

UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 3 (38), 2025

REGIMES

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REGIMES

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Publisher:

Published by NGO «Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation» (Ukraine),
Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the
Representation of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Ukraine

UA: Ukraine Analytica is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English
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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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PLEBISCITE ENGINEERING AND AUTOCRATISATION IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION

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It is widely recognised that top-down constitutional referendums in post-Soviet states reinforce the president's power, at the expense of other branches of government. This article examines referendum engineering as a factor that undermines the balance of power, establishes a constitutional basis for long-lasting autocracies, and promotes authoritarian learning. It argues that the success of such referendums results from persistent strategic efforts by autocrats in their power struggles, often involving the manipulation of procedural structures. Identifying early legal shifts towards autocracy is especially crucial for responding to the process of autocratisation.

Introduction

The process of autocratisation has previously been thoroughly studied. Unlike in hereditary monarchies like those of Saudi Arabia or the Kingdom of Eswatini, which have their own legitimacy, in other types of political regimes leaders seek to establish a status quo in which they consolidate power and avoid accountability. Scholars identify different stages of autocratisation, evaluate potential leadership changes, and examine the factors that sustain autocracies, even after a leader is replaced.

This article, based on the evidence from the post-Soviet countries, examines what role top-down referendums play in power struggles, and confirms the widespread thesis that in the logic of autocracies' survival, referendums are an essential component of legitimising their claims to

power, and that plebiscites are "more dispersed within an authoritarian regime, but not because they are a democratic reflex, but because they are a show of strength."¹ But for some time, referendums have ceased to be proposals to answer a question which has been posed, and have become a legalistic tool that fits into the practice of autocratic legalism². Decisions are made through them that immediately become part of legislation, usually within constitutions themselves, which pushes parliaments onto the back burner in preparing and adopting decisions related to constitutional changes which are designed to consolidate a certain level of power distribution.

L. Scheppele notes that "the new autocrats come to power not with bullets but with laws. They attack the institutions of liberal constitutionalism with constitutional amendments. They carefully preserve the

1 A. Penadés, S. Velasco, Plebiscites: a tool for dictatorship, *European Political Science Review*, 14(1), 2022, p. 75.

2 K.L. Scheppele, Autocratic Legalism, *University of Chicago Law Review*, 2018, Vol. 85: Iss. 2, Article 2.

shell of the prior liberal state — the same institutions, the same ceremonies, an overall appearance of rights protection — but in the meantime they hollow out its moral core.”³ Although the initial political conditions of all post-Soviet states were far from constituting liberal democracies, most of them, at different stages, went through periods of autocratisation or resistance to it, and at various points, their leaders actively sought to remain in office or to create conditions for the transfer of power within the family, as in Azerbaijan. The construction of such pragmatic actions was achieved, among other things, through managed referendums.

One may ask: What role have the rules played in carrying out successful referendums? I argue that these rules have been eroded at various stages, to ensure guaranteed outcomes through top-down referendums, driven by autocrats’ attempts to avoid repetition of their own or their neighbours’ prior failed experiences, and that this aligns with the concept of autocratic learning.⁴

The Main Tools of Autocratisation

Generally, the tactics of autocratisation are extensively discussed in the literature, which has been expanding rapidly since the 1960s.

Researchers from the V-Dem project demonstrate, based on broad empirical data, that democratic regression occurs through three stages: backsliding, the breakdown of democracy, and finally autocratisation⁵.

They note that the latter is “the antipode of democratisation – as a matter of degree that can happen in both democracies and autocracies.”⁶ It means that autocratisation also occurs within autocracies. This thesis is evidenced by developments in many post-Soviet countries. When examining the status of countries in the post-Soviet region (excluding the Baltic states) as presented by the V-Dem project, we can see that all but one (Armenia) began the new era in 1990 at the level of ‘autocracy’, whether full or electoral⁷. At the same time, each of these countries followed its own path in regime transformations. Some, like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, sought to exit the state of autocracies or the ‘grey zone’; others, such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which were already autocracies, aimed to consolidate this type of regime and embed it in their constitutions.

