

**POLICY BRIEF**

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**RESILIENT AUTOCRACIES:  
WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT  
THEIR DEFEAT?**

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## **MODERATOR:**



**Elena Korosteleva,**  
OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY  
(OBO); PROFESSOR/DIRECTOR,  
IGSD AT WARWICK

## **SPEAKERS:**



**Martin K. Dimitrov,**  
Professor and Chair, Depart-  
ment of Political Science,  
Tulane University



**STEPHEN HALL,**  
Assistant Professor in Rus-  
sian and Post-Soviet Poli-  
tics, University of Bath



**DIANA  
KUDAIBERGENOVA,**  
Assistant Professor, Depart-  
ment of Sociology, Universi-  
ty of Cambridge



**SOFIE BEDFORD,**  
Affiliated Researcher, Insti-  
tute for Russian and Eur-  
asian Studies, Uppsala  
University

## **CONTRIBUTORS:**

**OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY:** The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

**OST RESEARCH CENTRE:** OST Research Centre is a department of the **OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST)**. The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

**IGSD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK:** Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

## **RESILIENT AUTOCRACIES: WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT THEIR DEFEAT?**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This policy brief focuses on resilient autocracies. The core meaning of resilience, as it is used in this brief, is that dictatorial regimes, just like civil societies, can adapt, survive, and learn to withstand pressure, or political crisis. There are always two sides to the term: the first one is the resilience of the regimes or autocracies themselves; the second one is the resilience of societies. This policy briefing focuses on the former by examining different cases across the post-Soviet space and beyond. The brief examines the sources of authoritarian resilience and how authoritarian leaders learn from each other and react to new developments. It is concluded that most authoritarian regimes rely on shaky foundations even when they seem resilient.

### **BACKGROUND**

Resilience may mean 'all things to all people', but when applied to authoritarian regimes, it underscores their capacity to adapt and learn from the transformational struggles, protect themselves, negotiate, and even grow stronger. In this fight for survival, there are always two sides to a coin - the state and the society: they draw on divergent resources and power distribution, which seemingly can make one stronger, and the other one - disbanded or exiled. Whatever the outcome, the people would either comply and adapt, or rise and sweep away, to establish new arrangements of power to suit their demands and aspirations, because they are the ultimate resource of power and a guarantor of its stability.

How all this works in real life, is a different story, with many diversions and tangents to follow. What would be the outcome of the prolonged struggle and suffering in Belarus and Russia, for example? Can dictatorships adapt and find a new consensus with their people, as many cases of Central Asia seem to tell us? What are the strategies, tactics, and tools for civil society and democratic leaders to challenge the status quo and ensure their ultimate win? These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory, and IGSD University of Warwick (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Elena Korostelova, Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and Professor/Director, IGSD at the University of Warwick; and the speakers of the event included Martin K. Dimitrov, Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, Tulane University; Stephen Hall, Assistant Professor in Russian and Post-Soviet Politics, University of Bath; Diana Kudaibergenova, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge; and Sofie Bedford, Affiliated Researcher, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In an era marked by complex global challenges, the endurance of autocratic regimes has defied conventional expectations. Despite the prevailing narrative that democracies are inherently more stable and adaptable, autocracies have displayed remarkable resilience, adapting to changing circumstances, surviving domestic and international pressures, and even learning from one another's experiences and building some alliances. Autocracies in the so-called post-Soviet space are no exception to that. In this context, understanding the mechanisms that underpin the adaptability and survival of autocracies is of paramount importance for policymakers and scholars alike.

This policy brief aims to discuss the state of democracy and autocratisation more broadly. Drawing on case studies from a range of autocratic states from the "post-Soviet space", it will examine the various dimensions of autocratic resilience, shedding light on how these regimes not only weather crises but also adapt and learn from one another.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE**

### **I. DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY: SOME INSIGHTS FROM GLOBAL TRENDS**

In his influential article, "The end of history?", Francis Fukuyama highlighted two trends coming together. One was the crisis of non-market systems for organising economic activities, such as the central planning practice in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites. The other was the movement towards democratisation which had begun with the toppling of dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, as well as in Africa and Latin America<sup>1</sup>. The 1990s were the heyday of democracy promotion around the world. Markets triumphed, and more countries were moving towards democracy. It seemed that history had indeed ended, but the 21st century brought in the painful realisation that democracy and the market need not go together. Two powerful states re-emerged in the global scene, China and Russia, which offered examples of market economies that resolutely opposed democratisation. What is more, the two countries have worked assiduously to export their model of development to autocracies around the world, which want prosperity but not multi-party competition.

