

Russia's Mock Democracy Feeds Off Apathy

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Hungary's new prime minister, Viktor Orban, recently entertained the academic world by announcing that he wants to create an "illiberal democracy" in Hungary — using Russia as an example — because the liberal model has outlived its effectiveness.

It's true that there is no more relevant area of study in modern political science than hybrid regimes. There are many terms for them, which indicates their still-transitioning nature as a research topic: illiberal democracies, imitation democracies, electoral authoritarian states or non-tyrannical autocracies.

What practical lessons can be gleaned from this cutting-edge field? Understanding the nature of hybrid democracies is a useful way to at least avoid persistent historical analogies and time spent waiting for fascism to rise or Soviet power to return.

Hybrid regimes are a new historical stage of authoritarianism. The difference between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes has already been defined: While the former breeds

passivity in its citizens, the latter mobilizes them. Totalitarian regimes demand participation: He who doesn't march and sing isn't loyal.

Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, want the populace to stay home. Those who march enthusiastically and sing too loudly fall under suspicion, regardless of the ideological content of the songs or the direction they're marching.

Hybrid regimes generally arise in countries rich in natural resources, sometimes called "petrostates," though their lucrative resources don't have to be oil. These are regimes that collect money for nothing — that is, not as a result of governance, but through their country's natural wealth. The population of hybrid regimes is only a hindrance, creating additional risks to the dream of permanent rule by the same leadership.

At the heart of such regimes is an idea that if there were X amount of citizens to do the necessary work — extracting natural resources — and the rest just disappeared somewhere. These regimes fear any type of mobilization because they don't have the institutions to utilize active civilian participation.

Western researchers who have called hybrid regimes illiberal democracies or electoral authoritarian states focus on one element: the decorative nature of their democratic institutions. Hybrid regimes hold elections, but the government doesn't change.

There are several television stations, but they all say the same thing. There is an opposition, but it doesn't oppose anyone. So, Western political scientists say, these are just decorative trappings hiding old-fashioned authoritarianism.

In reality, hybrid regimes imitate other types of states in two ways. They not only imitate an illusory democracy; they pretend to be a dictatorship that doesn't actually exist. It's easy to see that the democratic facade is made out of papier-mâché. But it's more difficult to detect that the Stalinist mustache is also a fake.

What makes it harder is that ideas like "focused violence" and a "low level of repression" are morally questionable for a modern audience. We live in a humanist era and are horrified by numbers of victims that would have been insignificant in 20th-century Europe.

Hybrid regimes attempt to achieve their main goal — keeping the leadership in power — through a relatively low level of violence. They have neither the moral capital of monarchies nor the repressive systems of totalitarianism. But citizens of hybrid regimes don't want to participate in anything. It's telling that the state propaganda of these governments doesn't mobilize anyone. They unite their citizens through the principle of passivity.

Take a look at the 87 percent of Russians who approve of everything, from military invasions to food sanctions. To the question, "Do you approve?" they always answer, "Yes." But at the same time, they do nothing.

They don't join volunteer military units or go to pro-military demonstrations. They don't even participate much in elections, which is why hybrid regimes always have to falsify voter turnouts and results. The only politically motivated actions these citizens take are to remove money from their bank accounts, exchange it for dollars and buy butter.

The propaganda is breathtakingly effective at forming the opinions of those people whose opinions mean nothing. Not because they are allegedly "second-rate people," but because their opinions are unconnected to their actions. They can provide the government with approval, but not support; they can't be depended on.

The regime understands that the 87 percent doing the approving are not actually participants in the political process.

The only important opinions are held by the politically active minority. This explains the paradox of legislators here: Why doesn't a government with seemingly solid, nationwide support use that support instead of passing more and more repressive and defensive laws?

Maybe the new laws are meant to feel out that active minority. Maybe they have dual citizenship or are somehow connected to public organizations. Maybe it's the bloggers or those who go to demonstrations and like smoking in restaurants.

How can they be detected and crushed — not too obviously, but lightly? It would be even better to paint them as worthless traitors and get them to leave. Hybrid regimes never try to retain people against their will; instead they actually urge that active minority to emigrate.

These regimes are fairly stable and enduring. They use the advantages of an almost-market economy and partially free public life, and therefore don't fall in a single day, as classic dictatorships do.

Those expecting a replay of the fall of the Soviet Union should keep this in mind, as well as those who await its sudden restoration. It would be just as difficult to wake up one day a committed fascist in your 16th year of rule as it would be to suddenly turn into a shining example of liberalism.

We can gather from this that hybrid regimes are stable. They long for stability and are prepared to withstand any upheaval to get it. The root cause of this seeming contradiction lies in the mechanism of decision-making — the Achilles heel of a hybrid regime.

Since they cut off every channel that could be used for feedback and subsequently fill it with garbage, these regimes are in many ways operating in the dark.

The only means they have to get in touch with reality is the television, talking to itself; the elite, chosen for their incompetence; and the feelings of their leader, whose heart should beat in unison with his people, but whose long years of isolation mean it well could have taken on a rhythm of its own.

That's why they must constantly guess whether their actions will be acceptable to their external and internal audiences. Hybrid regimes have no reverse gear; they're stable but not maneuverable.

The rise of imitation democracies is not the result of failure on the part of real ones. This is the fruit of moral progress; the unthinking, widespread violence of 50 years ago is no longer acceptable. If "hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue," then imitation is the dues that dictatorships pay to democracy.

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