

Authoritarian Leadership in the Post-Communist World

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Abstract: A quarter-century after the collapse of the USSR, authoritarian politics dominates seven of the fifteen successor states. Placing the post-communist authoritarian experience in the broader frame of nondemocratic governance, this essay explores the origins and operation of personalist rule in the region; the relationship between time and power; and the role of Soviet legacies in shaping the agenda and tools of leadership. It also examines the efforts of post-communist authoritarians to enhance personal and regime legitimacy by claiming to rule beyond politics. Within the post-communist world, the essay finds significant variation among authoritarian leaders in their approaches to personnel policy and to the use of policies, symbols, and narratives to address the ethnic and religious awakening spawned by the collapse of Soviet rule. The essay concludes with a brief assessment of the trajectories of post-communist authoritarian leadership.

... nothing is harder to manage, more risky in the undertaking, or more doubtful of success than to set up as the introducer of a new order.
– Machiavelli

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New countries create unique challenges and opportunities for political leadership. Founding leaders help to establish the rules of the political game and often acquire a personal authority that inspires deference, or even reverence. However, they also face the daunting tasks of building or consolidating state and nation and, in many cases, of redefining relations with an imperial power. In addition to the challenges present in all fledgling states, leaders of new post-communist countries had to confront the peculiar legacies of the Soviet era, which included a command economy, one-party rule, and a single, all-embracing ideology that removed religion from public life. It is no wonder that instead of systemic change, which characterized the transformational leadership of Mikhail

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Gorbachev, most post-Soviet leaders have focused on systemic stabilization.¹ It is also unsurprising that, with their immature political institutions and uncertain identities, post-communist states have been a breeding ground for authoritarian leaders.² Despite the hopes of many in the West for a democratic transition throughout the post-communist world, authoritarian presidents have governed in one-third of the almost thirty post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Many continue to do so today.

Scholars have offered compelling structural explanations of why some post-communist countries have pursued authoritarian rather than democratic paths,³ and new works appear regularly on individual authoritarian leaders in the region, especially Vladimir Putin. However, as Timothy Colton has observed, “we have not learned nearly enough” about the nature and impact of leadership in the post-communist world.⁴ This comment applies with particular force to the region’s authoritarian countries, where the limited accountability of rulers allows them to shape political developments in ways that would be unimaginable in democratic regimes. In Turkmenistan, for example, the first leader of the post-communist era, Saparmurat Niyazov, plunged his country into diplomatic isolation while creating a cult of personality of epic proportions.

A quarter-century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this essay examines the record of rule in seven states in order to identify and explain patterns of authoritarian leadership in the post-communist world and to locate the post-communist experience in the broader landscape of nondemocratic governance. Although several countries in the region, including Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, have flirted briefly with authoritarian rule, the main focus here is on the post-communist states that have maintained an au-

thoritarian regime for a decade or longer. These include Belarus and Russia, which are predominantly Slavic and Orthodox countries, and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, states with majority Muslim and Turkic or Iranian populations (see Table 1).

Some may object that the concept of “authoritarian leadership” is an oxymoron. Because leadership is most frequently associated with the pursuit of laudable goals by fair-minded means, there is a reluctance to apply the term to the exercise of power by authoritarian rulers. Yet the most essential element of leadership – the power to persuade – is found in authoritarian as well as democratic leaders. As Sergei Guriev and Daniel Triesman recently argued, authoritarian rulers today prefer to govern with a velvet fist.⁵ Thus, in authoritarian regimes, getting followers to go in the direction the leader wants requires more than applying force, rigging elections, and controlling the media.⁶ It also requires the exercise of leadership in the selection of personnel, the adoption of public policies, the cultivation of a compelling personal image, and the construction and manipulation of national symbols, rituals, and narratives. These universal functions of political leadership are at the center of the analysis below.

It is tempting to regard post-communist authoritarian leadership as a legacy of the Soviet era, and yet in two fundamental ways it represents a sharp break with the past. Except for the period of high Stalinism, the Soviet system of government was an oligarchy, in which the power of the general secretary was constrained by the other members of the ruling elite and the rules and conventions of the Communist Party. Post-communist presidents, on the other hand, govern in personalist regimes where the leaders have acquired “so much power that they can no longer be credibly threatened by their allies.”⁷

Table 1
Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist States

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Country	Polity IV Score* (2014)	Leader	Period as Leader of Territory		Years in Office+	Age+
			Soviet Era	Post-Soviet Era		
Azerbaijan	-7	Heidar Aliev	1969 – 1982	1993 – 2003	23	Deceased
		Ilham Aliev		2003 – Present	12	54
Belarus	-7	Alexander Lukashenka		1994 – Present	21	61
Kazakhstan	-6	Nursultan Nazarbaev	1989 – 1991	1992 – Present	26	75
Russia	4	Vladimir Putin		2000 – Present	16#	63
Tajikistan	-3	Emomali Rakhmon		1994 – Present	21	63
Turkmenistan	-8	Saparmurat Niyazov	1985 – 1991	1992 – 2006	31	Deceased
		Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov		2006 – Present	9	58
Uzbekistan	-9	Islam Karimov	1989 – 1991	1992 – Present	26	78

* Polity IV scores, which range from 10 (consolidated democracy) to -10 (hereditary monarchy), classify two of our countries (Russia and Tajikistan) as “anocracies,” which combine elements of democratic and authoritarian governance, and the remaining five as autocracies. The index from Freedom House considers all the countries under review to be “unfree,” with scores between 6 and 7, where 7 is the most unfree.

