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# Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes in Times of Political Crises

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## **Executive summary**

Our knowledge about authoritarian regimes is limited to their normal functioning modes. So far there has been no systematic study conducted on how authoritarian regimes function in times of political crises. Asking this question is important since the picture we have during normal times may be dramatically altered in the context of political crisis. This paper outlines some of the main power preservation strategies of post-Soviet non-democratic leaders and illustrates how they may change during particular types of political crises – power succession periods and mass public protests.

## **Introduction**

Existing knowledge of non-democratic regimes is mainly focused on normal functioning modes of authoritarian leaders. Many scholars discuss different power preservation strategies of non-democratic leaders and this knowledge is extremely important, but this does not provide us with an insight of what happens when the political crisis takes place. In times of crises the emphasis on different power preservation strategies and the intensity of their use may change substantially.

Political actors in the democratic world draw their assumptions about the nature of authoritarian regimes based on the existing knowledge, but one could question whether these observations are enough to understand how authoritarian regimes behave or are likely to behave when facing different types of challenges. This paper begins to fill a gap in the existing knowledge by emphasizing the importance of studying the conduct of authoritarian leaders in times of crises, when their power is challenged by the political opposition, inner elite members or the population of the country. This knowledge will be useful to political actors in the democratic world in order to gain a deeper understanding of authoritarian states' functioning logic of when facing crises. This way, key political stakeholders such as Western leaders and institutions, as well as civil society and media representatives could get an insight into possible actions of non-democratic leaders in relation to different actors who might challenge stability of their regimes and understand the likelihood that they might resort to the use of physical force against their opponents.

In order to acquire knowledge on how post-Soviet non-democratic leaders respond to different types of political crises, firstly it was necessary to identify those challenges that leaders of these countries had to face after gaining independence. Secondly, existing research on individual post-Soviet leaders' responses to political challenges were studied systematically. The added value of this approach is that after identifying of all relevant studies it links their findings to each other with the aim to create a broader overview. Based on this, it is possible to identify a typology of power preservation strategies and link specific reactions to specific types of crises.

## **Key research findings**

The table below outlines the main political challenges that post-Communist authoritarian leaders had to face in the period of 1995-2016. Two particularly important instances when authoritarian leaders are likely to face crises situations are the periods of power succession and

mass public protests. Both of these occurrences pose a direct challenge to the stability of the political regime. In the case of mass public protests the main threat is stemming from the political opposition and overall population of the country, while in times of power transfer from one leader to another, heads of state have to be aware of possible defections of the influential members of the political elite.

Numerous challenges to post-Soviet political regimes, as illustrated by this table, show that these countries are facing potential political instability quite frequently. This evidence highlights that gaining an understanding of these dynamics is highly significant for democratic forces that may be affected by these events and might need to develop strategies in order to respond to these instabilities.

*Table 1. Political crises taking place in post-Soviet states in the period of 1995-2016*

<b>Regime Type</b>	<b>Country, Year</b>	<b>Crises</b>	<b>Regime Change</b>
<b>Competitive authoritarianism</b>	Armenia (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass public protests – April 2002;</li> <li>2. Mass public protests – February-March 2003;</li> <li>3. Mass public protests – late March-mid-April 2004;</li> <li>4. Succession crisis – February 2008;</li> <li>5. Mass public protests – February-March 2008;</li> <li>6. Mass public protests – mid-February 2011;</li> <li>7. Mass public protests – November 2014-March 2015;</li> <li>8. Mass public protests – End of July 2016</li> </ol>	<b>No regime change</b>
	Georgia (1995-2003)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass public protests – November 2003;</li> <li>2. Succession crisis – November 2004;</li> <li>3. Mass public protests – early April-late May 2009</li> </ol>	<b>Yes Yes No regime change</b>
	Russia (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass public protests – first quarter of 1997;</li> <li>2. Succession crisis – December 1999;</li> <li>3. Mass public protests – January 2005;</li> <li>4. Succession crisis – March 2008;</li> <li>5. Mass public protests – December 2011-June 2012</li> </ol>	<b>No regime change</b>
<b>Hegemonic authoritarianism</b>	Azerbaijan (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Succession crisis – October 2003;</li> <li>2. Mass public protests – October 2003;</li> <li>3. Mass public protests November-December 2005;</li> <li>4. State budget crisis – 2013-2014</li> </ol>	<b>No Regime Change</b>
	Belarus (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. State budget crisis – 2008-2012;</li> <li>2. Mass public protests – April-May 1996;</li> </ol>	<b>No regime change</b>

