The anatomy of authoritarianism: a conceptual and analytical framework and taxonomy of authoritarian government practices

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Abstract: Various forms of authoritarianism are on the rise, severely affecting both newer and more established democracies (Diamond, 2021). However, this current wave of de-democratization is different from previous ones. It tends to be more gradual, more subtle, and often driven by democratically elected politicians who typically maintain a democratic façade (Bermeo, 2016; Guriev and Treisman, 2022). These characteristics not only have crucial practical consequences but also highlight important theoretical limitations in social science theorizing. First, the dominant structuralist "grand theories" of (de-)democratization – which typically take a country-level approach and focus on highly visible turning points such as violent coups – are not well suited to describing and explaining the more subtle and incremental forms of autocratization (Pepinsky, 2020). Second, the country-level perspective hinders the analysis of anti-democratic dynamics in otherwise democratic countries, too. Finally, the efforts of autocratic leaders to conceal their ambitions are both facilitated by and contribute to the conceptual confusion surrounding terms such as "authoritarian," "populist,", and "illiberal, ".

These and other limitations and gaps underscore the necessity of shifting the level of analysis from the country (macro) level of the politico-administrative system downwards to its meso level and developing a novel analytical and theoretical lens to study the ongoing wave of autocratization. Building on recent developments in theory that propose (meso-level) "practices" as units of analysis, we propose the concept of authoritarian government practice (AGP), broadly defined as patterns of actions taken by those in power that aim to undermine governmental accountability . Some recent work has already laid some conceptual and theoretical groundwork for AGPs (Glasius, 2018; Pepinsky, 2020), and other studies have demonstrated the analytical, descriptive, and explanatory potential of the concept (Morgenbesser, 2020). What is lacking is a fine-grained analytical framework specifically suited to the in-depth, empirical identification and analysis of authoritarian practices.

The primary objective of the proposed paper is, first, to construct a conceptual and analytical framework of AGPs, one that allows their empirical identification. Second, in order to enable subsequent comparative work we set out to develop a taxonomy of AGPs. Our empirical focus will be on four Eastern European and Central Asian countries that have experienced a significant degree of autocratization. The source of empirical data will be the detailed country reports of 3 Freedom House, a global think tank active in democracy monitoring and research, complemented by desk research when necessary.

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