Although Putin left the presidency to serve as prime minister from 2008 to 2012, allowing his protégé, Dmitrii Medvedev, to assume the presidency, Putin remained the most important leader in the country in this period. One should also note that it was not until approximately 2003 that authoritarian rule was consolidated in Russia. It took Lukashenka, Nazarbaev, and Rakhmon two to four years to consolidate authoritarian rule.

+ As of March 1, 2016.

How does one explain these patterns of personalist over party rule, and what Milan Svoblik has called an “established autocracy” over a “contested autocracy”?⁸ One answer lies in the choice of institutions, specifically a semipresidential model of government that grants unusual power and prominence to an elected president. In order to reduce the role of the Communist Party and increase the efficiency and reform orientation of executive authority, presidencies were created in eleven of the fifteen republics on the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Within two years after the breakup of the USSR, all of the new states, except the three Baltic republics, had adopted constitutions that placed the presidency at the center of political life, which meant that this institution inherited

many of the functions, as well as some of the offices and personnel, of the old ruling communist parties. In effect, one now had the Soviet structure of government minus the ruling party, which placed the president above the other branches of government – parliament, courts, and council of ministers – like a republican monarch.

Not all countries under review succumbed immediately to authoritarian rule. Whereas leaders in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan tolerated organized and vocal opposition forces for only a few months after arriving in office, the Russian president remained accountable to parliament and people until approximately 2003. In the end, however, all leaders eliminated the primary sources of popular and elite opposition to their rule by expanding the for-

mal powers of the presidency; arresting, exiling, or intimidating critics; manipulating elections; and, with the exception of Belarus, creating a subservient party or parties that were instruments of electioneering and not governance. To paraphrase the Russian historian Kliuchevsky, as the office of the president swelled up – in terms of power and size – the liberal institutions of state grew lean. Although the substitution of a strong president for a collective party leadership does not lead inexorably to authoritarianism in the context of post-communist rule, it creates a favorable institutional climate for the consolidation of personalist rule. Compared to authoritarian regimes based on one-party rule or a military government, presidentialism makes oligarchy or other forms of “contested autocracy” a less likely outcome because of the symbolic majesty and extensive formal powers of the office of the president.

The legacy of republican-level politics in the USSR may also have contributed to the emergence of single-man, as opposed to oligarchic, rule in post-communist authoritarian regimes. We noted above that a collective leadership governed the country through most of Soviet history, yet one-man rule by a party chieftain was the norm in subnational politics in all but the Russian Republic. Although Moscow appointed republican leaders and established intricate checking mechanisms to ensure their loyalty, in the individual republics, these party first secretaries tended to dominate the political landscape. Thus, when the former Soviet republics became independent states in late 1991, there was no tradition of collective leadership in their capitals.

Whatever the role of legacies in preparing the ground for one-man rule, each leader employed a range of measures to ensure that he controlled his own political allies as well as the governed. As numerous writers on authoritarianism have pointed out, rebellions in the street – or in the voting

booth – are less likely to topple a repressive ruler than rebellions in the palace. To keep their political allies in line, authoritarians used both carrot and stick. In exchange for their fealty, political allies received important sinecures in the state apparatus and/or patronage for their lucrative and often illicit business activities;⁹ for their part, suspect members of the political or economic establishment were subject to prosecution or worse. It is easy to forget, however, that some ties binding political allies to their leaders go beyond calculations based on fear or greed. President Putin, for example, has surrounded himself with a team of officials and advisers whose loyalty rests in part on lengthy personal friendships or professional collaboration, or on traditions of deference developed in the security services.

Ties based on kinship or common geographic origin, which are especially prevalent in Central Asia and the Caucasus, may also bind members of the political elite to a ruler and discourage defection. In Tajikistan, President Rakhmon has recruited his inner circle from his home region, Kulob, while in Azerbaijan, officials with origins in Nakhichevan or Erevan form the president’s core support group.¹⁰ In Turkmenistan, President Niyazov employed a different, though equally effective, tactic, surrounding himself with political eunuchs: that is, officials who had no possibility of contending for power because they were foreigners or from minority ethnic groups.¹¹ Both the kinship and the political eunuch principles have informed the recruitment decisions of President Nazarbaev, whose inner circle was reportedly divided into two contending groups at the end of 2014, one led by his daughter, Dariga, and the other by a member of the Uighur minority, Kasim Masimov.¹² Such tactics minimize the chances of “allies’ rebellions” and serve as a reminder of the extraordinary diversity of leadership choic-

es on matters of patronage, even within a single region of the world.

