EXPLORING 'OVERDEVELOPED' POST-COMMUNIST AUTOCRACIES

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ABSTRACT

This review article focuses on the phenomenon where some countries do not follow the general pattern suggested by the modernisation theory – the more developed, the more democratic. Former Soviet states like Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus appear as anomalies displaying very high level of human development, despite being fully authoritarian. Considering that divergence, this article reviews main theoretical approaches used to explain democratisation and autocratic resilience of post-communist regimes. In addition, a preliminary test is conducted to evaluate the potential of these theoretical approaches to address the fact that such countries outperform both more open neighbouring non-democracies and some democracies. While some theories imply possible explanations (patronal politics, conditional approach to resource dependence, and market social contract), none of them sufficiently discloses the hidden mechanism behind such an anomaly, implying the need for more in-depth studies.

Keywords: modernisation theory, neopatrimonialism, patronal politics, rentier state theory, market social contract.

INTRODUCTION

This review article examines theories that are employed to explain democratisation, development, and autocratic resilience. Ever since Seymour Martin Lipset's (1959, p. 75) famous postulation "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" the idea that socioeconomic development significantly increases the chances of a country being or becoming a democracy has been one of the most prominent approaches in political science. Although such correlation, proposed by the modernisation theory, has been confirmed by dozens of studies over decades, the causation is still challenged (Teorell, 2010; Przeworski, Cheibub, Limongi, & Alvarez, 2000). Furthermore, there are several autocracies among the top economic performers of the world, including Singapore, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UNDP, n.d.-a). This contradiction is based not only on (oil) wealth; Human Development Index (HDI) by UNDP shows that several autocracies display substantial social development as well. As many as 18 out of 66 countries with very high human development are autocracies (UNDP, n.d.-b). Additionally, such regimes are often categorised not as hybrid, but as fully authoritarian (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Russia) (Freedom House, n.d.-a).

This is not just a question of regimes that have been autocratic for decades, as several post-communist countries have followed a similar path. In their case, such contradiction is especially evident. Excluding the democratic Baltic States, the countries delivering highest level of human development in the former Soviet Union area are some of the most closed autocracies of the region: Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (see Table 1). According to their level of HDI, they outperform not only more open post-communist autocracies like Ukraine and Georgia, but also the democratic Bulgaria (UNDP, n.d.-b). This challenges approaches claiming that open autocracies (e.g., competitive authoritarian regimes) deliver better human development than closed autocracies (Cassani, 2021).

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Table 1. HDI, GNI, and Democracy in former Soviet Union

Country	HDI[a]	GNI[b]	FIW status[c]
Estonia	0.892	36 019	F
Lithuania	0.882	35 799	F
Latvia	0.866	30 282	F
Kazakhstan	0.825	22 857	NF
Russian Federation	0.824	26 157	NF
Belarus	0.823	18 546	NF
Georgia	0.812	14 429	PF
Ukraine	0.779	13 216	PF
Armenia	0.776	13 894	PF
Azerbaijan	0.756	13 784	NF
Moldova	0.750	13 664	PF
Uzbekistan	0.720	7 142	NF
Turkmenistan	0.715	14 909	NF
Kyrgyzstan	0.697	4 864	PF
Tajikistan	0.668	3 954	NF

Sources:

[a] *Human Development Index value for year 2019 (UNDP, n.d.-a, Table 1)*

[b] *Gross national income per capita for year 2019 (2017 PPP $; UNDP, n.d.-a, Table 1)*

[c] *Freedom in the World country ranking (F = Free; PF = Partly Free; NF = Not Free. Note that Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus are NF.) Freedom House. (n.d.-b). Freedom in the World 2013-2022 Raw Data. Retrieved June 26, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/All_data_FIW_2013-2022.xlsx*

Such outliers seem to have found the secret to the game, as they are able to undermine both international pressure and public appeal for democratisation and thus prevent regime change (Cutright & Wiley, 1969; Rueschemeyer, Huber, & Stephens, 1992; Dimitrov, 2009). The fact that such a trend continues and possibly extends, challenges not only the modernisation theory but also the prospect of further democratisation in the world and in the post-communist realm in particular, strengthening the claims of an era of standstill and reversal (Alizada et al., 2021; Diamond, 2020; Repucci, 2020). Besides affecting the daily lives of the people in these countries, such regimes may be role models for others in the future.

What are the mechanisms behind the relative success of some fully authoritarian regimes? This review article surveys and synthesises prior relevant research and provides input for future research (Webster & Watson, 2020). Its aim is to examine main theoretical approaches employed to explain democratisation, development, and autocratic resilience of post-communist regimes with a focus on addressing the fact that some fully authoritarian regimes deliver better human development than several more open states. Since modernisation theory appears problematic in explaining the mechanism that enables these regimes to remain fully authoritarian and deliver very high level of human development, several regime theories (neopatrimonialism, patronal politics, rentier state theory, popular autocrats, etc) are studied. However, this is not a classic review article, as theories are briefly evaluated against empirics using research synthesis (Cooper, 2010).

In this article, mostly data on the year 2019 is used since this was the latest available during the preparatory phase of the article. It is also the year Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down as the President of Kazakhstan, a symbolic starting point of

a set of important changes in countries in focus in this article.[2] This review article explores theoretical approaches based on how they describe a specific anomaly in the relationship between democracy and development: it is not a normative assessment of the policies of authoritarian regimes.

The article is structured as follows: first, a brief overview of literature on main schools of comparative democratisation studies and the relationship between democratisation and development is given. Next, theories with the ambition to explain autocratic resilience in post-communist countries in the 21st century will be reviewed. Finally, a preliminary test of the applicability of these theories on explaining very high level of human development under some post-communist closed autocracies is conducted.

