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“Bad enough governance”: state capacity and quality of institutions in post-Soviet autocracies

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This article contributes to current discussions on state capacity, quality of institutions, and political regimes. Our analysis demonstrates that the J-curve argument (“good institutions” in autocracies as compared to hybrid and transitional regimes) may not be generic and is not well supported by empirical evidence from the sample of post-Soviet countries. An explanatory model of the “King of the Mountain” is instead provided. Its focus is on the monopoly of political rent as a precondition for extraction of economic rent. It demonstrates an inverse correlation between the quality of institutions and the extraction of political and economic rent, and explains why an autocrat may not have an incentive to improve institutions that may make his/her monopoly vulnerable, and rather would prefer to preserve a low quality of institutions and “bad enough governance.” An analysis of a variety of external and domestic factors that may endanger this monopoly is provided. Finally, the autocrat’s alternative strategic choices are analyzed. It is argued that better payoffs for the autocrat – paradoxically – may result from partial reforms and improvement of the quality of institutions. However, for various reasons, this is not occurring in post-Soviet autocracies.

Keywords: state capacity; governance; quality of institutions; autocracy; post-Soviet regimes; “King of the Mountain”

Introduction

Why are there good institutions in a majority of democracies, providing for the rule of law, property rights, contract enforcement, effective governance, control of corruption, etc.? And why are there very few autocracies with effective institutions (e.g., in Singapore or Oman), while most authoritarian regimes do not have them?¹

The existing literature on state capacity, quality of institutions, and political regimes is immense, and various authors provide different approaches and definitions. Fukuyama (2004), for example, defines multiple dimensions of stateness, including functions, capabilities, and grounds for legitimacy of government. He suggests a list of state functions, including defense, law and order, property rights, protection of the poor, macroeconomic management, public health, education, financial regulation, redistributive pensions, environmental

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protection, unemployment insurance, asset redistribution, and fostering markets. Another approach is that of Bäck and Hadenius (2008), who consider stateness as the capacity of state entities to maintain sovereignty. A more detailed focus is taken by Hendrix (2010) via defining state capacity in terms of military capacity, bureaucratic or administrative capacity, and the quality and coherence of political institutions. An institutional approach is found in Fortin (2010), with state capacity measured by five indicators – corruption, contract-intensive money, infrastructure reform, protection of property rights, and tax revenue. Another understanding of state capacity is presented by Charron and Lapuente (2010, 2011), who equate state capacity with the quality of government (as assessed by such measures as the International Country Risk Guide and the Worldwide Governance Indicators [WGI]). Thompson (2014) considers state capacity as “state strength,” which is measured by indicators reflecting state fiscal capacity (income tax revenue as a proportion of gross domestic product), state coercive capacity (coercive capacity scale), legitimacy (“voice and accountability,” “government effectiveness,” “rule of law,” and “control of corruption [WGI]”) and armed force monopoly (“political stability” [WGI]).

There are also different approaches to the problem of the relationship among state capacity, quality of institutions, and political regimes. For example, Tilly (2007) provides a theoretical typology of “crude regime types” along two axes (state capacity and democracy): high-capacity/undemocratic (e.g., Kazakhstan); low-capacity/undemocratic (e.g., Somalia); high-capacity/democratic (e.g., Norway) and low-capacity/democratic (e.g., Jamaica). Rose and Shin (2001), Bratton (2004), Bratton and Chang (2006) and Carbone and Memoli (2012) find that high levels of state capacity and quality of institutions are not necessary preconditions for democratization. On the contrary, Bäck and Hadenius (2008) and Møller and Skaaning (2011), on the basis of empirical large-*N* studies, argue that high levels of state capacity and quality of institutions are necessary prerequisites for democracy and democratization and they are attained in developed democracies. Relatively high levels of these capacities and qualities, it is argued, are also possible under particular types of autocracies and they are much higher than those in transitional and hybrid regimes.² This is basically the gist of the J-curve³ argument that is addressed in this article.

In line with this argument, there are theoretical and empirical studies that develop the thesis of “perfect dictatorship” – i.e., specifically “successful” autocratic regimes that provide institutions of good quality (Dominguez 2002; Besley and Kudamatsu 2007; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Svolik 2012; Boix and Svolik 2013). In “successful” autocracies, there is regular rotation of power, a strategy of cooptation prevails over the strategy of repressions, the “selectorate” and the “winning coalition” (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) are rather broad, property rights are guaranteed, contracts are enforced, but – most importantly – there are relatively effective institutions of governance that help the leader reduce transaction costs, legitimize his/her rule inside the country and outside,⁴ shift the load of personal responsibility, create instruments of control over elite groups inside the regime and other groups outside the regime, etc.

Many questions, however, remain yet to be answered. For example: What are the rational or psychological motivations for an autocrat to improve the quality of institutions – and why and when might they be realized?⁵ What is the likelihood? After all, how universal is the J-curve argument? And, with the reference to the sample used in this article, can it be applied to post-Soviet regimes? Are there cases of institutional “success” among post-Soviet autocracies? If not, then why?