Today the global liberal political order is under attack from both autocrats and populists. History appears to be ending again, this time with democracies rather than autocracies being threatened. According to Freedom House, in 2023, only one in five individuals globally lived in a country described as "free." This is alarming, especially when contrasted with the widespread optimism during the 1980s and 1990s about the universal triumph of democratic values. This also raises important questions about the variables that lead to the persistence of authoritarianism and how and when autocracies fail.

There is a significant variation in the average lifespan of autocracies. The

literature suggests that single-party regimes appear to exhibit the highest longevity<sup>2</sup>. Within the group of single-party regimes, there is a subgroup of communist dictatorships which outlast non-communist autocracies. Accordingly, these communist regimes emerge as the most resilient type of non-democratic system. There are also notable differences in the durability of the two different subsets of communist regimes. Despite most communist regimes collapsing in 1989–1991, China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba have persisted for more than three decades after the end of the Cold War, and the average tenure of these five single-party communist regimes was 66 years as of 2023.

## LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. The end of history? The National Interest.
2. See Martin Dimitrov, *Dictatorship and Information: Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

## **II. “THE DICTATORS’ DILEMMA”, OR HOW AND WHY DO AUTOCRACIES SURVIVE?**

In his recent book, Martin K. Dimitrov explains the resilience of authoritarian regimes by focusing on “the dictators’ dilemma”, shedding light on the mechanisms behind the resilience of autocratic regimes. By focusing on the uncertainty dictators face regarding their level of popular support, Dimitrov elucidates the intricate dynamics that allow these regimes to adapt and survive<sup>1</sup>.

First, Dimitrov argues that dictators are aware of this problem and invest substantial resources into creating institutions that generate the information needed to mitigate it. These information-gathering mechanisms serve a dual purpose: they are accessible both to autocrats and to the public, potentially enabling anti-regime action. Recognizing this, autocrats actively foster other mechanisms for private transmission of information only to regime insiders.

Second, while complex information-gathering institutions can prolong the lifespan of autocratic regimes, their effectiveness hinges on whether autocrats are willing to use the assessments of popular discontent generated by these institutions to guide decisions about the use of force and the making of concessions. In some instances, authoritarian leaders possess abundant information about discontent but fail to act upon it, potentially jeopardising their hold on power. In addition to information management, autocrats employ other strategies to stay in power, including economic populism, anti-Western nationalism, and control of the media environment<sup>2</sup>.

## LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. Ibid.
2. Martin K. Dimitrov, “Debating the Color Revolutions: Popular Autocrats,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2009: 78–81.

### **III. SHARING “BEST PRACTICES”: AUTOCRATIC LEARNING**

In addition to the dictators' dilemma and other resilience factors, authoritarian regimes demonstrate remarkable adaptability through the process of authoritarian learning. These regimes engage in regular exchanges, sharing “best practices” and learning from one another. This learning occurs not only at the intra-state level and between state regimes but also within regional organisations, in particular in the post-Soviet space, where such platforms serve as crucial arenas for learning rooms, sharing the “best practices,” training exercises, experiences of dealing with protesters, etc.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, authoritarian leaders learn as much from failures as from success, thus learning the lessons from their countries and other regimes. However, while learning from each other happens, it is also clear that what works in one country, such as Russia, may not necessarily work in others, such as in Belarus. For example, in the past, Belarus has been a testing ground for developing “best practices”, successfully adopted by other autocracies, including Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.

Finally, authoritarian leaders often employ a strategy called “authoritarian upgrading.”<sup>2</sup> This involves implementing superficial reforms in specific areas to create the perception that the regime “cares” about its citizens. Azerbaijan serves as an example where staged reforms have been utilised to maintain the status quo while projecting an image of progress. For instance, on the eve of the elections, in 2019, the Azerbaijani President initiated a set of political reforms allegedly to open more space to reform-oriented young generations and new faces in politics. Following the elections in 2020, little changed but they could be seen as an example of managed pluralism –and how it works as a practice of “authoritarian upgrading.” A similar dynamic is at work in Kazakhstan. In this sense, the authoritarian upgrading meant almost stealing that agenda from the political grassroots movements to make some cosmetic changes and not allow new parties emerge or opposition to mobilise.

#### LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. Stephen G. F. Hall, *The Authoritarian International: Tracing How Authoritarian Regimes Learn in the Post-Soviet Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
2. Sofie Bedford, forthcoming article *Baltic Worlds*.

### **IV. AUTOCRATIC RESILIENCE FACTORS: GERSCHEWSKI'S MODEL**

A popular model of autocratic stability was developed by Johannes Gerschewski who underlines the three main pillars: co-optation, legitimacy, and repression<sup>1</sup>. Co-optation refers to the regime's ability to bring key elites into its fold and maintain their loyalty. Legitimacy refers to the perceived justification and acceptance of the regime's authority by the population. Repression represents the regime's capacity to use force and coercion to suppress opposition and maintain order.