As of 2024, the experts classified two post-Soviet countries, Armenia and Moldova, as electoral democracies. Three countries, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, are considered closed autocracies, while the remaining seven, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine, are classified as electoral autocracies.⁸ Additionally, both Armenia and Moldova have historically experienced periods of autocratisation that lasted for extended periods.

The current assessment of Ukraine as an electoral autocracy is likely due to the

3 *Ibid.*, p. 582.

4 S.G. Hall, T. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview*, *East European Politics*, 2017, 33:2.

5 A. Lüthmann, S.I. Lindberg, A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7) 2019, p. 1098.

6 *Ibid.*

7 See: M. Nord, D. Altman, F. Angiolillo, T. Fernandes, A.G. God, and S.I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg, March 2025: 52. Typology is demonstrated in A. Lüthmann, M. Tannenberg, S. Lindberg, *Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes*, *Politics and Governance*, 2018, 6(1): 60-77.

8 *Ibid.*

decline in the protection of rights and freedoms under the imposition of martial law. Because of Russia's large-scale attack in 2022, Ukraine has had to limit its commitments to the provision of full civil liberties and political rights. However, within these justified and acceptable restrictions, the concern about preventing autocracy has become more acute.

Politically-Driven Referendums in the Post-Soviet Region

Johan Gerschewski⁹ developed a concept that explains the survival mechanisms of autocracies across various subtypes. It includes popular legitimization, the co-optation of key elites, and the suppression of potential dissenters, since autocracies, as he demonstrates, face threats from three sources – the people, the elites, and the opposition. Moreover, he argues that it is precisely legitimization that adds stability to autocracies. As the literature shows, post-Soviet autocracies rely on all three pillars.¹⁰ It is well known that referendums play a significant role in what Gerschewski refers to as popular legitimization in post-Soviet countries. It should be noted that none of the referendums are of the bottom-up type, which is considered a genuine referendum and accepted in many modern democracies. All referendums in the post-Soviet space have been orchestrated by the ruling elites to fight for power. Experts assert that “the erosion of democracy often begins with political elites pushing the boundaries of

their power, and that – consistent with the drift-to-danger model. Like frogs in a pan of slowly heating water, those who protect democracy often fail to see the risks to the system until it is almost too late.”¹¹



All referendums in the post-Soviet space have been orchestrated by the ruling elites to fight for power.

After examining the path to autocratisation in post-Soviet countries, we can see that the legitimisation of the status quo through top-down referendums was used across the board. Based on the questions posed in national referendums and the outcomes of the referendum decisions, it can be argued that out of 53 referendums held over nearly a quarter of a century, from 1990 to 2024 inclusive¹², seven were referendums on declaring independence, while the remaining forty-six served purposes such as:

- legitimising the seizure of power and obtaining ‘popular consent’ for the expansion of the leadership powers;
- bypassing parliamentary control, whereby any expansion of the leader’s powers could not be missed;
- institutionalising the seizure of power and establishing a new constitutional system of checks and balances.

9 J. Gerschewski, *The three pillars of stability: legitimization, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes*, “Democratization”, 20(1), 2013, p. 19; J. Gerschewski. *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*. Cambridge University Press 2023

10 In particular, see: P. G. Roeder, *Varieties of Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes*, “Post-Soviet Affairs”, 10(1), 1994, pp.61–101; A. Fruhstorfer, *Referendums and Autocratization: Explaining Constitutional Referendums in the Post-Soviet Space*, p. 157–180 [in:] A. Richard, R. Stacey (eds), “The Limits and Legitimacy of Referendums”, Oxford, 2022; T. Lankina, A. Libman, A. Obydenkova, *Authoritarian and Democratic Diffusion in Post-Communist Regions*, “Comparative Political Studies” 2016, Vol. 49(12) 1599–1629;

11 C.M. Abels, K.J.A. Huttunen, R. Hertwig, S. Lewandowsky, *Dodging the autocratic bullet: enlisting behavioural science to arrest democratic backsliding*, “Behavioural Public Policy”, 1–28, 2024. doi:10.1017/bpp.2024.43

12 Here, I only consider nationwide referendums within each country.

In each of the post-Soviet countries, between one and five top-down referendums were held, and in Kyrgyzstan, ten.