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The subsequent section provides an empirical analysis of the quality of institutions in post-Soviet regimes. The following section outlines a “King of the Mountain” model that attempts to explain the authoritarian equilibrium. Finally, a menu of possible strategic choices of the “King of the Mountain” and the subsequent “payoffs” are discussed.

Quality of institutions in post-Soviet regimes

This section empirically tests the assumptions of the J-curve thesis using a post-Soviet sample. To measure levels of democracy/autocracy, the combined scores on Political Rights (PR) and Civil Liberties (CL) from the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” methodology (FH (Freedom House) 2014) are used. The quality of institutions is measured using the combined scores of five indices of the Worldwide Governance Indicators – Political Stability and Absence of Violence; Government Effectiveness; Regulatory Quality; Rule of Law; and Control of Corruption.⁶

In essence, WGI embodies and is largely based on the World Bank’s normative ideal of “good governance” as a general goal and criterion for evaluation and comparison of institutional development of different countries, with the focus on developing ones.⁷ However, since the beginning of the 2000s in the academic and political communities, there are growing signs of skepticism regarding the universality and practical attainability of the institutional quality of “good governance” with regard to most developing and “catching-up” countries.⁸ In particular, the concept of “good enough governance” is proposed in recent research as a more modest but realistic institutional guideline for developing countries. This article will extend this concept, discussing the possible strategic choices of the “King of the Mountain” along with the suggested notion of “bad enough governance” as the characteristic quality of institutions in post-Soviet autocracies.

FH and WGI comparative data related to the post-Soviet sample are provided in Table 1. The “not free” countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia) have the lowest scores on practically all five governance indicators. The relationship is direct, although it does not tell us much about causality: the lower the democracy scores, the lower the governance scores (and vice versa). There is more variation in the “partly free” countries (Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova), but overall they have much higher scores on institutional quality. “Free” countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) are the unquestionable leaders in the quality of institutions of governance. The scatter plot in Figure 1 (based on these data) provides a persuasive visualization of these empirical findings.

Table 1. Post-Soviet political regimes and quality of institutions.

Country	FH (political rights/civil liberties)	Worldwide governance indicators (from +2.5 to - 2.5)				
		Political stability and absence of violence	Government effectiveness	Regulatory quality	Rule of law	Control of corruption
Not free						
Turkmenistan	7/7	+ 1.17	- 1.32	- 2.12	- 1.36	- 1.34
Uzbekistan	7/7	- 0.55	- 0.94	- 1.63	- 1.20	- 1.23
Belarus	7/6	- 0.30	- 0.94	- 1.09	- 0.89	- 0.52
Tajikistan	6/6	- 1.14	- 1.08	- 1.07	- 1.24	- 1.19
Azerbaijan	6/6	- 0.41	- 0.46	- 0.43	- 0.67	- 0.90
Kazakhstan	6/5	- 0.38	- 0.54	- 0.38	- 0.67	- 0.90
Russia	6/6	- 0.75	- 0.36	- 0.37	- 0.78	- 0.99
Partly free						
Kyrgyz Republic	6/5	- 0.91	- 0.69	- 0.33	- 1.14	- 1.12
Armenia	5/4	+ 0.07	+ 0.07	+ 0.23	- 0.31	- 0.47
Ukraine	4/3	- 0.76	- 0.65	- 0.64	- 0.83	- 1.09
Georgia	3/3	- 0.46	+ 0.53	+ 0.74	- 0.02	+ 0.36
Moldova	3/3	- 0.03	- 0.40	- 0.09	- 0.41	- 0.74
Free						
Latvia	2/2	+ 0.57	+ 0.88	+ 1.03	+ 0.75	+ 0.27
Lithuania	1/1	+ 0.92	+ 0.82	+ 1.13	+ 0.79	+ 0.36
Estonia	1/1	+ 0.73	+ 0.98	+ 1.43	+ 1.16	+ 1.11

Sources: FH (Freedom House) 2014; WGI 2014 (data are for calendar year 2013).

“Not free” post-Soviet countries obviously demonstrate what can be called “bad enough governance” – the lowest ratings of combined scores of Control of Corruption, Rule of Law, Regulatory Quality, Government Effectiveness, and Political Stability and Absence of Violence. In practical terms, according to WGI, this means high levels of corruption and “state capture” by elites and private interests, absence (or very serious problems with the implementation) of rule of law including property rights and contract enforcement, poor support for private sector development, and the likelihood of political instability.

These empirical findings contradict (although within the sample of this article) the main thesis of the J-curve argument – there are obviously no post-Soviet autocracies with good institutions; figuratively, no post-Soviet “Singapore” or “Oman.” Moreover, “partly free” (hybrid, or transitional in another terminology) post-Soviet regimes, unlike in the J-curve logic, have better institutions than autocracies. At the very least, these empirical findings call for some sensible interpretations/explanations, which the subsequent section attempts to provide.

