Building Closed Autocracies: the Cases of Russia and Belarus

Call for Papers

Political and social sciences section in the framework of the Congress of East European Studies by the German Association for East European Studies

6.-7. October 2022, Berlin

Russia's recent attack on Ukraine sent shockwaves across Europe and the rest of the world. It is not only a turning point to the international community, but also represents a critical juncture for the domestic structures of Russia's political regime. Within less than two weeks upon the beginning of the war, domestic policy gained totalitarian momentum: The complete crackdown on the few independent media, hermetic censorship on the public sphere, the harsh criminalisation of any dissent against the war, and a new level of brutality against protest and civil society activism were initiated and implemented literally overnight. Similar dynamics can be observed in Belarus, whose political leadership is Putin's closest ally in the war, even if it is currently less in the focus of international attention.

These domestic implications of the invasion of Ukraine, whose radicality and severity were unexpected by scholars and activists alike, will accelerate the ongoing global regression of democracy and rise of authoritarian regimes around the globe (e.g. EIU 2022, Diamond 2022). Nevertheless, it is too early for an analysis of the type of regime the recent changes and repressions bring about. It is not yet possible to predict which of these structures are going to stabilise. Nor is it possible to anticipate what relationship between state and society will settle down in Russia and Belarus in the longer term. However, it is already obvious that the oppressive toolkit that is used to legitimise aggressive international politics and destroy any signs of anti-war movements in their inception has developed a long time before this aggressive move.

The section puts the focus on the reflection of this repressive toolkit, which has been considered a remarkable characteristic of non-democratic regimes (e.g. Kailitz & Wurster 2017). Its components are based on an ambivalent relationship between government and society: Seeking to maintain a democratic facade, however flimsy it may be, the legitimacy of governments rests significantly on public support and their scope for action limited by preferences and consent of the population. At the same time, effective participation must be avoided in order not to even hint at the possibility of a change of power. This ambivalence is reflected not least in the obvious pre-election nervousness of governments, which was particularly evident in the context of the recent parliamentary elections in Russia. To prevent unwanted participation and electoral uncertainty, however, measures of mass control and repression are no longer employed by modern autocrats. Instead, they manage political inclusion and exclusion in a way that is more selective, elaborate, and subtle, relies on information technology, and is explicitly justified by reference to allegedly similar regulations in Western democracies (Guriev & Treisman 2020; Puddington 2017).

Mechanisms and instruments that are used in this context lead to the stabilisation of roles that often take up and reinterpret categories of the totalitarian past.

The section sets out to investigate mechanisms and structures of authoritarian inclusion and, most importantly, exclusion in Belarus and Russia as role-models for modern autocracies. To this end, we look at three different levels, with one session devoted to each:

(1) Political institutions with a particular focus on election manipulation;

(2) Policies and legal measures such as "Foreign Agents" laws, laws against terrorism and extremism, political restrictions under the guise of pandemic prevention, mass media control, or internet regulation;

(3) Cases of targeted repression against individual activists or organisations.

The fourth and final session will be a roundtable discussion with activists that reflects on coping strategies and on the potential and limitations of activism in exile. We consider this section as an opportunity to reflect on the developments in Belarus and Russia in the past decade and understand how these developments lead to the aggressive and expansionist politics in the post-Soviet region.

We invite contributions from all social sciences disciplines (such as political science, sociology, ethnology, or social geography) that investigate forms and implications of political exclusion on the level of institutions, policies, or individuals in Russia and Belarus. Please submit a one-page abstract to Evelyn Moser (emoser@uni-bonn.de) and Galina Selivanova (gselivanova@uni-bonn.de) by 23 May 2022.

Accommodation costs will be covered by the organizers. It is possible to apply for the payment of travel expenses if there are no other financing options.

References:

Diamond, Larry (2022): »Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled«, in: Journal of Democracy 33 (1), S. 163-179.

Economist Intelligence Unit (2022): Democracy Index 2021.

Guriev, Sergei and Treisman, Daniel (2019): A Theory of Informational Autocracy, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3426238.

Kailitz, Steffen und Stefan Wurster (Hg.) (2017): Special Issue: Legitimationsstrategien von Autokratien, Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft 11 (2).

Puddington, Arch (2017): »Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians«, Freedom House: https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/breaking-down-democracy-goals-strategies-and-methods-modern-authoritarians.