MAIN TRADITIONS AND THE DEVELOPMENT-DEMOCRACY NEXUS

The following section reviews literature focusing on the main schools of comparative democratisation studies and the role of socioeconomic development in fostering democratisation (and vice versa), with an emphasis on the modernisation theory. Comparative democratisation studies have been dominated by four main traditions: the modernisation theory, the historical sociologist approach, the transitionalist school, and, more recently, a 'new structuralist' game-theoretical economic approach. While the first two are structuralist in their epistemological-methodological approach, transitionalists are on the other side of the axis of structure and agency, and the fourth approach, although rooted in structuralism, combines, in a way, all the above, and thus represents the wider trend of synthesising different approaches.

In many countries, democratisation followed modernisation, tempting scholars to link these two and develop an approach known as the modernisation school. Since Seymour Martin Lipset's famous postulation, mentioned at the beginning of this article, economic development has been considered the dominant explanatory variable for democracy, based on a vast number of (usually) quantitative studies. Be it measured in GNI/GDP per capita, energy consumption per capita, or other similar measures, the correlation has almost always been evident (Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, & O'Halloran, 2006; Boix & Stokes, 2003; Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994; Bollen & Jackman, 1985; Bollen, 1983, 1979; Cutright & Wiley, 1969; Cutright, 1963). One of the leading scholars in the field of democracy studies Larry Diamond infers: "given the considerable variation in quantitative methods, in countries and years tested, in the measures of democracy employed, and in the vast array of different regression equations /…/ this must rank as one of the most powerful and robust relationships in the study of comparative national development" (Diamond, 1992, p. 468). The majority of studies show, as Todd Landman summarises, that socioeconomic development progressively accumulates the kind of social changes that make a society ready for democratisation (Landman, 2003).

In opposition to the modernisation theory, historical sociologist (or social forces) and agency-based transitionalist approaches have also gained momentum in the study of democratisation. Barrington Moore, founder of the historical sociologist tradition, related democratisation to the rise of the middle class and the terms of its political incorporation (Moore, 1966), a result later upheld by Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) as other prominent contributors of that school. The latter found that the working class was the most consistently pro-democratic force with middle class sometimes as their allies or in the leading role. Historical sociologist studies about few countries and single-country studies claim other important factors mediate the relationship between economic development and democracy, be they class structures, the nature of economic development, the role of the state, important historical events, political culture, or international factors (Landman, 2003). According to Jean Grugel (2002), such approaches had lost their appeal by the turn of the century, mostly because of their inability to explain the sudden democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. These events supported, in contrast to structuralist approaches, the transitionalists or the strategic approach, situated on the other side

[2] It was followed by, *inter alia*, the 2020 Belarus presidential election and protests, 2022 Kazakh unrest and Russia's attack on Ukraine the same year with unprecedented sanctions imposed on President Putin's regime. Combined, these events can be considered as signs of partial retreat from the political phenomenon in focus in this article (or even signalling an end of an era). Thus, the analysis in this article may not entirely reflect the situation at the time this article is published.

of the epistemological-methodological axis of structure and agency. They claim democracy can be created independent of structural context, based on the interplay of individual actors. Skilful leadership, aided by luck, is considered key to outcomes which lead to the establishment of democratic procedures for government (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Rustow, 1970).

Recent decades have faced new approaches combining different schools, and the structuralist approach has also returned to the debates, with Boix (2003), Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), and Levitsky and Way (2010) as some of the most prominent authors. This approach is well represented by the tradition based on the formal game-theoretic models of economics. Although they are sometimes titled as ‘new structuralists’ (Pengl, 2013), they also integrate other main traditions by providing structural conditions explaining preferences and actions of ordinary citizens (social forces), in turn affecting the strategic choices made by political elites (Boix, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Teorell, 2010). They often model regime transitions in a game-theoretic framework, where the rich (or the elites) may choose to repress at a certain cost, in response to which the poor (the citizens) may choose to revolt against the regime or acquiesce, or they may choose not to repress, in which case democracy ensues. However, despite similar premises, Boix, Acemoglu, and Robinson arrive at fundamentally different conjectures when it comes to the impact of inequality on democratisation. Whereas according to Boix the best chances for transition to democracy are associated with lower levels of inequality, Acemoglu and Robinson conclude that democracy has the best chance to emerge in societies with middle levels of inequality. Pengl, however, shows that both approaches have found only limited support in quantitative empirical studies and additionally face theoretical problems (Pengl, 2013).

All these different schools provide some valuable input to the study of democratisation. Teorell (2010) tests several determinants of democratisation, and his results confirm the continued importance of all the first three theoretically disparate intellectual traditions. As he concludes, structural conditions do matter, particularly in the long run; but so do elite actors, particularly in the short run. Moreover, the mass of the citizens themselves matter when able to organise peaceful insurrections against the regime. Since the fourth (economic) approach also incorporates aspects from the three previous schools, Teorell (2010) sees the possibility of his approach further theoretically integrating with Boix’s.

Modernisation, Human Development and Democracy

Debates concerning the linkage between democracy and development are ongoing and besides criticism there have been attempts to advance the modernisation theory. As a fruitful example, Larry Diamond (1992) proposed Human Development Index (HDI) to be a better development variable to associate with democracy (juxtaposed with national income). HDI has grown out of dissatisfaction with comparisons of countries employing GDP/GNI per capita, even when purchasing power parity (PPP) is considered. According to its leitmotif, the decisive factor is not the amount of money produced by the society but the way it is converted into the well-being of its citizens. The authors have tried to keep HDI as simple as possible, using only three aspects (proxies) that show the potential of representing social development as a whole – income, health, and education (UNDP, n.d.-c). Diamond (1992) upheld his idea statistically, comparing HDI with an index of democracy, Freedom in the World (FIW), and finding strong statistical correlations. HDI showed substantially stronger correlation with the index of democracy (0.71 significance at the 0.0001 level) than per capita Gross National Income (GNI; 0.51 at 0.0001). This finding advanced the modernisation approach by introducing HDI as the possible predictor of democracy and made Diamond reformulate Lipset’s famous thesis, “The more well-to-do the people of a country, on average, the more likely they will favour, achieve, and maintain a democratic system for their country” (Diamond, 1992, p. 468). Following Diamond, in this article, HDI is employed as the main indicator of development.