The “King of the Mountain” as a model of authoritarian equilibrium⁹

The “King of the Mountain” model (Figure 2) suggested below is helpful in understanding why high levels of state capacity and quality of institutions are

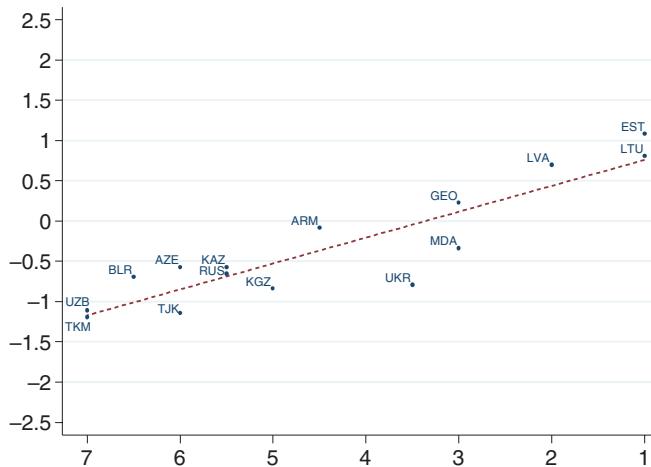


Figure 1. Democracy/autocracy (x-axis) and quality of institutions (y-axis) in post-Soviet countries. Legend: ARM – Armenia; AZE – Azerbaijan; BLR – Belarus; EST – Estonia; GEO – Georgia; KAZ – Kazakhstan; KGZ – Kyrgyzstan; LTU – Lithuania; LVA – Latvia; MDA – Moldova; RUS – Russia; TJK – Tajikistan; TKM – Turkmenistan; UKR – Ukraine; Uzb – Turkmenistan. Sources: Freedom House and World Government Indicators for the calendar year 2013 (FH (Freedom House) 2014; WGI 2014).

absent in post-Soviet autocracies. This model demonstrates a curvilinear relationship between quality of institutions (axis X) and rent extraction (axis Y). It does not necessarily imply a specific regime type; it is rather a model of desired authoritarian equilibrium based on guaranteed access to economic and political rent. Its focus is the negative correlation between monopoly on economic and political rent extraction and quality of institutions – the higher the rent, the lower the institutional quality. The consequence is that any improvement of the quality

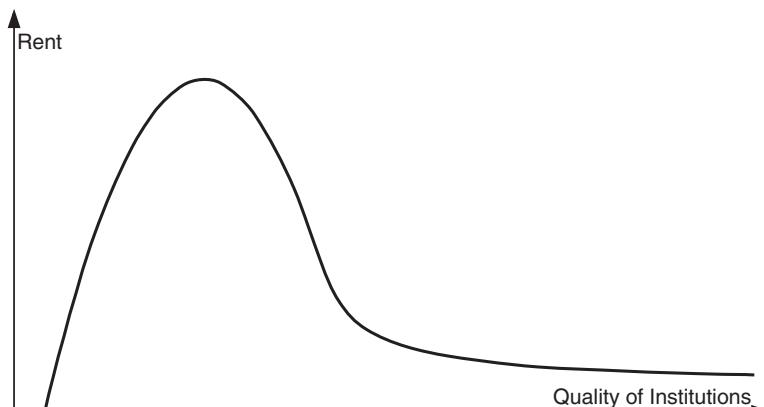


Figure 2. The “King of the Mountain”: political and economic rent vs. quality of institutions.

of institutions may endanger the economic and political monopoly of the “King of the Mountain.”

This general model requires some important specifications. These are related, in particular, to: (a) options and trade-offs in securing economic rent; (b) conditionality of economic and political rent extraction; (c) origins and aspects of economic and political monopoly of the “King of the Mountain”; and (d) durability and vulnerability of the authoritarian equilibrium.

First, economic rent in the suggested model, following the arguments in the recent literature on the resource bases of particular types of modern autocracies (Khan 2000; Kuru 2002; Franke, Gawrich, and Alakbarov 2009; Peters and Moore 2009), includes natural resources such as oil and natural gas in the first place (in Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan), and in the particular case of Uzbekistan also cotton (along with natural gas), but is not limited to them. Other examples of economic rent extraction include transportation of natural resources and preferential access to lucrative foreign markets (as in the case of Belarus), control over finances and financial flows, including those coming from labor migrants, as in many post-Soviet autocracies, and other types of external rents generated from foreign aid, various subsidies, and security and development assistance provided by a patron to clients.¹⁰

Moreover, it is important to note in general that an autocratic leader (as probably any other leader for that matter) seeks above all to maximize the revenues available to him/her for provision of private and public goods and their redistribution to buy loyalty and secure support. For this purpose, he/she may choose from a menu of different strategies of economic growth, depending on particular circumstances and priorities, especially in rare cases of “successful” autocracies with good institutions, discussed above. However, at least within our sample, an autocrat – other things being equal – would rely primarily on the option of economic rent extraction (assuming one or another type of rent is available) as the most cost efficient way to maximize revenues without improvement of institutions.

As a result, under these circumstances the ruler has no incentive to improve institutions and change the status quo. While North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) contrast rents that may promote development to those that inhibit it, feasible economic efficiency is not a motivation for the “King of the Mountain,” whose monopoly is based on rent extraction. The result is a frozen equilibrium in which all major political actors accept enforced rules and expected outcomes.