The first post-communist authoritarians were unlikely candidates to lead new countries experiencing an ethnic and religious awakening. As traditional products of Soviet rule – four had been party first secretaries, two collective farm chairmen, and one a KGB officer – they clung to many of the political, economic, and cultural values of the communist era, including an aversion to ethnic nationalism and religious belief.¹³ Cast against type, they faced the difficult challenge of creating a new state identity and new state policies that could satisfy the surging nationalism of the titular people, while reassuring minority groups that they had a viable future in the country. Especially in the non-Slavic authoritarian regimes, like in Kazakhstan, where there was considerable intraethnic tension based on regional or tribal/clan loyalties, it was often necessary to move gingerly along two tracks at once: using ethnic nationalism to unite and appease the titular population, while trying to transcend, or at least contain, ethnic nationalism by pursuing a symbolic politics that could draw together all communities.¹⁴

Authoritarian leaders of the non-Slavic countries under review reached back to the period before the Russian conquest to discover historical figures and/or political communities that could be used as foundations for the modern state. Where the Tajik president Rahmon traced the origins of post-communist Tajikistan to the Samanid Empire, President Karimov sought a legitimating lineage in the fourteenth-century founder of the Timurid dynasty, Tamerlane. To bask in the reflected glory of these earlier leaders or communities, the presidents organized grand celebrations of these ideational cornerstones of the new state: 660 years for Tamerlane in 1995 and 1,100 years for the Samanid Empire in 1999.

For President Niyazov – known as the Turkmenbashi, or Father of the Turkmen – it was not enough to be a founding leader of a modern state with ancient roots. In Paul Theroux's words, Niyazov presented himself as "a sort of reincarnation of Oguz Khan [the legendary founder of the nation], just as powerful and wise, and to prove it he has named cities and hills and rivers and streets after himself."¹⁵ Leadership for Niyazov was in many ways a caricature of personalist rule, where the wellsprings of legitimacy flowed less from the distant past than from the nation's present fortune of living under the rule of the Turkmenbashi.¹⁶

Given the number of ethnic Russians in his country and a lengthy shared border with Russia, Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev has exhibited less enthusiasm for grounding his country's identity in distant historical symbols and events.¹⁷ Nazarbaev has sought personal and regime legitimacy more in current economic performance and his ambitious plans for the future than in connections to the Kazakh past. The symbols of this radiant future include the dramatic architecture of the new capital of Astana and the long-term strategic plans that stretch out to 2050. Even Nazarbaev, however, remains vulnerable to demands from his nationalist flank, demands that increased in intensity after President Putin remarked in 2014 that Kazakhstan had no state tradition and was part of the "Russian world" (*russkii mir*). In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, which raised the specter of Russian irredentism throughout the post-communist world, Nazarbaev was forced to respond by employing the backward-looking discourse of neighboring presidents. Acceding to the wishes of Kazakh nationalists, Nazarbaev announced that the country would celebrate in 2015 the 550th anniversary of the founding of the modern Kazakh state.¹⁸

Unlike in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where new states rejected much of the Rus-

Eugene
Huskey

sian and Soviet inheritance in order to indigenize their languages, toponyms, and histories, in Belarus and Russia, Lukashenka and Putin rehabilitated important parts of the Soviet heritage that had been rejected by earlier post-communist leaders in each country. In fact, nostalgia for the communist era became the centerpiece of Lukashenka's leadership.¹⁹ Where his predecessors in the early 1990s had highlighted the distinctiveness of Belarusian language and history – thereby claiming a national identity that differed from Russia's – Lukashenka came into office intent on restoring the dominant position of Russian language and culture in the country and the centrality of a civic identity that downplayed ethnic distinctions. Instead of attempting to tame and control ethnic nationalism, Lukashenka chose to suppress it.

Under Putin's leadership, Russia has experienced a crisis of identity that is more nuanced, and more consequential, than that in the imperial periphery. As Ronald Suny has argued, the struggle over national identity in Russia is less about relations between Russians and non-Russians within the country than about who is a Russian and where Russia's boundaries should lie. Writing on the eve of Putin's accession to power, Suny noted that Russians are "deeply divided over the question of what constitutes the Russian nation and state. Russians remain uncertain about their state's boundaries, where its border guards ought to patrol . . . and even its internal structure as an asymmetrical federation."²⁰ Where the Second Chechen War facilitated the rise of Putin and his consolidation of authoritarian rule, Putin's recent discourse on an expanded Russian identity and his military actions in Ukraine have deepened his hold on the country and made it more difficult to challenge state policies. The result is a paradox of leadership on identity politics: as Putin expands the concept of Russian-

ness to include persons living outside the country, he treats some of his critics living inside Russia as unwelcome members of the political community, claiming that they are fifth columnists in the service of foreign powers. A trademark of authoritarian leadership everywhere, this demonization of the *other* in the post-communist world targets enemies ranging from Islamists to human rights advocates.²¹