Modernisation theory has also faced criticism and the debate continues. Comparing 40 years of data, Przeworski, Cheibub, Limongi, and Alvarez (2000) found that although there is a correlation between development and democracy, there may be no causation. In other words, political regimes do not transition to democracy as per capita incomes rise; rather such a movement is random. They claim the correlation exists since rich democracies tend not to collapse. However, Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, and O’Halloran (2006) retested the findings of Przeworski et al., using new data, new techniques, and a three-way classification of regimes, and found that increase in GDP per capita is a causal factor in the process of

democratisation. This question is still up to debate with Przeworski and his co-authors facing similar criticism, e.g., from Boix and Stokes (2003), but support from Persson and Tabellini (2009), and Teorell (2010).

The role of political regime and its institutions in fostering human development is in focus of several studies, with most of them addressing the comparison between democracies and autocracies. An extensive literature finds that democracy improves quality of life (Gerring, Knutsen, Maguire, Skaaning, Teorell, & Coppedge, 2021; Yi-ting Wang, Mechkova, & Andersson, 2019; Kudamatsu, 2012; Gerring, Thacker, & Alfaro, 2012; Navia & Zweifel, 2003; Lake & Baum, 2001; Brown, 1999). Others dispute this approach (Truex, 2017; Miller, 2015; Rothstein, 2015; Jacobsen, 2015; Halleröd, Rothstein, Daoud, & Nandy, 2013; Ross, 2006).

On the other hand, relatively limited attention has been devoted to studying differences in human development performance in different forms of autocracy – an important aspect in explaining the anomaly in focus in this study. Cassani (2021) suggests that competitive authoritarian regimes which hold elections and allow for some degree of contestation face stronger pressures to improve citizen living conditions. As a response, they employ mostly performance-based legitimation (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). Using data on school enrolment and child mortality, Cassani finds that competitive authoritarian regimes outperform other non-democracies, apart from hereditary autocracies. Miller (2015) argues that, among autocracies, those holding elections obtain better results in education and healthcare than other (closed regimes). Cassani and Carbone (2016) find that, concerning human development performance, competitive authoritarian regimes (in sub-Saharan Africa) lie in-between democracies and other (non-competitive) autocracies. Other authors challenge these conclusions, with Kim and Kroeger (2018) asserting that autocratic multiparty elections have no effect on infant mortality. In addition, Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson (2019) find that electoral competition needs to be of relatively good quality, arguing that democratisation has a threshold effect on health outcomes.

Thus, this is by no means a settled question, and further research is necessary. However, all the theories reviewed in this section, to a larger or lesser extent, fail to address the cases of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. These three countries represent a phenomenon that contradicts the logic proposed by the modernisation theory. They are more developed than other post-Soviet autocracies, but at the same time their regimes are some of the most closed in the region. Authors more sensitive to different forms of autocracy (e.g., Cassani, 2021) claim that more open cases (competitive authoritarian regimes) display better results of human development. However, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Russia – contrastingly – are at the other side of the democracy–dictatorship axis. Thus, in conclusion, these studies establish several significant statistical relationships but do not explain in sufficient detail the reasons why some (hegemonic party) autocracies are able to sustain and advance a very high human development index score. As a more fruitful approach, several regime theories that focus more on the operating mechanisms of autocratic regimes will be reviewed next.

FROM REGIME THEORIES TO AUTOCRATIC RESILIENCE

This section reviews literature on autocratic resilience in the 21st century, with the focus on post-communist countries and regime types. Since modernisation theory and most related approaches appeared problematic in explaining the mechanisms that enable or motivate closed autocratic regimes to sustain very high level of human development, as a more promising avenue, more attention will be given to several regime theories (neopatrimonialism, patronal politics, rentier state theory, popular autocrats, etc).

Organisational Power, Linkage and Leverage

Various authors have focused on analysing autocratic resilience and the phenomenon of hybridisation after the dissolution of Soviet Union. The most prominent authors coping with the aforementioned aspects, Levitsky and Way (2010), propose a 'mixed approach'. They combine structural domestic variables and international variables in explaining why some countries

that had democratic openings or a regime change (at the beginning of 1990s), democratised, while others became hybrid or fully authoritarian regimes. They develop the currently most prominent regime type in the grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism, the concept of 'competitive authoritarianism' – a hybrid regime where competition for power is real, but unfair. In the context of the current article, the most relevant part of their theory concerns the variables explaining trajectories of competitive authoritarian regimes: linkage to the West, organisational power of the regime, and Western leverage. For Levitsky and Way (2010), regime change and stability are the interplay of domestic and external factors, with the latter being more decisive and divided into two parts. The regime outcome of competitive authoritarian systems is primarily defined by linkage to the West. The authors show that almost all competitive authoritarian countries with high linkage have democratised, regardless of other aspects. Second, according to their theory, if the organisational power of the regime and the party in power is high, the regime will not fall easily and is likely to stabilise. The third aspect, Western leverage, mostly consisting of democracy promotion from the outside (and aspects related to it), comes as a less influential factor. Thus, it empirically appears that high linkage to the West tends to cause democratisation, high organisational power brings authoritarian stabilisation, and in the case of contradictory powers at play, the result will often be unstable authoritarianism.