But what if the availability of economic rent is modest or even minimal, and institutions are very weak (as in the lower left segment of the presented curve of rent extraction and institutional quality)? Theoretically, this segment in Figure 2 in a global context connotes fragile states that are institutionally too weak even to extract rents – similar to failed states like Somalia or Rwanda. At the same time, the relationship between state fragility and institutional weakness, on the one hand, and resources for rent extraction, on the other hand, is unclear. One may suppose that even a relatively modest level of rent extraction requires at least some level of institutional quality that cannot be provided in weak and fragile states.

Within the post-Soviet sample, possible examples are, probably, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. These and similar cases may in fact put into question the (inverse) linearity of the relationship between quality of institutions and rent extraction – i.e., the highest rents under the weakest institutions. One may go further and suggest that most post-Soviet autocracies (taking into account the aforementioned anomalies) inherited at least some levels of institutional quality necessary for the extraction of available rents – as represented by the peak of the “King of the Mountain” curve. Another matter is that hereafter the status quo position at the peak of the curve assumes a deliberate policy of rejection of institutional improvement that may endanger the monopolistic position.

There is another related point worth mentioning. According to suggested “King of the Mountain” model, economic rents are not predominantly exogenous but are generated by a deliberate choice of specific policies. In a subsequent section, we will address the problem of alternative strategic choices available – at least theoretically – to an autocrat in a situation of exogenous shocks that are detrimental to rent flows and may motivate him/her to move along the curve toward at least some improvement of institutions.

Second, in post-Soviet autocracies political rent becomes an indispensable precondition for securing economic rent, for the latter derives primarily from the control of resources and is distributed through various informal mechanisms of patron-client networks and resource transfers.¹¹ This important point is the contribution of our “King of the Mountain” model to the famous “Hellman’s curve” (Hellman 1998). Hellman’s focus is actually on economic rent derived from the advantageous positions of “early winners” in the first rounds of post-communist privatization, when they have no motivations to continue reforms. The “King of the Mountain” model adds to this argument a crucially important political dimension, stressing mutual conditionality of political and economic rent extraction in post-Soviet autocracies.

Participation in or compliance with political monopoly (i.e., political rent) becomes in this situation a *sine qua non* for access to economic rent. Not a single oligarch can be confident in securing his/her property rights without full political compliance and direct financial support of the regime.¹² Moreover, political compliance is not always a personal guarantee under the rule of the “King of the Mountain.”¹³

Third, among other important aspects of economic and political monopoly within the model under discussion are the following: specific “inversion” of the functions of institutions of “bad enough governance”; origins and specific instruments of personalistic rule of the “King of the Mountain”; and consequent balancing of repressions and cooptation.

As mentioned earlier in this study, the “King of the Mountain” in his/her position of the monopolist of political and economic rent does not have any credible incentives to improve the quality of institutions or change the status quo, which corroborates documented findings that rent is an obstacle to institutional development (Guriev and Zhuravskaya 2010). In fact, *bad*, i.e., corrupt, not transparent, and inefficient institutions with no protection of property rights and

hindering political and economic competition (“bad enough governance”) in a paradoxical way “inverts” their function – in fact, they are *good* for the monopolist of rent extraction as they perform exactly the functions they are designed and supposed to. Political and economic monopoly in such cases can be secured without quality of institutions. In particular, obtaining more or less guaranteed control over various elite groups of the “selectorate” prevents “autocratic accountability,” which theoretically may lead to relative improvement of institutions (Besley and Kudamatsu 2007). In this situation, preservation of the status quo based on political and economic rent remains the major motivation for the ruler.

The monopoly of political and economic rent extraction leads in turn to a propensity for personalistic rule on the basis of patron–client channels and exchange of private goods for political loyalty (Wright 2008). Actually, rents are primarily private goods that the ruler can distribute at his/her discretion. The origins of the personalistic rule of the “King of the Mountain” may vary. There are, for example, remarkable cases of authoritarian and neopatrimonial succession and continuity dating back to the Soviet period (as in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Turkmenistan). And at the same time there are cases of initially more or less competitive elections (as in Russia or Belarus), which resulted in the victory of alternative candidates who thereafter drifted in autocratic directions. Post-Soviet experience also provides cases of hereditary successions (already implemented – as, for example, in Azerbaijan – or supposedly planned in other countries), illustrating a marginal but nonetheless real phenomenon (Brownlee 2007). However, despite these differences in the origination, various types of consolidated post-Soviet personalistic rule share some common features.

The “King of the Mountain,” while “mimicking” (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014b) formally democratic institutions (elections, parties, legislatures), has at his/her disposal a menu of other instruments. Most often he/she would prefer to rely on informal institutions, often leading to corporatist practices. There is a temptation on the part of a personalistic ruler to establish corporatist-like “direct bonds” and “unity” with the nation as a whole, thus “outflanking” formal institutions, which eventually may at least partly constraint his/her freedom of maneuver. Complex and often painful processes of state building, nation building, and identity building in post-Soviet countries may also facilitate the creation of the halo of undisputed paternal “national leader.” Such a leader becomes a symbolic personification of the nation itself and an ultimate guarantor of its survival.¹⁴ Appeals to wounded sentiments of national pride and populist promises are often used to solidify established personalistic rule.