Autocrats see it as vital to demonstrate 'popular support' and 'public approval.' Although some of these referendums were legally binding, meaning that the constitutions required a referendum for amendments or they were presented as a people's initiative, they still contributed to the political process in terms of contents and objectives.

The main types of questions posed to the 'people's vote' concerned the approval of autocratisation mechanisms and included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Lifting the limit on serving more than two terms in office – Belarus 2004, Alexander Lukashenko; Azerbaijan 2008, Ilham Aliyev; Tajikistan 2016, Emomali Rahmon.
- 'Zeroing out'¹³ the presidential term¹⁴ – Belarus 1996, Alexander Lukashenko; Tajikistan 2003, Emomali Rahmon; Russia 2020, Vladimir Putin; Uzbekistan 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.
- Reviewing the age of candidacy for office – Tajikistan 2016, Emomali Rahmon.
- Vote of confidence in the president – Azerbaijan 1993, Abulfaz Elchibey, or vote of confidence in the parliament¹⁵ – Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma.
- Switching from a mixed electoral vote to a plural one – Azerbaijan 2002, Heydar Aliyev.

- Removing parliament's role in making decisions about government formation, the 'rule of the people' principle, and the subjugation of parliament – Kyrgyzstan 1996, Askar Akayev.
- Extension of the presidential term in office – Turkmenistan 1994, Saparmurad Niyazov; Kazakhstan 1995, Nursultan Nazarbayev; Russia 2008, Vladimir Putin; Azerbaijan 2016, Ilham Aliyev; Uzbekistan 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.
- Reducing the number of seats in parliament sharply – Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma; Georgia 2003, Eduard Shevardnadze.
- Postponement of the deadlines for the presidential or parliamentary elections – Georgia 2008, Mikheil Saakashvili.
- Reforming the parliament from a single chamber to a bicameral system – Belarus 1996, Alexander Lukashenko; Tajikistan 1999, Emomali Rahmon; Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma; Uzbekistan 2002, Islam Karimov.
- Authority granted to the president to dissolve parliament – Belarus 1995, Alexander Lukashenko.
- Redistribution of power between the president and the government – Armenia 2005, Robert Kocharian; Azerbaijan 2016, Ilkham Aliyev.
- Cancellation of presidential elections from the date specified by the constitution – Turkmenistan 1994, Saparmurad Niyazov; Kazakhstan 1995, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

13 Sometimes authors equate the removal of the restriction on standing for office more than twice in a row with 'resetting the terms' or 'zeroing the terms', but these are different legal mechanisms. 'Resetting the terms' occurs when a legal act, usually a constitution, comes into force, initiating a new 'political chronology' and nullifying previous facts. Meanwhile, the restriction on standing for election after two terms can still be included in the constitution.

14 Decisions regarding the start of new time limits were also made by constitutional courts, thereby contributing to the process of autocratisation. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the constitutional court in 1998 allowed Askar Akayev, who by that time had already held the position twice, in 1991 and 1995, to run again for the presidency.

15 The referendum results were not implemented for political reasons. The 'failure' of the 2000 referendum in Ukraine served as a lesson for some autocracies seeking to avoid a similar outcome.

The list of issues resolved highlights the significance of referendums in the process of autocratisation. Each of these referendums aligns with the three-stage typology of autocratisation outlined by Bálint Magyar, and Bálint Madlovics, which illustrates the political development of post-communist countries as follows: autocratic attempt, autocratic breakthrough, and autocratic consolidation¹⁶. Each one served a purpose corresponding to its respective stage of autocratisation. Here, we will examine the case of Belarus, which clearly demonstrates that the referendums held led to a shift in the system of power in favour of the president, and that they conform to the researchers' suggested model of autocratisation.

Example of Belarusian Autocratisation through a Referendum

Belarus has held four referendums.

The autocratic attempt

The first referendum, on 14th May 1995, included four questions, one of which concerned granting Alexander Lukashenko, who had become president in 1994, the power to dissolve the parliament. The remaining questions aimed to approve his policies. "<...> 4. Do you agree with the need to make changes to the constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which provide for the possibility of early termination

of the powers of the Supreme Council by the President of the Republic of Belarus in cases of systematic or gross violation of the constitution?"¹⁷ Unlike the first three binding questions, the fourth question was marked as consultative.