Post-communist authoritarians had to contend with religious as well as ethnic nationalist revivals at the breakup of the USSR. While maintaining the secular status of their states, post-communist authoritarian leaders have sought to channel religious observance into the quietism found in established religions. Achieving this goal has proved especially difficult for post-communist authoritarian presidents in Muslim-majority countries, in part because of the nonhierarchical character of Sunni Islam, the dominant branch of the faith in the region, and in part because the presidents insist on using state agencies to "manage" religions.²² Where the Moscow patriarchate exercises control over the vast majority of Orthodox believers in Belarus and Russia, there is no such authority figure for Muslims in Central Asia. Cynical efforts by Central Asian presidents, all of whom are essentially secular, to control the Islamic brand has only fed underground religious resistance. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, being a devout Muslim is enough to incur the suspicion, and in some cases the wrath, of the state.

Nowhere was the cynicism in leadership on religious matters more pronounced than in Uzbekistan. After winning the December 1991 election, Karimov took the oath of office on the Koran and made the hajj to Mecca, but shortly thereafter launched a campaign to eliminate independent Muslim organizations and subordinate imams to the state-run Muslim Directorate of Uzbekistan.²³ Given the high level of religio-

ity in Uzbekistan, President Karimov was understandably hesitant to follow the lead of neighboring leaders Emomali Rakhmon and Saparmurat Niyazov, who sought to temper Islam's influence in their societies by legitimizing alternative belief traditions. In the case of Rakhmon, it was Zoroastrianism, which recently celebrated its three-thousandth anniversary in Tajikistan. In Turkmenistan, it was Niyazov's magnum opus the *Rukhnama* ("book of the soul") that began to displace the Koran as the country's holiest book in the last years of Niyazov's rule. In a statement a few months before his death, the Turkmenbashi noted that "anyone who reads his book three times will become intelligent and understand nature, laws, and human values. And after that he will enter directly into heaven."²⁴

In Russia, the "symphonia" between ecclesiastical and civil authority in the Orthodox tradition has simplified President Putin's leadership on religious affairs. Although the Orthodox Church is not a monolith, and some of its elements have supported radical Russian nationalist ideas, the church hierarchy has signed on with alacrity to Putin's recent campaign to establish a Russian cultural identity that separates the country from the "decadence" of modern Western values on issues such as homosexuality and freedom of expression on religious themes. President Putin still struggles, however, to come to grips with the challenges posed by Islamic revivalism in a society where, by 2030, Muslims may represent as much as 20 percent of Russia's population. Even the country's deputy chief mufti recently warned that Putin's discourse about the "Russian world" had alienated many Muslim youth in Russia.²⁵

Among the many contextual differences between leadership in the democratic and authoritarian worlds, none are more important than the relationship between power and time. Where democratic lead-

ers hold office *pro tempore* – until the voters, party or parliamentary colleagues, or term limits turn them out – authoritarian rulers view death as the only insurmountable threat to their tenure. The result is a bias toward longevity in office. In the five post-Soviet democratic or hybrid regimes with strong presidencies, the average tenure of the leader has been a little less than six years;²⁶ in the seven post-Soviet authoritarian states, it has been sixteen-and-a-half years, and no authoritarian leader has served for less than nine years. In fact, in only two of the seven post-communist countries under review has an authoritarian leader left office. Azerbaijan's Heidar Aliiev transferred power to his son, Ilham, in 2003, less than two months before his death at age eighty, and Turkmenistan's Niyazov died in office in 2006 at the age of sixty-six, succeeded by the minister of health, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who was Niyazov's dentist. In both instances, the transitions occurred with minimal interelite turmoil, which is unusual by world standards. From 1945 to 2002, authoritarian rulers worldwide died in office or transferred power by constitutional means only one-third of the time; in the remaining cases, almost two-thirds of authoritarian leaders were removed by a military coup, 12 percent by a popular revolt, and 7 percent by assassination.²⁷ Given this background, authoritarian leadership in the post-communist world has exhibited remarkable continuity and stability.

If younger authoritarian rulers in the region may be contemplating another decade or longer in office, older rulers, such as Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov (born 1938) and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev (born 1940), recognize that they are approaching the end of their tenures. This declining time horizon, especially when paired with rumors of the ill-health of both men, alters the political calculations of the leader, establishment elites, and the opposition;

it also fuels speculation about likely successors, which can destabilize the regime. To this point, however, neither leader has been willing to identify a successor, in part because to do so would eliminate the advantage of open-ended rule and transform the president into a lame duck.²⁸

Authoritarian leaders in the post-communist world have reduced, but not eliminated altogether, the role of electoral cycles in structuring political time.²⁹ Through popular referendums or legislation adopted by quiescent parliaments, several authoritarian presidents in the region have extended the time between presidential elections, which changes the calculus of leaders and led and discourages an already weak opposition. On occasion, presidents in the region have altered electoral timing by calling early or snap elections that are designed to catch regime opponents off guard and avoid going to the nation when the health of the leader or the national economy might be in doubt. This desire to control the timing of elections suggests that although post-communist authoritarians possess numerous levers of influence over electoral outcomes – from disqualifying opponents to falsifying results – they still squirm at the thought of the “institutionalized uncertainty” represented by elections.

