

BELARUS AND KAZAKHSTAN: REGIME DURABILITY, CLAIMS FOR LEGITIMACY AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

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Main theses

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After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a brief feeling of optimism regarding the future spread of democracy in the world. The idea was that since the West emerged as victorious in the Cold War, the advantages of democratic political system would be evident. Nations now free of foreign domination would gradually take on the task of developing democratic institutions.

Nowadays, contrary to that logic, most countries in the world are ruled by authoritarian regimes. Studying authoritarian regimes and their durability is as relevant as ever, and the post-Soviet space offers a plenty of cases to anyone interested in the subject.

In this paper I will try to compare the ruling regimes in Belarus and Kazakhstan, their claims to legitimacy and the approach of the EU towards the two countries. By doing so, I hope to show what are the reasons of autocratic durability of the two regimes.

Belarus and Kazakhstan have the longest serving rulers among the post-Soviet countries. The countries share Soviet legacy and some characteristics of their political regimes. They both are most integrated with Russia and are crucial participants in the Eurasian integration process. Therefore, it is interesting to compare the two countries in the aspect of the durability of their authoritarianisms.

Neo-communism, patrimonialism, sultanism... anything else?

Let us start with a short review of how Belarusian and Kazakhstani regimes are characterized in academic literature. Different concepts have been used to describe the regimes in the two countries. Notably, Lukashenko's regime has been described as neo-communist, neo-authoritarian or a demagogical democracy. Some concepts, like neo-patrimonialism and sultanism have been used to characterize regimes of both Belarus and Kazakhstan.

It is worth noting, that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, the authors of the concept of competitive authoritarianism, put Belarus under the category of competitive authoritarianism and Kazakhstan – under that of noncompetitive authoritarianism. According to these authors, competitive authoritarianism is the type of a regime where democratic institutions like elections exist and are considered as a way to attain political power; however, playing field is uneven because of abuse of power by incumbents, which puts opposition politicians at a huge disadvantage. In competitive authoritarian regimes, “competition is real but unfair” (Levitsky, Way, 2010).

Way and Levitsky argue, that in Kazakhstan, unlike in competitive authoritarian regimes, elections served “functions other than determining who governed” and that “opponents did not view them as viable means to achieve power.” Among other functions of the elections, the authors list enhancing regime legitimacy and distributing patronage (ibid).

It is arguable, whether elections in Belarus nowadays serve as a tool of determining who governs. After all, it is hardly imaginable that Lukashenko would lose power through elections. However, it has to be kept in mind that no regime is stably fixed in terms of regime typology. Levitsky and Way make clear that many countries share some features of different categories but are closer to one category than to another (ibid). **Belarus shares some features of non-competitive authoritarian regimes but is closer to being a competitive authoritarian regime.**

Neopatrimonialism is another concept used to describe regimes in Belarus and Kazakhstan in academic literature. This concept is based on Max Weber's definition of types of authority: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational bureaucracy. According to this distinction, the political systems with authority based on personal rather than legal-rational bureaucratic ground were patrimonial. This label referred to earlier traditional societies. To make distinction between earlier and modern patrimonial societies clearer, Samuel Eisenstadt proposed to refer to modern patrimonial regimes as neopatrimonial. (Laurrelle, 2012) Major differences between earlier patrimonial and neopatrimonial regimes are that the latter relies less on traditional authority and has to look for other sources of

legitimation. Besides, modern, neopatrimonial regimes have to deal with stronger external influences due to the fact that they are part of modern, more developed international system (Laurelle, 2012).

Power dynamics and functioning of political system in neopatrimonial regimes is based on patron-client relationships and closeness to the ruler that uses his position to grant power and other rewards to his clients. Position of those clients depends on their closeness to the leader, not on the institutions that they head or are part of. In other words, neopatrimonial regime is based on “private appropriation by the ruling elite of the public realm and “electoral” benefits” (Fisun, 2012).

Oleksander Fisun describes three central features of the post-Soviet neopatrimonialism. According to him, this type of regime is characterized by (1) formation of strata of neopatrimonial bureaucrats, that use wealth and personal linkages to attain political and economic goals; (2) private appropriation of public resources used coercively to defeat economic and political competitors and (3) crucial role of patron client networks in economic and political processes (ibid).