The autocratic breakthrough

The course and results of the referendum on 24th November 1996 demonstrated the political weight and influence of the president. Four questions from the head of state and three from the parliament were put on the referendum. In particular, both branches of power sought to gain support for their respective amendments to the Constitution, adopted two years earlier. The head of state called on voters "<...> 2. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with amendments and additions (new version of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus) proposed by the President of the Republic of Belarus, A. G. Lukashenko," while the deputies of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus called on them "1. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with amendments and additions proposed by the deputies of the communist and agrarian factions."¹⁸

The main differences between them concerned the distribution of power. The 1994 constitution established a semi-presidential system, with significant parliamentary control, while Lukashenko

16 B. Magyar, B. Madlovics, *A Concise Field Guide to Post-Communist Regimes: Actors, Institutions, and Dynamics*, Central European University Press: Budapest–New York 2022, p. 99.

17 *Протокол Центральной комиссии Республики Беларусь по выборам и проведению республиканских референдумов об итогах голосования на республиканском референдуме, проведенном 14 мая 2014 г. в соответствии с постановлением Верховного Совета Республики Беларусь от 13 апреля 1995 г. № 3728-XII* (Protocol of the Central Commission of the Republic of Belarus on Elections and Holding of Republican Referendums on the results of voting at the republican referendum held on 14 May 2014, in accordance with the Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of 13 April 1995 No. 3728-XII), <https://www.rec.gov.by>

18 *Протокол Центральной комиссии Республики Беларусь по выборам и проведению республиканских референдумов "О результатах голосования на республиканском референдуме, проведенном 24 ноября 1996 года, в соответствии с Постановлением Верховного Совета Республики Беларусь от 6 сентября 1996 года № 578-XIII"* (On the results of the vote in the republican referendum held on November 24, 1996, in accordance with Resolution No. 578-XIII of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus dated September 6, 1996), the Minutes of the Central Commission of the Republic of Belarus for Elections and Conducting Republican Referendums, <https://www.rec.gov.by>

sought to transform it into a super-presidential model, and the deputies aimed to move towards a parliamentary republic. Another, no less important, aspect of this process concerned the source of law. While the parliamentary side insisted on adherence to parliamentary procedures, Lukashenko portrayed the referendum as an expression of the people's will. The referendum's decision not just constituted a disagreement with the then elected parliament but marked the final break with the existing political system and a transition to a new system of power distribution. As a result of the referendum, the current parliament was dissolved, as the president was granted such authority. A bicameral parliament replaced the unicameral one. The presidential powers were significantly expanded, extending to the appointment of the Attorney General, as well as members of the National Bank's management, part of the Central Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, and other higher courts, and the leadership of the Control Chamber. The prior procedure for approving key ministers was eliminated. Lukashenko also gained the authority to call referendums, which previously was the prerogative of the parliament. While the previous two referendums required parliamentary approval, the next one was called by presidential decree. The assumption of powers to call a referendum also strengthened Lukashenko's influence.

The autocratic consolidation

On October 17th, 2004, the third referendum was approved, allowing Lukashenko to run for a third term. Furthermore, the question included two issues, the combination of which, in itself, violated the rules of logic and



The 1994 constitution established a semi-presidential system, with significant parliamentary control, while Lukashenko sought to transform it into a super-presidential model, and the deputies aimed to move towards a parliamentary republic

created a situation of manipulation: "Do you permit the first President of the Republic of Belarus, A. G. Lukashenko, to participate as a candidate in the presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus, and do you accept the first part of Article 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the following wording: "The President shall be elected for five years directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus on the basis of universal, free, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot?"¹⁹

The autocratic consolidation

One question was put to the vote on 27th February 2022 – "Do you agree with the amendments and additions to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus?"²⁰ The referendum constitutionalised the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which existed as a civil-political platform and, for example, actively promoted Lukashenko's position in the 1996 referendum. It became the highest representative body of the people's power in the Republic of Belarus. It was granted a range of powers over personnel appointment, control, and supervision, thereby weakening the role of the parliament. The decisions of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which stands at the apex of the vertical axis of power led by