One measure of the degree of competitiveness of elections in post-communist authoritarian regimes is the percentage of votes won by the ruler. As Table 2 illustrates, with the exception of the election of Vladimir Putin in March 2012, all authoritarian incumbents have received over 70 percent of the vote in their respective elections, and the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have garnered over 90 percent.³⁰ While the share of the results going to the incumbent authoritarians has remained relatively stable in recent years, there has been an overall decline in the results obtained by the second-place finisher, which may be a more accurate indication of

the competitiveness of the race – and the political system more broadly – because it captures the strength of the opposition. Unfortunately, that indicator has its own limitations as a measure of contestation. Post-communist authoritarian leaders have regularly recruited deferential opponents to run against them in order to create the illusion of competitiveness and to divide the opposition vote so that no single contender receives a substantial share of the results. Shattering this illusion in the 2011 presidential race in Kazakhstan was the public admission by one candidate that he had voted for President Nazarbaev.³¹

Like authoritarians everywhere, post-communist authoritarians insist on avoiding genuinely competitive elections out of fear as well as greed. In democratic societies, the loss of office reduces dramatically the visibility and influence of leaders; in authoritarian regimes it also endangers their property and their lives. Through trusted associates, post-communist authoritarians engage in acts of political repression and in self-enrichment on a grand scale, which leaves them vulnerable to prosecution upon leaving office. In these circumstances, the only way for an authoritarian to ensure his or her security on retirement is to relinquish power to another leader who is strong and loyal enough to maintain the impunity of the former ruler.

One option, already adopted in Azerbaijan, is family rule. Rumors of dynastic succession involving the sons, daughters, or sons-in-law of post-communist authoritarian leaders have circulated widely, but issues of personal character and timing complicate this form of transition. For a number of years, President Karimov’s older daughter, Gulnara, appeared to be on track to succeed her father, but after a series of scandals, including accusations that Gulnara had extorted over \$1 billion from foreign firms, the Uzbekistani leader placed this former diplomat/businesswoman/

Table 2

Presidential Election Results in Post-Communist Authoritarian Countries

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Country		Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4	Election 5	Election 6
Azerbaijan	Winner	60.9	98.8	77.6	75.4	87.3	84.5
	Second Place	33.8	1	11.8	15.1	2.8	5.5
Belarus	Winner	80.6*	77.4	82.6	79.7	83.5	
	Second Place	14.2	15.7	6	2.4	4.4	
Kazakhstan	Winner	81	91.2	95.6	97.8		
	Second Place	11.9	6.6	1.9	1.6		
Russia	Winner	54.4*	53.4	71.9	71.3	63.6	
	Second Place	40.7	29.5	13.8	18	17.2	
Tajikistan	Winner	59.5	97.6	79.3	83.9		
	Second Place	34.7	2.1	6.3	5		
Turkmenistan	Winner	99.5#	89.2	97.1			
	Second Place	0	3.2	1.1			
Uzbekistan	Winner	95.7	90.8	90.4			
	Second Place	4.3	3.3	3.1			

* The results here are from the second round of the election. In the other elections shown, the candidates won in the first round by receiving a majority of the votes. In the first round in Belarus in 1994, Lukashenka received 44.8 percent of the vote and his closest opponent 17.3 percent; in Russia in 1996, Yeltsin received 35.8 percent in the first round and his closest opponent 32.5.

Niyazov ran unopposed and was never subject to reelection. The remaining figures in these rows are for contests involving President Berdymukhamedov.

pop singer under house arrest in February 2014.³² President Lukashenka, for his part, has shown signs of preparing his preteen son, Nikolai (born 2004), to succeed him.³³ At recent military parades Nikolai has been dressed in the uniform of a marshal of the armed forces, and on a visit to Venezuela in 2012, President Lukashenka observed that Nikolai could carry the torch of Belarus-Venezuelan friendship in twenty to twenty-five years, at which point the president would be in his late seventies or early eighties.³⁴ Among current authoritarian leaders in the region, President Rahmon of Tajikistan has set out the clearest path for the perpetuation of family rule. For several years, he has been grooming his son, Rustam (born 1987), the head of the country's powerful anticorruption committee, as his successor.³⁵ In order to allow Rustam

to succeed him as early as the next presidential election, in 2020, President Rahmon proposed changes to the constitution that reduce the minimum age of the president from thirty-five to thirty – Rustam would be thirty-three in 2020. As expected, a popular referendum approved these changes overwhelmingly on May 22, 2016.