Fisun considers **Belarus as an example of bureaucratic neopatrimonialism**, characterized by bureaucratic monopoly of the ruling regime; semi-coercive centralization and superpresidentialism. Such political system utilizes populist mobilization and plebiscites (ibid). He does not mention Kazakhstan in his article on the post-Soviet neopatrimonialism, but, based on the typology he has developed, Kazakhstan should be placed somewhere between bureaucratic neopatrimonialism and sultanistic neopatrimonialism. The latter is described as a regime “characterized by an extreme concentration of power, pure personal rulership, façade elections, and clan-based models of voting” (Fisun, 2012; 93).

Another concept that might fit for description on current regimes in Belarus and Kazakhstan is personalism, developed by Barbara Geddes in her seminal classification of autocratic regimes. Geddes’s classification includes military, single-party and personalist regimes and is considered as one of the most important contributions to regime type studies (Liden, 2014). The term “personalist regime” refers to a regime type in which the source of power is the person of the leader who has consolidated power in his own hands. Personalist regimes do not rely on bureaucracies and institutions as much as other regimes described by Geddes. “Personalist rulers rely instead on informal and often quite unstable personal networks” (Geddes, 1999; 133).

Personalism, which, in my view, characterizes the regimes of both countries, should not be confused with the cult of personality that relies on idealized the image of a leader. **The cult of personality is much less present in Belarus, than in Kazakhstan**, where in 2010 the

parliament granted president Nazarbayev the official title of “Elbasy”, the leader of the nation. More recently, in 2016, the Kazakhstani parliament passed a declaration that postulated renaming the country’s capital after Nazarbayev (The Guardian, 2016).

Although independent Kazakhstan, unlike Belarus, did not have any other ruler than the country’s current president, the struggle for consolidation of power of the leaders did have some similarities. In the mid-90s, both Nazarbayev and Lukashenko were opposed by parliaments and both leaders used referendums to change the constitution to gain assure powers for themselves. Over time, parliaments of both countries have been subordinated to the will of the leaders. The parliament of Kazakhstan has become dominated by Nur Otan, a power party established and headed by president Nazarbayev. The parliament now mostly serves legitimizing purposes for the existing regime (Del Sordi, 2016).

In Belarus, political parties have mostly been absent from the parliament. Most MPs are “independent” candidates and many of them are ex-employees of the government administration at many of them are at the end of their political career (Leukavets, 2017). Regardless of these differences, both parliaments are utterly under the control of the presidents and none of the two regimes needs to worry about a genuine challenge to their power coming from their parliaments.

In general, the regimes are similar according to several typologies of authoritarian regimes, most importantly neopatrimonialism and personalism. The absence of significant internal challenge to their power from political opposition and strong control over different branches of government due to purposeful underdevelopment of political institutions except for the presidency have created a system that has proven durable over many years.

Lastly, although comparison of economies of the two countries is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that **availability of huge sources of income not directly connected to economic activity of the population of the country is one of the major enablers of the longevity of both regimes**. For Kazakhstan, it is, of course, the country’s vast resources, mostly oil. For the Belarusian regime, economic aid from Russia has been the crucial source of income for the regime.

Legitimacy

In order better to understand the regimes in Belarus and Kazakhstan, let us now look at how the two governments try to claim legitimacy for their rule. By doing so we will see what is the ruling elites' perceived basis of their support among the population and how the elites are trying to make their power more secure.

Clearly, since the regimes that I am discussing here are authoritarian, they depend on the

will and approval of the population to a lesser extent than the governments in democratic countries. It does not mean, however, that these governments do not care about making their rule legitimate. There are several reasons for that.

First of all, the survival of a regime that is not supported by at least minor part of the population requires enormous level of coercion and resources and such a regime should not be expected to be durable. Secondly, in the modern international system, any regime must gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international community or else it will be excluded from international cooperation and/or in more extreme cases, pressured out of existence.

Different regimes put different claims for legitimacy. Of course, there are many ways in which a regime can claim legitimacy and no regime relies only on one way or one strategy. However, certain legitimating strategies are usually emphasized more than others.

Paul Brooker, for example, distinguishes several ways in which dictatorships usually claim legitimacy. He mentions electoral legitimacy, ideological legitimacy, claiming a legal right to rule or appealing to national interest or patriotism (Brooker, 2013).

Electoral legitimacy is probably the most common form that is nowadays used in overwhelming majority of countries. Even the totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany that were much less dependent on electoral support than modern, post-Soviet, soft authoritarian regimes, held elections to claim popular support and to legitimize their rule. Ruling regimes in both Belarus and Kazakhstan regularly hold elections which are not recognized internationally as free and fair but they mobilize public support and create electoral legitimacy for the existing regimes.