Levitsky and Way (2010) measure organisational power based on three components: state coercive capacity, party strength, and state economic control. Efficient party and state organisations (e.g., army, police forces, domestic intelligence) increase the capacity of those in power to anticipate defection, co-opt or repress opponents, stifle or crush protests, and win (or steal) elections. State economic control, on the other hand, occasionally serves as a substitute for a coercive and party organisation, and helps the ruler prevent or counter challenges posed by the opposition. A ruler's economic power is high when resources (production, finances, oil rents) are concentrated into the hands of the state, and governments are free to distribute these resources to a considerable extent at their discretion.

The approach of Levitsky and Way is in accordance with Teorell's analysis (2010), according to which regional democratic organisations and neighbour diffusion affect regime stability. In addition, since these characteristics are rather universal in nature, it can be suggested that they can be used in explaining modern regime transitions and resilience in general.

According to the research by Levitsky and Way (2010), post-communist Eastern Europe (excluding the former Soviet Republics) was a region where linkage-based pressure from Western Europe was so intense that democratisation occurred in the face of significant domestic obstacles (with only Albania as an exception). The former Soviet Union region, on the other hand, was characterised by lower linkage. External democratising pressure was weaker, the cases lacked strong domestic push for democracy, and the main difference was authoritarian stability. Where state and party structures were strong, and/or where Western leverage was medium or low, autocrats were able to hold onto power even in the face of highly mobilised opposition. According to Levitsky and Way (2010), Russia and Belarus also started out as competitive authoritarian after the dissolution of Soviet Union, but in the course of time they transformed into full authoritarianism (Belarus in 1994 and Russia in 2008). They describe these countries as examples of how low leverage and high organisational power contribute to authoritarian stability.

The conclusions by Levitsky and Way are in accordance with the analysis of Bunce (2015). When explaining the democratisation of Central and Eastern Europe, she stressed the importance of geography (the long history of connections to Western Europe, the influence of European Union, diffusion effects within the region) and the development of oppositions already during communism. As disadvantages of former Soviet Union countries, she emphasised their longer history of communist rule and, in the case of Russia and Central Asia, the fact that dominant international powers must choose between security concerns and democracy promotion. The influence of communist past is also reflected in the clientelist relations and corruption present in post-communist societies. As Cerami (2015) notes, such phenomena have not usually disappeared even with democratisation, since they have become rooted in the culture of these societies. Following similar logic, Pop-Eleches (2014) emphasises that post-communist countries are less democratic than their socio-economic levels predicted. He claims that it is due to the distorted nature of communist development. The latter helped, on the one hand, the pro-democratic middle-class to remain passive, and on the other hand mobilised the lower class, which is less likely to subscribe to democratic values than their counterparts in non-communist countries.

Popular Autocrats and Market Social Contract

The *modus operandi* of Levitsky and Way is partly challenged and partly advanced by Martin K. Dimitrov, who gives them recognition for considering the influence of the West and organisational power of the regime as crucial components. He complements this list with an even more prominent component – the authoritarian ruler's popularity. According to Dimitrov, this factor helps understand why several authoritarian regimes prevail in the post-Soviet space. Unlike their unpopular counterparts, such rulers possess the support of the populace, and they seldom need to resort to using brute force. He adds that popular autocrats use three strategies to ensure their popularity: economic populism, anti-Western nationalism, and muzzling the media. Cumulatively these three strategies produce a high level of legitimacy and stability. It is extremely difficult for competitors to overthrow an authoritarian regime which is enjoying strong support, regardless of whether it is natural or partly created by the media. Economic populism includes substantial investments in social projects and redistributing policies. These are easiest to achieve in countries like Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, where income from natural resources accelerates economic growth and generates money that can be used for redistribution. Elements of organisational power continue to be important in Dimitrov's opinion, but this holds especially true in the context of a different type of regimes – those with unpopular rulers. It is also noteworthy that when giving examples of popular autocrats, Dimitrov (2009) points, contrary to common logic, not to competitive authoritarian, but to fully authoritarian regimes (e.g., Russia and Kazakhstan). The ideal types of totalitarianism and sultanism let one expect that the more closed an autocracy is, the more it resorts to repression in securing social stability (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Raun, 2012). However, in an era where the cost of open repression is high, it is useful to employ other mechanisms to secure regime resilience, including, for instance, state dictated Soviet-style 'social contract', which was used in post-communist regimes in the 1980s. Cook and Dimitrov (2017) find that such contracts are still present: the post-communist regimes of reform-era China and Putin's Russia have created distinctive 'market social contracts' where authoritarian leaders cater to the consumption needs of the population in a strategic effort to remain in office. They also highlight the centrality of mass co-optation in explaining durable autocratic rule.

Neopatrimonialism and the Selectorate Theory

When looking at the region in focus in this article, the other prominent approaches to democratisation are the (partly connected) neopatrimonialist and rentier state schools. Authors who favour the neopatrimonialist approach (Paiziev, 2014; Peyrouse, 2012; Kunysz, 2012; Isaacs, 2011; Fisun, 2003; Ishiyama, 2002) claim that most or many former Soviet Union countries are ruled on other grounds than legal-rational bureaucratic regimes and propose that this also explains their failure to democratise. They admit, though, that these countries are not governed entirely on traditional grounds either, that is, two methods of domination have become combined – hence the prefix 'neo-'. Formally bureaucratic governance has become mixed with informal governance that follows patrimonial logic. Neopatrimonialism has been considered as a distinct regime type (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994, 1997), but later scholars have reduced it to constitute only one component of a regime – the operation mechanism of bureaucracy or state authority structure (Guliyev, 2011; Erdmann & Engel, 2007). Nevertheless, at the heart of this model is a patron-client relationship where the ruler directs public resources to benefit his cronies in the form of private goods in exchange for loyalty, and at the expense of the public, securing the survival of his regime in doing so. Paiziev (2014) analyses key elements contributing to the persistence of neopatrimonialism in Central Asian countries and finds that it prevails because in these countries the relationship between the executive and legislative power is presidential (superpresidentalism), and their political culture is characterised by clan politics. According to Paiziev (2014), the secret of the longevity of Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's authoritarian regimes is the fact that they manage to profit from formal as well as non-formal, traditional as well as non-traditional institutions and practices, and the mixture of all these can be described as neopatrimonialism.