Whereas numerous factors, from political economy to political culture, help to create the conditions for authoritarianism's rise, it is the leader's instinct for self-preservation that perpetuates authoritarian rule and makes an orderly transition to constitutional governance so difficult. In fact, as the Russian case illustrates, the logic of self-preservation of the president, his family, and his political allies may also accelerate the transformation of a hybrid regime into an authoritarian or

der. To arrange protection for himself and his entourage, President Yeltsin and his advisers found a successor, Vladimir Putin, whose background in the security services and whose lack of an existing political base made him amenable to an agreement that secured the lives, properties, and even some of the jobs of the Yeltsin team. By selecting Putin as his prime minister and heir apparent, and then stepping down from office early in order to speed up the timing of the presidential election to benefit Putin, Yeltsin prevented the transfer of power to a different ruling group, which is one of the fundamental features of democratic rule.

Due to its limited accountability, leadership in authoritarian regimes is more idiosyncratic than in democracies. Even in the seven countries under study here, one finds an unusual range of leadership styles, from the supernatural weirdness of the Turkmenbashi to the business-like pragmatism of Nazarbaev. There is also significant variation in the use of force. While most of the presidents have favored an economy of violence, Islam Karimov has shown less hesitation in killing his enemies: witness the massive loss of life in the Andijon revolt of 2005. All of the authoritarian leaders in the region, however, share a desire to present themselves as governing above traditional politics. Although they retain elections, parties, and parliaments because they are universally recognized features of a modern state, post-communist authoritarians are constantly searching for discursive and institutional innovations that will illustrate not just the legitimacy but the superiority and exceptionalism of their system of governance. Perhaps in no other region of the world are authoritarians as conscious of their own image and that of their regime. An example of this sensitivity to public perception is *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, a three-hour live question-and-answer television show with the

Russian president that purportedly allows unmediated contact between the leader and the people.³⁶

Arguing that existing intermediary institutions, such as NGOs, are unrepresentative of society, Putin and other authoritarian leaders in the region have created their own official substitutes. These range from youth groups like *Nashi* (“ours”) to the appointed State Council and Public Chambers, which compete with traditional elected assemblies, and the All-Russian Popular Front, a new pro-Putin protoparty masquerading as an inclusive, grassroots national movement.³⁷ In their Rousseauist-like antipathy toward the idea of partial interests, authoritarians construct institutions that claim to represent, like the presidents themselves, the interests of society as a whole.

Accompanying these institutional “innovations” is a rhetoric of rule that emphasizes the special knowledge wielded by the leader, whether it emanates from a transcendent vision, as was the case with Niyazov, or technocratic expertise, in the case of rulers like Lukashenka, Nazarbaev, and Putin.³⁸ This rhetoric is grounded in ruling ideologies that challenge the assumptions of Western democratic thought and provide cover to authoritarian rule.³⁹ “Sovereign democracy,” Russia’s semiofficial ideology, insists that the independence and interests of the state must always prevail, and procedural democracy as practiced in the West is an insufficient guarantee of these values. The architect of sovereign democracy, Vladimir Surkov, holds that “the nation has not given its currently living generations the right to terminate its history,” which is another way of saying that presidential leadership bears the responsibility for protecting the country from the mistakes of its people.⁴⁰ As Martha Olcott argues, this deep-seated suspicion of the populace is evident in Nazarbaev’s view that “as Asians, Kazakhs

are not disposed by history or culture to be democratic and . . . popular rule could empower nationalist demagogues, secessionists, communists or Islamic radicals and put the future of the nation – not to mention economic reform – at risk.”⁴¹

Governing above politics also means avoiding accountability for policy failures. Projecting an image of invincibility while shirking responsibility for corruption, incompetence, and poor economic performance has been raised to an art form in the post-communist world. Expressions found in the lexicon of democratic politics, like “taking personal responsibility for a problem” or “the buck stops here,” are alien to the leadership style of post-communist authoritarians. Continuing a tradition that began in the Soviet era, authoritarian rulers in the post-communist world engage in blame-shifting, often through ritualized humiliation of subordinates on television, as a means of deflecting public criticism of their leadership.⁴² Facilitating this practice is the semipresidential form of government found in all of the states under review except Turkmenistan. By formally separating the president from the council of ministers that oversees the budget and economic and social affairs, semipresidentialism offers up the prime minister as a convenient scapegoat for policy failures.

From our vantage point a generation into the post-communist era, it may be worth returning to a question on leadership trajectories posed by Archie Brown in the late Brezhnev period of Soviet politics.⁴³ Do post-communist authoritarian leaders, like their Soviet predecessors, strengthen their hold on power as they age in office? The evidence is compelling that post-communist authoritarian leaders govern with fewer constraints the longer their tenure. Not every leader, of course, accumulates power to the same degree or at the same pace – on both scores, Karimov and Niyazov were

at the top of the charts. However, the control of post-communist authoritarian leaders over their populations and their political allies has grown steadily over time.⁴⁴ An obvious corollary of this finding is that authoritarian leaders are at their most vulnerable in the early years of power: witness the toppling of the fledgling authoritarian regimes in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine in 2010 and 2013.