Moreover, both Lukashenko and Nazarbayev have used referendums to make important changes in the existing political systems of their countries. Namely, to change the constitutions of the country, give additional powers to the presidency and to abolish term limits for the president. Those referendums too, were held in violation of international democratic standards but nonetheless they served the purpose of gaining electoral legitimacy for the rulers and their decisions.

The regimes in Belarus and Kazakhstan have both sought legal rights to rule as well. As I already mentioned, both presidents changed existing constitutions to legally increase their power vis-à-vis other political actors and to abolish presidential term limits.

Both regimes were able to capitalize on high economic growth rates from 2000 to 2008, until the global financial crisis. This allowed them to provide the citizens with some features of a welfare state and it undoubtedly enhanced legitimacy of the ruling regimes.

However, in recent years economic growth in both countries has slowed down and both regimes had to face mass protests.

In 2016, people took to the streets in several cities in Kazakhstan to protest against the proposed land reform. Several experts claimed that the protests were to a considerable extent fueled by economic downturn caused by low oil prices, currency devaluation and reduction of foreign direct investments (see, for example, Pannier, 2016 and Stronski, 2016).

In 2017, street protests took place in several Belarusian cities against the “anti-parasite decree”. These processes, characteristic of the countries where mass protests and active dissent are not allowed by the governments, point to the fact that economic performance has become a liability, rather than a source of legitimacy for both regimes. Therefore, in near future, unless economic situation improves significantly, the regimes won’t be able to count on economic performance to claim legitimacy.

Let us now turn to those claims for legitimacy that are not shared by the two countries. In Belarus the question of competing nationalisms or competing national projects continues to be relevant. This process was explained by Nelly Bekus as a struggle over the country’s identity between official and alternative “Belarusianness” (Bekus, 2010). The national idea supported by the state puts victory and sacrifice in the WWII at the center of the foundational myth of the nation while the nationalist opposition perceives Belarusian People’s Republic and restoration of independence from the Soviet Union as crucial events of the history of the nation. The nationalist opposition emphasizes the importance of revival of ethno-cultural elements such as Belarusian language and culture as an important part of national consolidation (Burkhardt, 2016). According to Burkhardt, the state has recently been able to “supplement its claims to legitimacy by ethno-cultural elements” previously championed by opposition actors (ibid). Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Belarusian regime has to some extent changed attitude towards the Belarusian language, national history and some of the national symbols (Rudkouski, 2017). The new strategy sometimes labelled “soft Belarusianisation” might be part of the process that Burkhardt described. The ruling regime may be trying to strengthen its legitimacy by incorporating symbols and some of the opposition’s views on Belarusian nation into the official discourse.

Lastly, the ruling regime in Kazakhstan has viewed active foreign policy as a source of both external and internal legitimacy. Over the last twenty years, the Kazakhstani leadership has joined lots of international organizations. On the other hand, Nazarbayev has been actively involved in creating new organizations such as CIS and Eurasian Union, in the post-Soviet space. Kazakhstani leader was also very active in foreign visits; Kazakhstan was active in

international forums like General Assembly and agencies of the UN and the country hosted more embassies than all of its Central Asian neighbours. Such proactive policy serves as a legitimization strategy with both internal (oriented toward the Kazakhstani population) and external (toward the international community) dimension (Schatz, 2006).

Relations with the outside world have not had the same significance for Belarus. Because of high degree of economic and political dependence on Russia, relations with the West have been viewed by the regime in context of Belarus' dealings with its eastern neighbour. Attempts at improving relations with the West have often been aimed at improving bargaining position vis-à-vis Russia (Balmaceda, 2012). Another significant factor in this regard is that Kazakhstan has never faced such pressure and such degree of isolation from the West as Belarus has. Therefore, establishing international contacts and arranging foreign visits has been much harder for Belarusian government. However, still not being part of the Council of Europe because of the retainment of capital punishment points to the fact that active engagement in international organizations has not been as high priority for Belarus as it has been for Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, since the annexation of Crimea, Belarusian regime has started to seek international importance for the country by hosting negotiations over the Russia – Ukraine conflict, and declaration to send peacekeepers to the east of Ukraine. This strategy, like the strategy of active external engagement in Kazakhstan, might serve legitimating purposes for Belarusian regime both externally and internally.

