

Songs of fire and ice: contentious politics, regime response and state capacity in Turkey and Russia

Marc Herzog | British Institute at Ankara

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This short article focuses on a research project in progress, the preliminary findings of which were presented at a politics conference in Graz in October 2015. The impetus for the project came from my mounting frustrations over recent years that, although references to the increasing convergence of Turkish and Russian politics in the context of authoritarian regime building were being made ever more frequently, especially in the domestic and international media, a more substantial analytical comparison of these trends remained absent. Thus, when a colleague at the University of Birmingham working on Russia expressed an interest in pursuing this theme in the format of a co-authored piece of work I jumped at the chance.

A dominant trend within comparative politics has been to address broader thematic concerns within the ambit of area or regional sub-system studies. This has perhaps come at the expense of a more globally interlinked understanding of critical socio-political processes and transformations. Therefore, in terms of the geographical parameters of this comparative research, we were particularly excited that this would include two cases that are not usually juxtaposed – Russia and Turkey. Arguably, embarking on the slightly more daring and unconventional format of evaluating the political evolution of these two cases could uncover insights that are generalisable for the wider world of hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism.

Despite the many contextual differences in culture, history and politico-economic development, however, when one looks closely there is actually an intriguing number of similarities between the Turkish and Russian political systems and cultures, and their respective state- and nation-building experiences that open up multiple spaces for comparison. For instance, both Russia and Turkey are successors to large multi-ethnic empires that collapsed after the First World War and were in turn replaced by semi-revolutionary, one-party regimes, although the time spans vary. In both cases, post-authoritarian political trajectories were characterised by weak democratic institutionalisation: significant abuse of power, political instability and the existence of significant non-democratic veto players and non-democratic tutelage. Equally, both countries have traditionally experienced ambiguous relations with the alliances and structures of the transatlantic West and encountered similar difficulties in their cultural placement and self-identification.

Moreover, as stated, although comparative work involving Turkey and Russia is still scarce, in recent years the international media and academic scholarship have focused more and more attention on both countries' similarities regarding their forms of political governance as



well as their respective leaders: President Putin and President Erdoğan. Both have been in power since the new millennium and they have developed similarly charismatic and populist leadership styles. In that sense, the research paper seeks to compare the electoral authoritarianism as a regime type in the context of Turkey and Russia, how the respective countries' state capacity enabled the establishment of authoritarian regime building at the expense of democratic consolidation, and how this informed and assisted their response to the large cycle of anti-regime protests that occurred in both countries between 2012 and 2014.

Our research begins by considering the conceptual categorisation and ordering of current regime dynamics in Turkey and Russia. Whilst recognising significant differences between the two cases, it argues that the concepts of electoral authoritarianism and neo-patrimonialism are particularly helpful in coming to a better understanding of systemic political evolution over the past two decades. Within this conceptual frame, we look at the interaction between state capacity and authoritarian regime building in light of recent research looking at how state capacity can support or undermine processes of democratisation and de-democratisation. For the purposes of the project, the concept of state capacity here has been parsimoniously disaggregated into the three smaller operational attributes of a state's extractive, administrative and coercive capacities.

The first preliminary conclusions we have been able to draw indicate that of the two cases, in Turkey, for a variety of reasons, the transition towards a political format based on electoral authoritarianism since 2010/2011 has been much more conflictual, unstable and characterised by more elite and social contention than in Russia. Up to now, Putin's Russia has proven more capable of harnessing the infrastructural and coercive capacity of the Russian state to institute a stable neo-patrimonial and authoritarian regime. In this regard we point towards the distinction Andreas Schedler makes between stably institutionalised forms of electoral authoritarianism, on the one hand, and the more fluid and competitive variant, on the other, where mobilisational and oppositional spaces are still sufficiently strong to allow for electoral alternation. In both cases, the process of authoritarian regime building seems to have come at the expense of strengthening and expanding state capacity in order to reinforce effective democratic governance.