19 Указ Президента Республики Беларусь 7 сентября 2004 г. N 431 г. Минск. "О назначении республиканского референдума" (On the calling of a national referendum. The President of the Republic of Belarus Decree of 7 September 2004 N 431 Minsk), <https://www.rec.gov.by>

20 Указ Президента Республики Беларусь 20 января 2022 г. N 14 г. Минск. "О назначении республиканского референдума" (On the calling of a national referendum. The President of the Republic of Belarus Decree of 20 January 2022 N 14 Minsk), <https://www.rec.gov.by>

the president, are binding. After Lukashenko took office for a seventh consecutive term in January 2025, he centralised political power in his own hands which had grown over his thirty years in the presidency, and he now controls most political decisions.²¹

The Construction of Referendum Rules

What role have referendum rules had in the success of these referendums? The rules for conducting referendums were subject to the same eroding of power as other mechanisms of checks and balances. "With the rise of autocratic legalism, we are witnessing new political technologies designed to accomplish the goals of autocracy without its usual tell-tale signs"²², states Scheppele. In addition to influencing the appointment of members to the national electoral commission, and controlling and displacing information from various sources through active propaganda, the leaders also focused on factors that made decision-making easier and more straightforward.

First and foremost, this concerns control over the conduct of the referendum. The leaders sought either to usurp the authority to call referendums or at least to manage the timing of their conduct. As a legacy of Soviet times, referendums were at first called by the republican supreme councils. Early laws on referendums adopted in the new states still contained such a provision, but this authority was gradually transferred entirely or partially to the president. Nuances



The rules for conducting referendums were subject to the same eroding of power as other mechanisms of checks and balances

depended on the subject of the referendum. For example, according to the constitution of 1996 in Ukraine, and this provision remains unchanged, the parliament calls referendums on issues related to changing Ukraine's territorial borders, while the president calls a nationwide referendum on amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine and also proclaims an all-Ukrainian referendum on a popular initiative.²³ In Azerbaijan, it was initially envisaged that the parliament would call referendums. From 1995 onwards, it was established that only the president could submit questions for constitutional amendments to a referendum, leaving the parliament with a residual role. In Kyrgyzstan, in 1991, a referendum was called by the parliament; in 1993, by both the parliament and the president; and in 1996, solely by the president.²⁴ Such a transfer of authority to the president in calling a referendum has occurred in Belarus: from the parliament in 1991 to the president in 1996; and in Russia: from the parliament in 1991 to the president in 1993.

The next option is adopting a new constitution or amending the constitution. In Kyrgyzstan, in 1993, amendments to the constitution were made by the parliament, and in 1996 – by a referendum.

21 Why the need for autocratic consolidation occurs is explained by V. Silitski, "Veteran leaders of former Soviet Republics <...> directly attribute the downfall of their Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kyrgyz counterparts not only to activities orchestrated by the international democracy-promotion community, but also to the inherent weaknesses of unconsolidated authoritarian regimes." See V. Silitski, *Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus*, "Journal of Democracy", Vol. 16(4), October 2005, p. 84.

22 K.L. Scheppele, *Autocratic Legalism*, "University of Chicago Law Review", 2018, Vol. 85: Iss. 2, Article 2, p. 582.

23 *Constitution of Ukraine as of 1996 with amendments as of 03 September 2019*, article 85, paragraph 2, and article 106, paragraph 6, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua>

24 Since 2007, the president has been required to secure the support of at least two-thirds of parliament in order to hold a referendum. This process reflects the intense political struggle that has characterised Kyrgyzstan's political developments.

An important point to consider is a reduction or elimination of the turnout requirements for the referendum's validity. While in the early 1990s, the rules set a rather high voter turnout threshold for the referendum to be considered valid, later on, there were 'simplifications', either lowering this threshold or removing it altogether. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the turnout threshold for a referendum in 1991 was a majority of registered voters (50%+1), whereas in 2016 the threshold was set at 30%+1, based on the ballot papers. Turkmenistan set a 50%+1 turnout threshold in 1993, which was abolished in 2012.



