking elite networks and take part in writing paper.

Shishir Nagaraja, an experienced computer scienties, will work with the research assistant to develop the algorithms of news collection and name recognition.

Shahryar Minhas, specialised in network analysis, will analyse the interlocking elite networks and take part in writing paper.

**Added Value of Collaboration:**

Our pilot studies based on over 10000 hand-coded entries of public co-appearance of Chinese elites shows the approach could effectively predict appointments of key posts in the regime. This project is part of our attempts to integrate cutting edge network analysis with big data approach. The findings from this approach has broader and important implications for both academic and policy circles.

The rise of the strongman regimes like Russia, China, and Turkey has imposed important challenges to the UK’s domestic and international interests. A better understanding of elite politics would allow the UK and its allies better respond to challenges from these authoritarian regimes. The findings from this project is of critical importance not only to the UK but also other democracies.

Brexit would introduce major changes to the UK’s foreign policies. The UK is expected to adjust its policies towards authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. Given this, a better understanding of elite politics in these countries would greatly strengthen the UK’s position after Brexit.

Many developing countries like China lack effective institutions. Sociopolitical developments in these countries are strongly affected by elite power sharing. This project allows a better understanding of elite politics in these countries and thus contribute their sociopolitical developments.

This a seed project of our attempts to integrate cutting edge network analysis with big data approach, which allows a systematic and accurate understanding of elite politics in authoritarian regimes.