At the same time, there is always some basic vagueness about the actual extent and limitations of personalistic power and control – even for the ruler himself/herself.¹⁵ First, the entourage of the “King of the Mountain” is never homogeneous and may be divided along different lines, reflecting preferred general strategies and concrete instruments (for example, classical divisions between “hardliners” and “reformists”), extent of ideological preferences and pragmatic approaches, competing elite groups or clans, etc. Information on these

divisions of interests and loyalties is usually hard to obtain due to the secrecy surrounding rule in personalized autocracies. In fact, we know remarkably little about the real balances and degrees of autonomy of different groups and even individuals within the elites vis-à-vis the patron. One can rely largely on anecdotal evidence, which seems to be even less informative in comparison with the most successful insights of the former “Sovietology” or “Kremlinology.” But besides the problems of decision-making under conditions of information obscurity, perpetuation of the status quo requires a selection of concrete means to secure compliance and support. In line with extant literature on comparative authoritarianism, in the “King of Mountain” model these would range from (but are not limited to) varieties of repressions and cooptation and their different combinations.

Repressions as such are indispensable tools for any autocrat as, according to empirical data, they usually contribute to his/her survival (Escriba-Folch 2013b). And for the “King of the Mountain” there are, as well, options of choosing between their degrees and types – for example, between “soft” repressions that aim at general restrictions on political liberties and “hard” ones, targeted at particular individuals and groups.¹⁶ However, as the empirical evidence demonstrates, repressions may have ambivalent consequences – on the one hand, they may effectively deter opposition from collective actions, but on the other hand, even under most repressive regimes “small acts” of individual or group resistance may escalate into mass rebellion (Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni 2011). Moreover, repressions – “soft” and dispersed or “hard” and targeted – are difficult to contain after they are unleashed because of their own momentum.

Another important and little-studied question in the literature is worth special attention: how an autocrat responds to an economic downturn. Indeed, what may be the most effective response from the point of view of rational self-interest – repressions or partial reforms? Economic downturns usually demonstrate a ruler’s incompetence and make him/her more vulnerable (Guriev and Treisman 2015). Existing research argues that “soft” repressions (in contrast to either cooptation or “hard” repressions) are more effective means for preserving autocratic rule during times of economic crisis (Tanneberg, Stefes, and Merkel 2013). This conclusion may find support, as well, if one examines the actual policy decisions of the “King of the Mountain” when facing economic troubles. However, from a theoretical point of view, a more rational option for self-preservation may be exactly the opposite – to decrease repressions and choose reformist strategies and improve institutional quality, in particular. This question requires additional comparative research, which is, however, outside the scope of this article.

Fourth, how durable or vulnerable is the authoritarian equilibrium of the “King of the Mountain” and what can undermine his/her political and economic monopoly and/or motivate the start of at least partial reforms of the institutions of governance – even without democratization? Current research on comparative authoritarianism provides contrasting cases when, depending on a variety of exogenous and endogenous factors, a few dictators would step down in a “regular” way – i.e., after the end of a term or an electoral defeat, while others would hold

power until the last minute (Ulfelder 2005; Goemans 2008; Debs and Goemans 2010; Slater and Fenner 2011; Svolik 2012; Kendall–Taylor and Frantz 2014a; Larcom, Sarr, and Willems 2014). Can these findings be correlated with the “King of the Mountain” model?

According to our model, the ideal goal is to preserve the authoritarian equilibrium of “bad enough governance” based on political and economic rent at the expense of the improvement of institutions. In pursuing this goal, the ruler needs to balance factors of durability and vulnerability of his/her monopoly. The prevalent argument in the literature is that the crucial factors of authoritarian endurance have to do with relatively high performance – economic and social, above all – which requires, in turn, institutions of good quality. However, as, for example, Croissant and Wurster (2013) indicate, non-democratic regimes even with weak performance may demonstrate substantial persistence. There are many factors, which may promote the durability of the status quo – political monopoly based on combinations of types of repressions and institutionalized cooptation, available economic and other resources crucial for rent extraction, control over media, compliance of the elites, passive support from the masses, insulation from the outside pressures, etc. At the same time, the existing theoretical and empirical literature indicates that these factors cannot be taken for granted.

Indeed, sources of vulnerability of the “King of the Mountain,” which may push him/her away from the authoritarian equilibrium, are numerous and should be taken into consideration for theoretical reasons and subsequent policy implications. As rent extraction is the foundation of this equilibrium, one of the major threats obviously derives from the possibility of contingent and exogenous erosion and undermining of the resource base. Above all, this relates to changes in the world prices of oil and gas, but should as well include other basic sources of economic rent, discussed above. These changes may result in the radical reduction of available resources for redistribution to buy the loyalty of important elite groups along patron-client channels and secure popular support. This scenario may bring about the adoption of different policy decisions needed for the preservation of the status quo and launch a variety of new political processes that could affect regime behavior internally and externally. Most obviously, such decisions may drive the regime toward more repressive strategies, revision of the terms of interactions with elite groups, and a search for alternative means of popular legitimization (“Rally Round the Flag” may become an appealing option).¹⁷

In addition to this obvious threat of the exhaustion of the rent resource base, there are other potential sources of destabilization of the “King of the Mountain” equilibrium. Weak and corrupted institutions may eventually present a menace for his/her monopoly. This may be a long-term prospect, but nonetheless is one with very grave implications for regime durability. Further, a pronounced reliance on a nostalgic ideology and ideological appeals to conservatism, nationalism, and wounded pride – which are not infrequent today in at least some countries in our sample and are often used as alternative instruments of legitimization and compensation for deterioration of economic and social conditions as well as a variety of other domestic and external problems – may lead to unintended

consequences, despite their seemingly temporary effectiveness. In fact, they may weaken the monopolistic position of the ruler and paradoxically make him/her a hostage to ideology and make him/her potentially vulnerable to more ideologically “pure” stalwarts who eventually may become competitors.