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Mass public protests – October 1999-March 2000;</li> <li>4. Mass public protests – early October 2003;</li> <li>5. Mass public protests – December 2011</li> </ol>	
	Kazakhstan (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass public protests – October 1997</li> <li>2. Mass public protests – May-October 2011</li> </ol>	<b>No regime change</b>
	Tajikistan (1995-)	-	<b>No regime change</b>
	Uzbekistan (1995-)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass public protests – mid-May 2005;</li> <li>2. Succession crisis – September 2016</li> </ol>	<b>No regime change</b>

### **Toolbox of authoritarian leaders**

The information gathered here documents that there are a wide variety of tools at the disposal of authoritarian leaders aimed at the prolongation of their rule. Within the group of these tools, three main categories of power preservation strategies can be outlined:

**1. Political repression** - The goal of repression is to discourage public demands and prevent challenges to the regime. The main targets of repression are individuals, groups of individuals or organizations that are able to challenge the leadership, such as influential opposition leaders, disobedient elite members, investigative journalists, free media outlets, critical civil society organizations etc.

**2. Legitimation** – aims to show to the members of the political elite, as well as population that the leadership of the country is serving their interests.<sup>1</sup> The main targets of legitimation strategy are citizens and members of the political elite, whose obedience is important for the prevention of mass protests, demonstrations and elite defections.

**3. Co-optation** – aims to provide political and material privileges to strategically important actors so that they are not interested in using their influence against the leadership.<sup>2</sup> Such actors may be representatives of political, military and business elites, as well as broader groups of politically active citizens.

### **Logic of applying power preservation strategies**

After identifying political crises that post-Soviet leaders had to face and types of responses used by authoritarian leaders to cope with those crises, it is possible to argue that different strategies are used for facing different types of political challenges. Specific power preservation strategies and their target groups are identified based on the question of who is posing the biggest

<sup>1</sup> Anna Matveeva, “Legitimizing Central Asian Authoritarianism: Political Manipulation and Symbolic Power”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, September 2009, p. 1097

<sup>2</sup> Scott Radnitz, “Oil in the family: managing presidential succession in Azerbaijan”, *Democratization*, Vol. 19, No. 1, February 2012, p. 61

challenge to the regime. As it was shown by the examples of power transfer periods in Russia from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin in 1999 and in Azerbaijan from Heydar to Ilham Aliyev in 2003, the main question facing leaders was whether the most influential members of the political elite would support successors proposed by them. In order to prevent elite defections and power struggles, the leadership used a particular form of co-optation strategy – provision of guarantees to the elite members that they would be able to preserve previous privileges under the new leadership.

In times of mass public protests, the main source of threat is public and members of the political opposition, therefore, the leadership is using strategies aimed at decreasing threats of mass discontent. Numerous post-Soviet examples, such as Armenia in February-March 2003 and in March-April 2004; Russia in December 2011 - June 2012; Uzbekistan in May 2005; Kazakhstan in May-October 2011, show that the main strategy used in times of mass public protests is state repression directed against protest participants. However, since the use of political repression has a negative effect on the image of the government, evidence indicates that this is used in combination with legitimation strategy in order to boost popularity of the leadership. Legitimation strategy is targeted at the broader population with an emphasis on political and economic stability that their country has achieved under the current government. This strategy aims to illustrate to the population that those political and economic achievements might be endangered in case of massive public discontent and political instability.

### **Policy implications**

- Non-democratic regimes have to face numerous political crises, however the information presented here indicates that in most cases these do not lead to the regime change. Therefore, the presence of political crises in authoritarian countries should not be understood by the leadership of democratic states and other interested stakeholders as the beginning of the end of these regimes. With the wide variety of tools at the disposal of authoritarian regimes, they are quite well equipped to deal with political crises.
- As illustrated by this paper, since obtaining independence, post-Soviet countries have faced numerous political challenges. Each of these political crises poses a risk of turning into a major stability challenge for the whole region, with wider implications for the security of Western countries. In this context this paper aims to familiarize international governmental organizations with security agendas, such as the EU, NATO and OSCE with domestic political factors which might lead to major political instabilities in the former Soviet Union countries. Based on a good understanding of challenges to the authoritarian stability and the logic of leaders' strategy used for power preservation, the above mentioned organizations may be better equipped for developing their responses to potential security challenges in the region.
- A key argument of this policy brief is that leaders of democratic countries and major international organizations should be well-aware of strategies that are in the arsenal of authoritarian leaders when facing different types of political crises. It is equally important to have a certain understanding of the circumstances under which non-democratic leaders are most likely to resort to the use of physical force against their opponents. This could play a central role in the prevention of such occurrences by

identifying the main vulnerable groups which might be the main potential targets of state repression in times of political crises. These findings might be especially helpful for non-governmental organizations working on human rights issues, particularly those preventing and/or monitoring human rights violations.