Such an approach comes close to the selectorate theory proposed by Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2011), a prominent scholar representing the game-theoretic approach, although authors elaborating about neopatrimonialism often do not refer to his work. This approach is more open to other coalitions than the simple patron-client relationship. According to his

theory, rulers, to remain in power, do not focus on the well-being of the electorate (as expected in democracy), but of 'the selectorate' that under authoritarian conditions is usually the elite (but not always). The selectorate is a set of people who have a say in choosing leaders with a prospect of gaining access to special privileges allocated by leaders, and the winning coalition is the subgroup of the selectorate who maintain incumbents in office and in exchange receive special privileges (such as business oligarchs and senior figures in the security forces, as in the case of Russia) (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011; Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Dawisha, 2014).

Patronal Politics

In addition, a concept close to both the neopatrimonialist and selectorate theory approach, the patronal politics theory developed by Henry E. Hale (2015) deserves attention. Similarly, he defines patronal politics through the personalised exchange of concrete rewards and punishments via networks of actual acquaintance. However, he acknowledges that scholars (also from both aforementioned approaches) tend to underestimate the power of public opinion in autocracies with contested elections. Besides patron-client networks, authoritarian leaders employ public politics aimed at creating mass support for the regime/leader. Public opinion shapes, in turn, not only the expectations of the people, but even more importantly of the elite, thus either facilitating or hindering leadership change. His analysis shows that post-Soviet patronal presidents fell primarily as they simultaneously suffered from the lame-duck syndrome and low popular support. The lame-duck syndrome is reflected in a situation where elites come to expect a patronal president's imminent departure from power, and the value of presidential promises and the gravity of their threats start to dissipate. Potential reasons include serious illness (or old age), term limits (together with credible plans to leave office), and massive drop in popularity (economic crises, etc). However, experiencing such a syndrome per se does not mean losing power, especially in case presidents or their handpicked successors are popular enough to win the competition (Hale, 2015). While in part resembling Dimitrov's approaches, Hale shows how post-Soviet patronal presidential systems feature a significant and powerful accountability mechanism forcing their leaders to cultivate and cater to public opinion.

Rentier State School and Conditional Approaches

In relation to defining neopatrimonialism and regimes in former Soviet Union countries, the concept of rentierism also needs to be examined. While neopatrimonialism was used to explain the underdevelopment of countries (and problems of democratisation allegedly related to the same phenomenon), some countries with a similar political system became rich but did not democratise. It was found that a large proportion of them had a common denominator – dependence on profit earned to the state budget from the export of oil and other natural resources, oil transit taxes, or external aid (Schlumberger, 2006). The most important element is not the fact that the country exports predominantly one type of raw material, but the fact that the income earned from this plays such a crucial role in the state budget (and in financing the leader and the elite) that there is no motivation to collect and raise taxes. Thus, the regime does not need to provide political representation to the people in exchange for rising taxes (Raun, 2007; Herb, 2005; Moore, 2004; Zakaria, 2003; Ross, 2001; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). If skilfully implemented, such a system gives rulers a lot of resources for redistribution via clientelism and patronage, that is, to ensure the survival and popularity of the regime – in addition to the opportunity for personal enrichment. According to Luciani (1987), the threshold for considering a country as a rentier state is whether oil export and similar aspects form at least 40 percent of total government revenues. Another aspect is that general government expenditure is expected to form a significant share of GDP (e.g., one half). However, one could argue that rentierism is not a political regime type, but a set of (economic) conditions that hinders democratisation. In addition, as Okruhlik (1999) puts it, oil wealth is just a resource – what matters is how politicians exploit it.

However, since several resource-abundant countries (including post-communist cases) do not easily fit the above-mentioned criteria, a conditional approach to the resource curse and rentierism has emerged, claiming other aspects mediate (or enforce) the relationship between mineral wealth and the efficiency of political institutions (Jones Luong & Weinthal, 2010; Gel'man,

2010; Franke, Gawrich, & Alakbarov, 2009; Dunning, 2008; Raun, 2007). For example, Thad Dunning (2008), one of the most prominent representatives of this perspective, shows that under favourable conditions, resource rents may even promote democracy, the two most important factors being the extent of private inequality outside the mineral sector and the degree of resource dependence. According to him, three levels of relationship can be distinguished: resource-abundant, rentier, and resource dependent states. While export of natural resources does not constitute a significant amount of state budget in resource-abundant states, in rentier states it is a definitive feature. This, however, does not necessarily imply e.g., that a country cannot be democratic (cf., Venezuela for decades and Norway). Resource-dependent states, in which the export of natural resources makes up a significant share of GDP, provide most favourable conditions for authoritarianism (Dunning, 2008).