An even more difficult and weighty question is whether the successors to current rulers will continue to steer their countries along an authoritarian path. The recent decline in energy revenues, on which many of the region’s economies depend, as well as the growing attraction of radical religious movements for post-communist youth may lead to governing crises in one or more of our countries under review. It is far from clear, however, that such crises would provide an opening for meaningful political opposition. As Barbara Geddes and colleagues found in their study of authoritarianism worldwide, the very structure of rule in post-communist authoritarian regimes may impede liberalization: transitions to democracy from personalist regimes are much rarer than those from one-party or military governments.⁴⁵ Moreover, the deepening regional integration and mutual learning of post-communist authoritarian regimes on matters of security, law enforcement, and economics are helping to inoculate most of the states against internal and external pressures for reform. Given the age and health of some of the region’s authoritarians, we may not have long to wait to acquire additional evidence on the trajectories of leadership in post-communist regimes.

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- ¹ For a discussion of the concept of transformational leadership, see Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), chap. 4.
 - ² New states give birth to 36 percent of "authoritarian spells" worldwide, where a spell is an uninterrupted period of authoritarian rule in a single country. Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.
 - ³ See, for example, M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
 - ⁴ Timothy J. Colton, "Political Leadership after Communism," *Demokratizatsiya* 20 (2) (Spring 2012): 65.
 - ⁵ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Triesman, "The New Dictators Rule with a Velvet Fist," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2015.
 - ⁶ W. H. Cowley, "Three Distinctions in the Study of Leaders," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 23 (July–September 1928): 145, cited in Glenn D. Paige, *The Scientific Study of Political Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 74.
 - ⁷ Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 6.
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*
 - ⁹ As Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy explain, "Participants in the system are not bought off in the classic sense of that term. They are compromised; they are made vulnerable to threats. . . . Loyalty is ensured through blackmail." Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2013), 215.
 - ¹⁰ Farid Guliyev, "Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization," *Demokratizatsiya* 13 (3) (2005): 402–405.
 - ¹¹ Sebastien Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan: Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), 73–76. According to Peyrouse, because Niyazov "had developed a pathological distrust toward his whole entourage, especially the Turkmen, [the Presidential Guard] was composed primarily of Russians, Turks, Arabs, and Caucasians." *Ibid.*, 76.
 - ¹² "Rakhat Aliev: deianie Nazarbaeva kvalifitsirovat' mozhno tol'ko kak prestuplenie i predatel'stvo kazakhskogo naroda," Svobodakz.net, October 31, 2014, <http://www.svobodakz.net/soprot/268-rahata-aliiev-deyaniya-nazarbaeva-kvalificirovat-mozhno-tolko-kak-prestuplenie-i-predatelstvo-kazakhskogo-naroda.html>; and Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Kazakh Neopatriarchal Regime: Balancing Uncertainties among the 'Family,' Oligarchs, and Technocrats," *Demokratizatsiya* 20 (4) (Fall 2012): 359.
 - ¹³ The one exception to this pattern may be Vladimir Putin, whose expressions of Orthodox piety may be more than a political tactic.
 - ¹⁴ Identity divisions in post-communist states rarely ran neatly along ethnic lines. In Kazakhstan, many Russified, urban, and secular Kazakhs had more in common with ethnic Russians in the republic than with their more religious, Kazakh-speaking kin from the countryside. Cengiz Surucu, "Modernity, Nationalism, Resistance: Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 21 (4) (2002): 385–402.
 - ¹⁵ Paul Theroux, *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 107; and Michael Denison, "The Art of the Impossible: Political Symbolism, and the Creation of National Identity and Collective Memory in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (7) (September 2009): 1167–1187.
 - ¹⁶ Under Niyazov's successor, Berdymukhamedov, Turkmenistan shed some of the symbolic excesses of the Turkmenbashi era. Abel Polese and Slavomir Horak, "A Tale of Two Presi-

dents: Personality Cult and Symbolic Nation-Building in Turkmenistan,” *Nationalities Papers* 43 (3) (2015): 457–478; and Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan*, 108–131. Eugene Huskey