Other external influences and shocks, besides declining oil prices, may present another diverse group of perils. Despite all barriers and “firewalls,” almost paranoically created against real or imaginary external threats, various externalities and influences from the outside – from economic sanction¹⁸ to economic interdependence and information transparency – may destabilize political regimes based on monopoly extraction of political and economic rent. Autarky and a “fortress under siege” mentality may become in many respects domestically and internationally too “costly” as an alternative, although they are sometimes acceptable to the ruler, especially in times of trouble.¹⁹

Historical experience also shows that ideal solutions for the “dictator’s dilemma” hardly exist, including guarantees against the threat of an elite conspiracy. Therewith, the “King of the Mountain,” with all his/her seemingly unlimited power, is not a real “Sultan,” as he/she needs to build relations with different elite groups in an attempt to solve commitment and credibility problems. Leadership succession, especially grave in autocracies, also presents a perennial threat for regime durability as the ruler ages, despite his/her seldom pronounced but evident ambition to rule forever – through constitutional amendments, administrative permutations, reshuffles and substitutions, or repressions. But even these and other efforts cannot satisfactorily eliminate the fundamental uncertainty of succession, embedded in the nature of autocratic rule.

Strategic choices of the “King of the Mountain”

The last section of this article proceeds with the analysis of alternative strategic choices available to the “King of the Mountain” and the “payoffs” to be had from each of these choices. In the final analysis, we focus on an attempt to identify theoretically possible options for the ruler to make a rational decision to deviate from the model of authoritarian equilibrium toward a partial improvement of institutions, which may lead to replacement of “bad enough governance” by a “better enough” alternative.

Methodologically, we depart from the already mentioned theoretical distinction between different groups within and outside of the regime. Przeworski in his seminal *Democracy and the Market* Przeworski (1991), building upon previous research by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), pointed out different groups of “players” in the “game of democratization” (see also Colomer 2000). On the whole, Przeworski’s argument is that political outcomes of this “game” depend on the balance of influence between “hardliners” and “reformists” within the ruling elites and “moderates” and “radicals” within the opposition. Brownlee (2002), in his comparative analysis of survival and transition in modern neopatrimonial regimes, convincingly adopts a similar approach. Even at the price of some formalization, this type of approach grasps crucially important aspects of

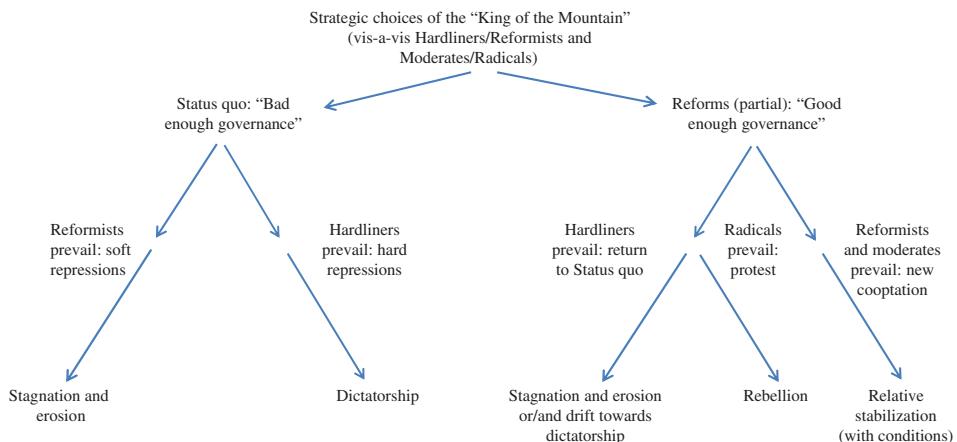


Figure 3. The “King of the Mountain” vis-à-vis the elite (“hardliners/reformists”) and opposition (“moderates/radicals”).

interactions between different “players” vis-à-vis the ruler who wants to maximize the “payoffs” following from different scenarios of the “game.”

This section explores an approach, similar to that of Prezeworski, to ascertain possible “players” and their interactions, as well as strategic options available to the “King of the Mountain” (Figure 3).²⁰ However, this “game” is not about democratization but about rational strategies of the ruler’s survival, which eventually may lead to partial institutional improvements.

In the “game” depicted in Figure 3, there are two basic options for the “King of the Mountain”: (a) to preserve the autocratic equilibrium of the status quo and “bad enough governance” or (b) to start at least partial reforms to improve institutions, which may eventually lead to “good enough governance.” These reforms do not necessarily imply democratization; their goal may seem very rational from the point of view of the ruler – to find new resources and instruments to preserve the authoritarian equilibrium (even without acknowledging that these reforms would de facto increase uncertainty).