In the same vein, Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal (2010) assert that mineral-rich states are cursed not by their wealth per se but rather by the ownership structure they chose to manage their mineral wealth. Secondly, they claim that weak institutions (particularly fiscal regimes) are not inevitable in mineral-rich states. They show that the best choice for building state capacity and achieving long-term economic growth is private foreign ownership of mineral sector, and that the most problematic case is such where state both owns and controls the petroleum sector. The other two strategies are state ownership without control and private domestic ownership. Vladimir Gel'man (2010) mixes the approach by Jones Luong and Weinthal with the model of interactions of state and big business proposed by David Kang (2002). Gel'man (2010) describes the dynamics observed in Russia as a pendulum-like swing from a predatory state with state ownership and control of mineral sector (in the 1980s) to private domestic ownership with rent-seeking business actors having captured the state (at the end of the 1990s) back to predatory state that has captured business and (partly) owns and controls mineral sector. Thus, Gel'man claims that besides the resource curse, inefficient political regimes and their institutions (cf. crony capitalism) impose major barriers to economic and political reforms (Gel'man, 2010). Such conditional approaches display more potential in explaining post-Soviet realities, especially the concept proposed by Jones Luong and Weinthal.

To sum up, even though this section does not review all the theories concerning democratisation and autocratic resilience, it shows the diversity of concepts and the difficulties of preferring one approach over others. Since the modernisation theory and related approaches do not explain the mechanism that makes closed post-communist autocracies deliver high level of development, several regime theories were reviewed with the expectation that they give an idea of what the mechanism could be. Next, based on the mapping in this section, a preliminary test is conducted to evaluate the potential of these theories to explain the anomaly.

OUTLINING THE POTENTIAL OF THEORIES IN EXPLAINING THE ANOMALY

This section briefly analyses the potential of theoretical approaches reviewed in previous section in explaining the empirical phenomenon where a group of outlying post-communist countries has not democratised despite their relative success in delivering remarkably high level of human development. Due to the limitations that a single scientific article faces and the overall focus on reviewing theories, this chapter shortly outlines only prominent approaches that explain the resilience of post-communist autocracies as possible avenues for more in-depth future research on the phenomenon.

From Levitsky and Way to Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Politics

The approach by Levitsky and Way (2010), the authors of one of the most widely renowned and elaborated work on authoritarianism in the modern world, helps to explain the authoritarian resilience of Belarus and Russia (and probably Kazakhstan). According to their analysis, in Russia and Belarus, linkage to the West and Western leverage are low to medium, and organisational power is medium to high, which leads to expect autocratic consolidation. Such a scenario has materialised in these countries: while at the beginning of the 1990s both countries were categorised as hybrid regimes ('competitive authoritarian') by Levitsky and Way (2010), by the year 2008, both had regressed to 'full authoritarianism'. The authors do not

analyse Kazakhstan, considering it as fully authoritarian since the beginning of the 1990s. It is thus reasonable to expect that their scores of the three indicators are similar to Belarus and Russia. However, since the study by Levitsky and Way focuses on explaining 'competitive authoritarianism', i.e., the way several autocratic incumbents 'mitigated' the democratising pressure of the third wave, they do not analyse and differentiate the 'fully authoritarian' group of countries in more detail, thus placing under one umbrella countries as diverse as Kazakhstan delivering very high level of human development, the extremely closed North Korea, and the poor Ethiopia. Therefore, their theory is insufficient in describing the distinctive features of the anomaly mapped in this article, but it contains aspects that could be employed in the search for a more general theory of modern autocratic resilience (e.g., the importance of organisational power).

Another prominent concept used in explaining the autocratic resilience of Central Asia and other post-communist countries is the neopatrimonialist approach. This is, however, often applied to these countries rather loosely, without much theoretical elaboration – as a *deus ex machina*. Based on the 'undermodernised' African countries of the 1960s where strongmen captured formally modern states and ruled them following patriarchal logic, this concept is especially problematic in explaining the anomaly where autocracies display 'too much' human development. A prominent feature of this theory is the patron-client relationship where the ruler remains in power by using state resources to ensure the loyalty of the elite at the expense of the populace. Under such circumstances, however, one would expect that national income is poorly converted to benefit social development, and such countries do not display particularly high level of human development.

However, such scores of human development can be better explained using the selectorate theory. It could be reasoned that in a more modern society with (at least formally) multi-party elections, a successful survival strategy also encompasses the incorporation of (segments of) the wider populace (voters) as part of the selectorate and the winning coalition, resulting in larger investments into public goods and patronage favouring targeted groups, which in turn may help to explain higher level of human development in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.[3] As Cook and Dimitrov (2017) imply, the ruler may base his power not only on the elite, but also on the people, which may have a balancing effect.

Another propitious approach, the concept of patronal politics by Henry E. Hale (2015), supplements the neopatrimonialist approach, with public support as a crucial factor for explaining regime survival, accompanied by the need to avoid the lame duck syndrome. Hale describes Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Russia as cases of 'nonrevolution'. In the first two, presidents had never become lame ducks (by the time of publishing his book in 2015), despite allowing at least some opposition to compete in the elections. Kremlin, on the other hand, experienced a lame duck period and even a dramatic competing-pyramid situation (serious coordinated challenge by opposition in 1999) but had presidents and handpicked successors who were popular enough to win the competition (in 2000, 2008 and 2012). In sum, these three cases could be categorised as the 'success stories' of patronal politics (Hale, 2015). In the context of elections with real opposition candidates (as in all three cases in focus), authoritarian leaders become interested in securing mass support. This, however, motivates patronal presidents to invest in economic growth and living standards of ordinary citizens (e.g., wages and social transfers, the four Priority National Projects in Russia [education, agriculture, housing, and health], etc.). It seems plausible that as a by-product, this trend could be reflected in the growth of HDI. Thus, the concept of patronal politics appears as one of the more promising explanations to the dilemmas mapped in this article.