If we look at the case of autocratic survival in Belarus, there was a lack of elite disaffection during the 2020 protests, with many elites remaining loyal to the regime. While social contract got partly broken and the economy may no longer be a significant source of legitimation for the Lukashenka regime, it can still rely on repressive measures to maintain control. The economy may no longer be a legitimation method for the Lukashenka regime, but it has the capacity still to repress.

Authoritarian leaders sometimes pretend to implement a set of reforms, which can be called “authoritarian upgrading.” These upgrades can take place in certain areas in a controlled way, just to communicate the message that they “care” about citizens. They try to establish this image, that the country is reforming, modernising, and liberalising without changing the way the country is governed. In this context, Azerbaijan serves as an important example.

In the public sector, there have been some reforms to make public administration more transparent, more efficient, and more cost-effective; for example, by introducing e-services. These reforms made life easier for the Azerbaijanis. Yet, it’s also been functional for the government to reduce mid and low-level corruption. The Azerbaijani President also initiated a set of political reforms in 2019 allegedly to open more space to reform-oriented young generations and new faces in politics. Following the elections, however, little changed, as usual. Still, the elections in 2020 were a good example of managed pluralism –and how it works as a practice of “authoritarian upgrading.”<sup>2</sup> All these attempts should be seen as tactics to normalise autocracy. A similar dynamic is at work in Kazakhstan. In this sense, the authoritarian upgrading was almost stealing that agenda from the political grassroots movements, suggesting it is not possible to reach a proper parliamentary democracy right now, but certain reforms may be introduced such as easing up the electoral laws or making other cosmetic changes, but not allowing new parties emerge, or seeing the opposition as a political agent of change.

## LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. Johannes Gerschewski, “The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes,” *Democratization*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2013: 13-38.
2. Sofie Bedford, forthcoming article *Baltic Worlds*.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This policy briefing examined the sources of authoritarian resilience and how authoritarian leaders learn from each other and react to new developments. It is important to underline, however, that even if autocracies seem resilient, most authoritarian regimes rely on shaky foundations. The poor handling of the economy, repression of society, and constant pressure to control the media and information environment generate an unsustainable equilibrium that ultimately brings their demise.



While it is difficult to predict when change occurs in authoritarian regimes, once the tipping point is reached, it becomes challenging for authoritarian leaders to halt the momentum of change. Once authoritarian leaders lose control—even partially—this might trigger a domino effect that makes it difficult for authoritarian leaders to establish complete control. This uncertainty raises an important question that extends beyond the scope of this policy briefing: What will the subsequent regime look like after the collapse of the old autocratic order? There is no guarantee that an incumbent autocrat will be replaced with a democratic leader and regime.

Therefore, as efforts are made to promote democratic change in Belarus, it is essential to consider the potential outcomes and plan for various scenarios. Building resilient democratic institutions, supporting civil society, and fostering a culture of inclusive dialogue can help lay the groundwork for a more stable and democratic future. By being prepared for the uncertainties that follow regime collapse, the international community can contribute to shaping a transition that upholds democratic principles and ensures a peaceful and democratic future for Belarus.

## ***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS***

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- 1** On the face of it, autocracies may all seem to appear similar in terms of their foundation and the exercise of power. Yet, a more nuanced case-based analysis is required to assess how regime dynamics work, and what constitutes the sources of each regime's legitimacy and resilience. Policy recommendations based on generalisations are unlikely to work.
- 2** One should not underestimate the force of societal change, bestowed in people, in authoritarian regimes regardless of what the regime looks like. This is because paradoxically the weakness of authoritarian regimes lies in their strength. Even small triggers happening in the neighbourhood or indeed within the regime itself can cause a domino effect at the state level. However, it is important to engage and prepare civil society for this moment to enable alternative institutions of power as and when necessary.
- 3** Finally, narratives matter. Continuous undermining of the autocratic regime's narratives, in juxtaposition to constant praising of people's power, concomitant with their education and exposure to alternative sources of information, would lay strong foundations for the transition of power, and change within an authoritarian state. This however will not be either a linear, or a swift process. At the same time, people are always far more resilient than autocracies whose power is finite once change is afoot.

# CONTACTS

**OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY,  
OXFORD SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AND AREA STUDIES**

Email: [obo@area.ox.ac.uk](mailto:obo@area.ox.ac.uk)

Twitter: [@OxfordBelarus](https://twitter.com/OxfordBelarus)

**RESEARCH CENTER OF THE OFFICE  
OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST RESEARCH CENTER)**

Email: [researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org](mailto:researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org)

YouTube: [go to the channel](#)

**INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT,  
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK (IGSD)**

E-mail: [igsd@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:igsd@warwick.ac.uk)

Twitter: [@IGSD\\_UoW](https://twitter.com/IGSD_UoW)