Engagement of the EU with Belarus and Kazakhstan

In the final part of the paper let us discuss how the EU has tried to respond to authoritarianism in Belarus and Kazakhstan and whether they have attempted to make authoritarian rule costly for the two regimes.

The differences between the approaches of the EU towards Belarus and Kazakhstan are evident. **Though Kazakhstan is not less but rather more authoritarian than Belarus, it has never faced similar pressure from the EU as the one applied to Lukashenka's regime.** For years, Lukashenka's regime has been under sanctions including travel bans for the president and many officials. Lukashenka's visit to Italy in 2016 was his first official visit to an EU country since 2009.

In general, EU's attempts at transforming the Belarusian regime can be divided into two approaches of "democracy promotion" and "functional cooperation." The former approach was actively used during the first half of 2000s and was based on negative conditionality and "naming and shaming", while the latter was favoured in the second half of 2000s and

involved “depolitization” and enhancement of low-level contacts with the emphasis on questions of “low politics.” The EU enlargement in 2004, which brought Belarus’ neighbouring countries to the EU, has facilitated this change (Bosse, 2012).

There has been some EU involvement aimed at transforming or softening the regime in Kazakhstan as well. Namely, “assistance in development of civil society and support for public debate has had a positive impact” (Zhovtis, 2007). However, the EU has been much less active in Kazakhstan than in Belarus in its attempts at regime transformation.

There are several explanations for this. First of all, the EU is understandably more active in its neighbourhood. The EU can influence the neighbouring countries more than distant ones. Establishment of such policy instruments such as the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership are good illustrations.

Secondly, since Belarus has become a direct neighbour of the EU, some of Belarus’ neighbouring countries, now EU members, have started to take active part in shaping the EU’s policy towards Belarus. Poland, for example, has been actively supporting Belarusian civil society since about 2006. In 2011-13, Poland became an active supporter of sanctions policy (Yelisayeu, 2017). Similarly, Lithuania has been active in supporting Belarusian civil society and “Vilnius has become a second home for Belarusian civil society organisations” (Potjomkina, Šukytė, 2017; 153).

Regardless of whether these countries are actively supporting sanctions or cooperation, it is no surprise that the countries that are most active towards Belarus are the ones with societal and cultural as well as historic ties with Belarus. No such ties unite any EU member state with Kazakhstan, not least because of geographical remoteness. Consequently, the EU’s ability to influence the ruling regime in Kazakhstan is lower.

The ties between Kazakhstan and the EU are mainly economic, mostly based on the EU’s importing oil and gas from the Central Asian country. The EU is Kazakhstan’s biggest trade partner. Moreover, the trade balance is hugely in Kazakhstan’s favour. The absence of ties, other than trade, decreases both ability and interest on the EU’s part to transform the governing regime in Kazakhstan.

As for the EU’s engagement with the regime in Belarus, it has not resulted in any meaningful transformation of the regime even though the stick-and-carrot method have been used over years. The reasons for the lack of success are, clearly, too complex to be reduced to simple explanations. However, if we focus on discussing external factors, Russian linkage with and leverage over Belarus stand out as the most remarkable reasons.

Taking into account that Russia supported Belarusian regime in mid 90s in crucial period of consolidation of power and provided the regime with subsidies ever since, it is natural that the EU is not in position to push the regime to democratization. As Way puts it, Belarus is a the clearest example of Russia's promotion of authoritarianism by supporting Lukashenko's regime politically and financially since mid-90s. "Given the country's initially pluralist trajectory and proximity to Europe, it is plausible that Belarus would have been more democratic without Russian support" (Way, 2015; 697).

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined some characteristics of Kazakhstani and Belarusian regimes, similarities and differences of their claims for legitimacy and the reasons for durability of the regimes. The regimes share some important characteristics of personalism, neo-patrimonialism. There are also some important differences like the degree of the cult of personality.

The regimes have actively used electoral and legal claims for legitimacy. Additionally, active foreign policy and engagement in international and regional organizations has been an important source of legitimacy for Nazarbayev's regime. The ruling regime in Belarus changed national symbols, underlining legitimacy based rather on sovietism than nationalist narratives.

Both regimes have managed to establish strong control over internal political sphere and institutions of their countries. As for the external dimension, **attempts at democratization by the EU have been almost absent in Kazakhstan and largely unsuccessful in Belarus.** Among other reasons, Russian linkage with Belarus has reduced the ability of the EU to influence the Belarusian regime. Now the West seems to be looking for other leverages.

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