Rentier State Theory and Ownership Structure

When compared to 'traditional' rentier state theory (Luciani, 1987) and the data on Gulf countries (Kuwait, Qatar, etc.), Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus fail to meet the expected requirements to be categorised as rentier states: oil exports at least 40% of total government revenues, general government expenditure as a significant share of GDP, and (extremely) low taxation. In a typical rentier state (Kuwait), the share of government expenditure is 51.2% (in 2021), whereas even in

3 Following Erdmann and Engel (2007, p. 107) a distinction is made between clientelism and patronage based on the recipients. Clientelism is about individual benefits (land, office services) and patronage of collective benefits to a bigger group (e.g., roads, schools). In both cases, the distribution of benefits follows personal or particularistic interests by violating universalistic rules.

Kazakhstan it is merely 21.1%. The tax burden as a percentage of GDP in Kuwait is 1.4, compared to 11.7 in Kazakhstan. Even the third criterion is not met in Kazakhstan – the share of oil export fluctuates between 19 to 35% of total government revenues (below 40%) (IMF, 2022; Heritage Foundation, 2021).

However, one could successfully elaborate that a smaller 'rentier effect' exists in Kazakhstan and Russia: the ruler has more resources to appease both the elite and the populace and to use them as a buffer during economic crises. In addition, a more encouraging avenue is the conditional approach to resource dependence, claiming other aspects mediate (or enforce) the relationship between mineral wealth and the efficiency of political institutions. As Jones Luong and Weinthal (2010), prominent authors representing this way of reasoning, assert, mineral-rich countries are not cursed by their wealth per se, but rather by the ownership structure they choose to manage the wealth. The decisive question is who owns and controls the mineral reserves – state or private companies – and whether the latter are of domestic or foreign origin. According to the authors, strong fiscal regimes are most likely to emerge in case of private domestic ownership of mineral sector, as was the situation in Russia until 2005. The second-best scenario is considered private foreign ownership, as in Kazakhstan until the same year. The other three main mineral-rich post-communist countries started as examples of more problematic structures – state ownership with control (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) or state ownership without control (Azerbaijan) (Jones Luong & Weinthal, 2010).

This distinction between ownership structures could help explain the different developmental trajectories of these regimes, especially the more positive structural outcomes of Kazakhstan and Russia. As the authors show, comparatively strong fiscal regimes were present in these countries at least until 2005 (with functioning National Resource Fund of Russia as a prominent example). It could also be reasoned that a more responsible and predictable fiscal regime facilitates more efficient translation of economic growth into human development. For example, Jones Luong and Weinthal (2010) assert that Kazakhstan has managed to redistribute the benefits of foreign investment from petroleum-rich to petroleum-poor regions and spend more on education and health sectors, including shifting some funding to primary and secondary education. However, in 2005 (over 15 years ago), both countries in focus retreated from their ownership structures, with Russia opting for the scenario regarded worst in terms of state capacity and long-term economic growth – state ownership with control –, and Kazakhstan establishing state ownership without control. Though it could be argued that the initial reforms still influence the results, the relationship between (previous) ownership structure of the mineral sector and measure of human development needs further in-depth analysis, and it seems reasonable to expect that other factors mediate this relationship. For example, Gel'man (2010) describes the emergence of 'crony capitalism' in Russia as interplay between 'big oil' and political institutions (the rise of the predatory state), partly basing his reasoning on the workings of Jones Luong and Weinthal.

Considering Belarus, the third anomalous case, the discussion about rentierism is problematic since Belarus lacks major oil or natural gas reserves. However, Balmaceda (2014) describes a somewhat twisted rentier effect, where President Alexander Lukashenko has exploited the revenues of the energy sector to secure the loyalty of his political base and the country's elites. Belarus has a valuable energy infrastructure (pipelines and refineries) inherited from the Soviet period, and subsidised commodity imports from Russia. This has helped Lukashenko take advantage of price differentials, transit fees, taxes, and re-exports to generate rents that are then redistributed among domestic actors, enhancing his popularity (see also discussion about economic populism in next paragraph).

Popular Autocrats and Market Social Contract

Another partly promising approach is proposed by Dimitrov who developed the concept of 'popular autocrats', describing rulers that secure their power using three strategies: economic populism, anti-Western nationalism and muzzling the media. As Dimitrov (2009) shows, all of the three conditions are met in Russia, with Kazakhstan and Belarus as significant examples of economic populism. While all three countries show low media freedom (Freedom House, 2017), in Kazakhstan, ethnic aspects were employed to benefit the regime in a different way with president Nazarbayev acting as the guarantor of inter-ethnic peace

in a multi-ethnic society (Toleukhanova, 2016). The first strategy, economic populism with high levels of social spending and consistent redistributionist policies, could help explain significant human development. However, analysis by Dimitrov suggests that other natural resource-abundant regimes such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan could be considered belonging to that group, thus this theory alone may not differentiate the three countries in focus in this article to a sufficient degree.

Economic populism is to a large share consistent with the concept of 'market social contract' defined by Cook and Dimitrov (2017). Elements of such a tacit contract are observable in all the three cases. In Russia, for example, financial benefits are targeted for social groups like pensioners and workers in the metallurgy sector. Belarus and Kazakhstan show a remarkably low level of inequality: according to World Bank, the Gini index for Kazakhstan is 27.8 and for Belarus 25.2 (in Russia it is 37.5) (World Bank, n.d.). However, in Russia, public money worth 20 percent of GDP is spent on social system, compared to the more moderate 10.1 in Kazakhstan (which is still higher than the 6.4 percent in the third main oil exporter in the region, Azerbaijan) (McCullaugh, 2013). In addition, Kazakhstan reduced its rate of poverty from 50% in 2000 to 5% in 2012 (UNDP, 2016). Although these demonstration effects of social spending and redistribution are not indicators of HDI, they depict a similar trend – we see autocratic regimes that invest into popular support more than expected (based on e.g., neopatrimonial logic).