The first choice – *status quo* – would be strongly supported by “hardliners” but would be met with reluctance by “reformists” within the elites. “Moderates” and “radicals” in the opposition would, certainly, resist. The second choice – *partial reforms* – would entail the support of “reformists” and “moderates” while “hardliners” and “radicals” would oppose (for obviously different reasons, however).

The outcomes of the status quo option under relatively weak opposition would primarily depend on the balance of influence of “hardliners” versus “reformists” within the ruling elite surrounding the “King of the Mountain.” If the “reformists” prevail, even if reforms do not start because of the choice of the status quo strategy by the “King of the Mountain,” soft repressions against all opposition – real or imaginary – would continue together with “bad enough governance,” eventually leading to stagnation and erosion of the regime, as the Soviet experience proves.

If “hardliners” prevail and the “King of the Mountain” chooses hard repressions, the outcome is hard dictatorship – a pretty “expensive” payoff in terms of performance and domestic and international legitimacy of the regime. Moreover, in the latter setting, there is the possibility that a more authoritarian leader will gain power,²¹ at least in part because of the shrinking rent base and the need to search for new resources and instruments of control.

An alternative strategic choice, in favor of partial institutional reforms, would lead to different outcomes depending on the distributions of influence among major “players” within the elite and the opposition. If “hardliners” eventually prevail and block institutional reforms, this would lead to a return to status quo followed either by stagnation and erosion or by outright dictatorship. Not very probable, although possible (as events in some post-communist countries attest) is the situation in which the supremacy – even very marginal – of “radicals” may lead to mass protests that result in a rebellion. Unfortunately, as history and the literature indicate, this may become an undesired outcome in terms of “payoffs” to all “players,” especially if violence is applied by either side. Nonviolent protest and consequent massive mobilization, however, may pave the way toward radical regime change (see, for example, Bunce and Wolchik 2011) – but according to our “game” model, this is an outcome that the ruler seeks to avoid above all.

Finally, in the event that “reformists” in the elites and “moderates” in the opposition prevail, and are supported by the “King of the Mountain,” new strategic openings may be possible. They could lead to new cooptation of leaders and groups outside of the regime and gradual reforms to improve the quality of institutions – to provide for the rule of law, to limit corruption, to guarantee property rights and contract enforcement, to enforce accountability, and to improve governance and institutional effectiveness.²² This may become a possible trajectory toward “good enough governance,” which would provide the “King of the Mountain” with desired (though relative and conditional) stabilization. Of course, this is not the best “payoff” for him/her from the point of view of the ideal autocratic equilibrium. However, this may be his/her best (more realistic) strategic choice, which may prevent radical democratization or a slide toward hard dictatorship, while partially improving the quality of institutions and building state capacity.

One must acknowledge, however, that these strategic choices may remain merely hypothetical options as, according to the suggested model, the “natural” preference of the “King of the Mountain” is to preserve the situation of authoritarian equilibrium – and abstain from improvement of the quality of institutions. Indeed, as our model implies, good institutions may not be necessary for an autocrat and his/her cronies to ensure rent extraction, even during an economic and financial downturn. However, history and the literature demonstrate that even if an autocrat does not improve the quality of institutions, autocratic rule does not persist forever, and there are many “exits,” including various “post-exit” regime trajectories and personal fates that may not be favorable for the ruler (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Escrivà-Folch 2013a; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014a).

Conclusions

This article provides empirical evidence against the universality of the J-curve argument, proving that there are no post-Soviet authoritarian regimes with high levels of state capacity and quality of institutions. Moreover, some post-Soviet hybrid and transitional regimes demonstrate higher state capacity and better governance than autocracies. An analytical model of the “King of the Mountain” was suggested as a plausible explanation for the absence of incentives to improve institutions that may endanger the monopoly of extraction of political and economic rent. The analysis of suggested strategic alternatives for the “King of the Mountain” implies that better “payoffs” would result, nonetheless, from balanced and partial improvement of institutions of governance that may contribute to the durability of the regime, even without democratization.

However, this seemingly “rational” option may not be realized in practice under the existing circumstances of the “King of the Mountain” situation. He/she may not be a rational and benevolent ruler and may not see incentives to improve institutions – even for the sake of personal and regime survival.

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Notes

1. In line with the current literature, the concept of “autocracy” is used in this article to define a group of regimes, where access to power and leadership does not depend on free and competitive elections (e.g., Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). There is one caveat, however: autocracies – both modern and old – for various reasons may enjoy substantial support from the population and pursue different forms of populist and plebiscitarian legitimization, successfully defeating weak opponents in elections. However, such regimes would radically limit or even exclude free and fair political competition – which makes them autocratic (even with “adjectives”).
2. However, on the basis of the existing literature and empirical evidence, we do not know the direction of the causal link between political regime characteristics, state capacity, and quality of institutions. Neither do we know exactly whether any other factors have an impact on the relationships among those three.
3. Care should be exercised not to conflate different “J-curve” theories. For example, Davies (1962) uses this metaphor in his theory of revolutions, arguing that they occur when a sharp deterioration of economic conditions follows a period of extended growth, which leads to popular sentiments of deprivation. Bremmer (2006) applies it to an analysis of international dynamics. Przeworski (1991), in his seminal work, addresses the “J-curve” as a “valley of transition” explaining the inevitable decline in mass consumption after the beginning of radical market reforms in post-