- ¹⁷ The exception is the celebration of the December 1986 uprising in Almaty, then the capital of Kazakhstan, when crowds protested the appointment of an ethnic Russian from outside Kazakhstan to lead the republic.
- ¹⁸ Ekaterina Kravets, “Nazarbaev otvetil Putinu, ob’iaviv o 550-letii gosudarstvennosti Kazakhstana,” *Birzhevoi lider*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.profi-forex.org/novosti-mira/novosti-sng/kazakhstan/entry1008231993.html>.
- ¹⁹ Steven M. Eke and Taras Kuzio, “Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (3) (2000): 526.
- ²⁰ Ronald Grigor Suny, “Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” *International Security* 24 (3) (Winter 1999/2000): 148.
- ²¹ Henry E. Hale, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” *World Politics* 58 (1) (October 2005): 147.
- ²² Only Azerbaijan among the region’s Muslim-majority countries has a predominantly Shi’a population.
- ²³ Shireen Hunter, “Islam and Politics in Central Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313.
- ²⁴ “Niyazov po dogovorennosti s Allakham poshlet v rai vsekh turkmen, prochitavshikh ego Rukhnamy tri raza,” *Newsru.com*, March 20, 2006, <http://www.newsru.com/world/20mar2006/rukhnama.html>.
- ²⁵ Igor Gashkov, “Musul’mane khotiat drugoi russkii mir,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 18, 2015, http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-03-18/3_musulmane.html.
- ²⁶ This excludes the parliamentary republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.
- ²⁷ Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 41; and Milan W. Svoblik, “Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (2) (April 2009): 478. Unlike in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, the military stays in the barracks at moments of crisis in the post-communist world.
- ²⁸ Hale, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” 135.
- ²⁹ The one exception was Turkmenistan’s Niyazov, who became president for life at the end of 1990s.
- ³⁰ In the case of the initial post-communist presidential elections in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, and the first two elections in Russia, authoritarian rule had not yet been consolidated and so the winners were not authoritarian incumbents.
- ³¹ Viktor Khrapounov, *Nazarbaev: votre ami le dictateur* (Paris: Editions du Moment, 2013), 206.
- ³² Joanna Lillis, “Uzbekistan: Telecoms Firms Paid Gulnara up to \$1 Billion in Backhanders—Watchdog,” *Eurasianet.org*, March 23, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72656>.
- ³³ Lukashenka is estranged from his two older sons and their mother. These sons complained that “now we all live encircled by barbed wire, but what will happen to us, Dad, when you stop being president?” Vladimir Shlapentokh, “Are Today’s Authoritarian Leaders Doomed to be Indicted when They Leave Office? The Russian and Other Post-Soviet Cases,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39 (4) (2006): 452. As Karen Dawisha points out, the same logic applies to those at lower levels of the establishment. “Attempts to safeguard one’s children and oneself from possible persecution by former colleagues along the ‘power vertical,’ along with the desire to maximally enrich oneself while in power, has become practically the main purpose of all political and economic decisions.” Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 348.

- ³⁴ Shaun Walker, "Who's that Boy in the Grey Suit? It's Kolya Lukashenko, the Next Dictator of Belarus. . ." *The Independent*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/whos-that-boy-in-the-grey-suit-its-kolya-lukashenko-the-next-dictator-of-belarus-7897089.html>.
- ³⁵ Nadin Bakhrom, "Will Tajikistan Be Ruled by an Emomali Dynasty?" *Silk Road Reporters*, September 1, 2015, <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2015/09/01/will-tajikistan-be-ruled-by-a-emomali-dynasty/>.
- ³⁶ Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, "The Discourse of a Spectacle at the End of the Presidential Term," in *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo (London: Routledge, 2013), 104–110. President Nazarbaev also experimented with this institution from 2005–2009.
- ³⁷ Richard Sakwa, in "Putin's Leadership: Character and Consequences," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (6) (2008): 879–897, calls these practices "para-constitutional." See also Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005); and Nikolay Petro, Maria Lipman, and Henry E. Hale, "Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 (1) (2014): 10. Throughout the region, authoritarian leaders reacted to the color revolutions in neighboring countries by clamping down on NGOs, which were seen as instruments of revolution and potential agents of the West.
- ³⁸ Karimov distinguishes himself, with his "scientific world view," from the "barbarians . . . ignorant, uneducated people who use pseudo-Islamic slogans to increase their own power." Adeeb Khalid, "A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (4) (November 2003): 587.
- ³⁹ Karimov's "national ideology" is "an extended argument against politics." Andrew F. March, "From Leninism to Karimovism: Hegemony, Ideology, and Authoritarian Legitimation," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19 (4) (2003): 308, 310.
- ⁴⁰ V. I. Surkov, "Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs *pro* Sovereign Democracy," *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 47 (4) (Spring 2009): 18.
- ⁴¹ Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 89.
- ⁴² Masha Gessen, *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 265; Helena Goscilo, "Russia's Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d'Art*," in *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Goscilo, 19; and Eke and Kuzio, "Sultanism in Eastern Europe," 531.
- ⁴³ Archie Brown, "The Power of the General Secretary of the CPSU," in *Authority, Power, and Policy in the USSR*, ed. T. H. Rigby, Archie Brown, and Peter Reddaway (London: Macmillan, 1980), 136.
- ⁴⁴ The only exception to this pattern may have been during the Medvedev interregnum in Russia from 2008–2012, when there was a "tandemocracy," with Putin as prime minister and his younger client, Dmitrii Medvedev, as president; even here Putin's role as the "national leader" remained unquestioned, and once Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, his grip on the reins of power tightened further.
- ⁴⁵ Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdowns and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2) (June 2014): 313–331.