The preliminary analysis in this section shows that besides the modernisation approach, several regime theories also struggle with explaining the anomaly of very high human development under three post-communist closed autocracies, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. As the analysis indicates, Western linkage and leverage in conjunction with the organisational power of the regime as indicators proposed by Levitsky and Way, the neopatrimonialist approach, the concept of 'popular autocrats', the selectorate, and the 'traditional' rentier state theories only partly help explain the remarkably high level of development in these states. The concepts of 'market social contract' (Cook & Dimitrov, 2017), 'patronal politics' (Hale, 2015) as well as conditional approach to resource dependence emerge as more promising avenues for further research on the anomaly. The theory asserting the central role of different ownership structures of mineral wealth by Jones Luong and Weinthal (2010) could help explain why Russia and Kazakhstan diverge from other (oil-rich) countries in the region (with the twisted rentier effect possibly partly explaining the case of Belarus) (Balmaceda, 2014). The motivation behind autocratic rulers investing in human development can, to a degree, be explained by employing the approach of patronal politics (Hale, 2015). To remain in power, in the context of elections with real opposition candidates, incumbents are interested in securing mass support and, as a by-product, also in investing in projects that enhance human development in the country. The concept of 'market social contract' also focuses on regimes that (e.g., considering the high cost of open repression) invest into popular support (Cook & Dimitrov, 2017). The ruler invests more in social welfare in exchange for denying democratic freedom, and human development ensues as one of the results.

Thus, based on this preliminary analysis, existing theories tend to provide only general or insufficient explanations of the relationship between state and relevant actors, serving mostly as guidelines for more in-depth studies. Three concepts emerged as more promising. Although they do not concentrate on the phenomenon in focus in this article per se, they could provide initial framework for future analysis and possibly be combined in the process. One possible avenue to better evaluate the applicability of different theoretical approaches would be to further analyse the relationship between human development, economic growth, and democracy in the countries in focus in this article. We could evaluate whether Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus appeared more developed than other autocracies in the region already 'initially' (in the 1990s). Alternatively, their notable level of human development must be in large part achieved later, and thus we are witnessing the demonstration effects of the current regimes. If the latter is the case, another explanation deserves attention: it could be argued that their high human development is the result of absolute economic growth (since – the faster it is, the more resources are available for investments in health and education sectors). For example, hypothetically, since both Kazakhstan and Russia are major oil exporters (cf. rentier state approach), the export of natural resources may fuel their economic growth so intensively that human development follows almost incidentally. Therefore, even if the growth of the national income of these countries is remarkable, their efficiency in converting it into human development could remain poor, implying a more ordinary case of 'bad-governance-*cum*-oil-wealth' (e.g., as the neopatrimonialism approach presumes).

In sum, this review article provided only very preliminary test of the theories. Several fundamental questions regarding high human development in autocratic states are not yet settled and further inquiry into the causal mechanisms of this phenomenon is necessary. Several aspects may have cumulative explanatory effect and could therefore be combined in further study on the anomaly.

CONCLUSION

In this review article, main theoretical approaches in explaining democratisation, development, and autocratic resilience were examined, focusing on post-communist regimes (including modernisation theory, neopatrimonialist approach, rentier state theory, concept of patronal politics, etc). Theories were reviewed based on the way they explain the operating mechanisms of some of the most closed autocracies in the region that – at the same time – manage to deliver high level of human development. Based on the Human Development Index (excluding the democratic Baltic States) Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan appear as the flagships of human development in the former Soviet Union region – they outperform not only more open post-communist autocracies but also democracies.

It occurred that several concepts appear deficient in explaining the operating mechanism of such regimes, contradicted each other, or needed to be developed further. First, the democracy–development nexus was given more attention. The most problematic case was the modernisation theory, according to which socioeconomic development should progressively accumulate the kind of social changes that make a society ready for democratisation. These three countries, however, are remarkable examples of the opposite trend. Authors more sensitive to different forms of autocracy (e.g., Cassani) claimed that more open autocratic regimes display better results of human development. Nevertheless, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus are at the other side of the democracy–dictatorship axis.

As a more fruitful approach, next several regime theories that focus more on the operating mechanisms of autocratic regimes were reviewed, and a preliminary test of their applicability in future research was conducted. As a result, it appeared that several regime theories struggle with explaining the anomaly. The analysis indicated that Western linkage and leverage, in conjunction with the organisational power of the regime (as indicators proposed by Levitsky and Way), the neopatrimonialist approach, the concept of 'popular autocrats', the selectorate, and the 'traditional' rentier state theories only partly help to explain high level of human development under full autocracy. Three approaches appeared as more promising. First, the theory asserting the central role of different ownership structures of mineral wealth by Jones Luong and Weinthal (2010) could help explain why Russia and Kazakhstan diverge from other (oil-rich) countries in the region (with the twisted rentier effect possibly partly explaining the case of Belarus) (Balmaceda, 2014). Second, the motivation behind autocratic rulers investing in human development can, to a degree, be explained by employing the approach of patronal politics (Hale, 2015). To remain in power, in the context of elections with real opposition candidates, incumbents are interested in securing mass support, and, as a by-product, also in investing in projects that enhance human development in the country. Finally, the concept of 'market social contract' focuses on regimes that (e.g., considering the high cost of open repression) invest into popular support (Cook & Dimitrov, 2017). The ruler invests more in social welfare (in exchange for denying democratic freedoms) and human development ensues as one of the results.

Based on this preliminary analysis, existing theories tend to provide only general or insufficient explanations of the relationship between state and relevant actors, serving mostly as guidelines for more in-depth studies. In sum, the mechanisms for the relative success of the authoritarian regimes deserve further investigation. Several aspects may have cumulative explanatory effect and could therefore be combined in further studies on the anomaly.

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