communist countries. He warns against the dangers of populist demands caused by growing unemployment, high prices, etc., which may subvert reforms, and calls for the “insulation” of dedicated reformists from immediate popular reactions of the “losers,” which may prevent the reform process from reaching the “higher hills” of transition. Schmitter, with Claudius Wagemann, and Obydenkova (2005) develop a similar argument, using a telling image of the “valley of tears.” Hellman (1998), however, in his widely cited contribution turns this argument upside down: real threats to continuation of economic reforms during post-communist transitions come not from the masses of “net losers” but from selected groups of “net winners”—“new entrepreneurs-cum-mafiosi” – who enjoy extraordinary gains from the distorted partial reforms, in the first place derived from privatization (“grabization”) of former state property, and try to maintain the monopoly of their privileged economic positions and block the continuation of reforms. Another, quite different interpretation of the “J-curve” argument has been provided recently by Bäck and Hadenius (2008), with their focus on the curvilinear effects of democracy and democratization on state capacity. In this article, we refer to the latter understanding of the “J-curve”; we empirically test the underlying arguments and provide a modification of “Hellman’s curve.”

4. Legitimation of authoritarian rule may result from various sources – ideology, religion, charisma, propaganda (stressing external and internal threats, etc.). Another and increasingly important factor of autocratic legitimacy is performance, which, according to the current literature, to a large extent, depends on the quality of institutions (e.g., McGuire 2013; Roller 2013).
5. In the literature, one can find several attempts to answer these questions. One of the most widespread is the reference to “time horizons,” implying that autocrats with long-term plans may have more incentives to invest in the quality of institutions than those who do not plan to stay in power for long and are merely using their position for private gains (e.g., Knutsen and Fjelde 2013). However, existing analysis and anecdotal evidence both suggest that there are very few dictators who are ready to quit shortly after their rise to power (Ludwig 2002; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2011; Dobson 2013). Another argument – that autocrats invest in quality of governance only when it “enhances their capacity to survive in power or extract resources” (Charron and Lapuente 2010: 463) – seems to be more plausible.
6. The index for Voice and Accountability is not included to avoid the endogeneity problem. We should note that both FH and WGI are subject to substantial criticism on various grounds; however, they are the most widely used measures in the literature.
7. The literature on “good governance” is enormous and its discussion lies beyond the scope of this article. Among some recent contributions, see Rothstein and Teorell (2008), Holmberg, Rothstein, and Nasiritoussi (2009), and Agnafors (2013).
8. For example, see Grindle (2004), Andrews (2010), North et al. (2011), Evans (2012), and Sundaram and Chowdhury (2012).
9. A preliminary discussion of this model is provided in Melville, Stukal, and Mironyuk (2014).
10. This latter issue relates to a broader problem of authoritarian assistance and diffusion (e.g., see Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Vanderhill 2013), but deserves special research.
11. In terms of political economy, this reflects a situation in which monopolistic state control in the economic sphere and subsequent “state capture” remains one of the most effective resources of authoritarian rule (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2000; Way 2012).
12. The post-Soviet experience provides ample examples – from Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia to Gulnara Karimova in Uzbekistan.

13. The unexpected house arrest of the most loyal Russian tycoon, Vladimir Yevtushenkov, in 2014 and his subsequent release is a salient example.
14. Nursultan Nazarbaev was officially named “First President – Leader of the Nation” despite his “objections”. After 2015 elections he was proclaimed a “reliable guarantor” of the “success of the 5 institutional reforms to create a modern state”.
15. Actually, this is a crucial assumption of the famous “dictator’s dilemma” (Haber 2006; Wintrobe 2007).
16. Depending on specific post-Soviet country-cases, reflecting different traditions and personalities, these options may range from control of the media and restrictions on activities of NGOs to prohibitions of opposition political parties and political imprisonments.
17. Alternative decisions potentially leading to the partial improvement of institutions will be discussed in the next section.
18. The existing literature, however, proves that the impact of economic sanctions is at the very least dubious, yielding from 5% to 35% of desired success. For an overview of the literature on the effectiveness of economic sanctions, see, for example, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2012).
19. Another lesson that can be drawn from history is that military adventures are just as likely to undermine (as to bolster) authoritarian regimes, and can lead to their breakdown (e.g., the Argentine regime after the Falklands War in 1982).
20. The factor of possible mass protest and mobilization – similar to the experience of the “colored revolutions,” to civic protest in Moscow and other Russian cities in 2011–2012 (in part), and even to very ambivalent “Maidan” – is considered in the “radicals prevail: protest” scenario.
21. In fact, this is an oft-used but disputed argument. Existing research indicates that, in statistical terms, most autocrats, at least since the second half of the last century, were replaced by other autocrats, but not necessarily by “worse” ones (Svolik 2012; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014a).
22. However, an unresolved challenge for the “King of the Mountain” remains – how to balance partial institutional reforms toward “good enough governance” and regime stabilization so that improvement of institutions does not subvert autocratic rule.

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