***An important point to consider
is a reduction or elimination
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An example of neutralising such requirements was the initiative in Ukraine. In the early years of Ukraine's independence, referendums on constitutional (politically significant) processes, such as the early termination of the powers of parliament or the president, required a qualified majority in the turnout (2/3). In 2012, a government controlled by president V. Yanukovych passed a law that removed the threshold for turnout and simultaneously enabled the adoption of a new constitution via referendum without parliamentary participation. In 2021, a 50% threshold necessary for any referendum to take place was reinstated.

The next challenge is lowering the decision-making threshold. It matters whether this is

based on the votes of the majority of voters under majority turnout conditions, or simply on the votes of the majority of participants.

The procedure for reviewing referendum decisions, if it remains within the bounds of current legitimacy, is crucial – not least for the stability of those decisions. Depending on the country's choice, it can last from 1-2 years up to 'the next referendum'.

It appears paradoxical that the easing of requirements for referendums, including those for adopting or amending the constitution, persists even in countries where a high degree of autocratic consolidation has been achieved and where threats from political elites or social movements have been eradicated. However, some adjustments were made in Uzbekistan in 2001, in Russia in 2004, and in Turkmenistan in 2012. This is because leaders (of autocracies) prefer to keep such an unambiguous tool for resolving internal political conflicts available, and to base adjustments on their experience in implementing it. For instance, the failure to implement decisions from various referendums in Moldova in 1999 and 2010, in Ukraine in 2000, and in Armenia in 2015, is among the reasons why autocrats tend to approve already prepared decisions rather than hold consultative referendums. These phenomena exemplify the practice of authoritarian learning, which is "a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments"²⁵. Natasha Lindstaedt states that "Authoritarian elites learn how to counter pro-democracy diffusion and adapt, making their regimes more resilient."²⁶

25 S.G.F. Hall, T. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview*, "East European Politics", 2017, 33:2, p. 143. On the unsuccessful attempt at autocratisation during the presidency of V. Yanukovych in Ukraine, see.: T. Ambrosio, *The fall of Yanukovych: structural and political constraints to implementing authoritarian learning*, "East European Politics", 2017, 33:2.

26 N. Lindstaedt, *Authoritarian Diffusion*, [in:] J.J. van den Bosch, N. Lindstaedt (eds.), *Encyclopedia Tyrannica: A Research Guide to Authoritarianism*, ibidem-Verlag: Hannover – Stuttgart 2025, p. 643.

Conclusion

Even though most post-Soviet countries, apart from the Baltic states and with the exception of Armenia, are classified by researchers as autocracies in varying degrees at the initial stage of state-building, they have, within these parameters, undergone their own process of autocratisation.

In countries where top-down referendums were planned but either not held or their results were not enforced, the process of autocratisation paused at that point (Armenia/Moldova/Georgia/Ukraine).

Top-down referendums were essential to this process. They were actively employed, and often played a decisive role in confirming the legitimacy of the status quo established by leaders, at specific moments in the power struggle. Even if referendums were binding, their purpose was to promote autocratisation.



In countries where top-down referendums were planned but either not held or their results were not enforced, the process of autocratisation paused at that point (Armenia/Moldova/Georgia/Ukraine)

Referendums were most common in countries with higher degrees of political conflict (Kyrgyzstan/Belarus). In countries where elite consolidation occurred early in state-building (such as Turkmenistan), there was no need to resort to referendums to resolve conflicts. Nonetheless, the development of referendum rules continued even in such countries. This can be explained

by leaders' desire to avoid difficulties in managing to conduct 'successful' referendums whenever necessary.

Attempts to make referendums a fool proof means of decision-making, with few exceptions, have occurred in all post-Soviet countries for more than a third of a century. These have included mechanisms such as controlling when the referendum is announced by the head of state, lowering, or ignoring the turnout threshold for the referendum to be valid, and reducing the number of votes needed to make a decision. Although in autocracies, civil liberties and political rights are not fully observed, elections and referendums are held; however, there is a need for rules that ensure the smooth operation of referendums with minimal obstacles. This process in the region can be explained by the practice of 'authoritarian learning'.

The difficulty of revising referendum decisions makes a significant contribution to the 'survival of autocracies.' This aspect should be taken into account when considering their longevity.

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Issue 3 (38), 2025

ISSN 2518-7481