



## Neo-Authoritarianism and Leadership: Outcomes for Modern Ukraine

*Anna Kovalenko*

*39th Women's Sotnia of the Maidan*

**Abstract:** This article examines the notions of authoritarianism and neo-authoritarianism as well as their features in terms of ideology, mentality, mobilization, and politicization of a population, state control, level of political pluralism, and leadership style. Incorporating evidence from reviews, surveys, and scientific research, the study identifies the main difference between the regimes and opposition to democracy, providing samples throughout history with different characteristics, causes, and backgrounds. It presents a vision of authoritarianism as an intermediate step on the path of a particular state to democracy or totalitarianism. Finally, this article reflects upon Ukraine's future in the European paradigm and contrasts it with Russia. Ukraine is at a crossroads and must continue to carefully navigate toward the institutionalized democracy it has begun to establish.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, democracy, political regimes, ideology, mentality, mobilization, politicization, defense, security, Ukraine, Putin, China, Russia, EU.

### Introduction

Throughout three recent decades, the situation with democracy in Ukraine has had its ups and downs. Although the Revolution on Granite, "Ukraine without Kuchma" protests, the Orange Revolution, and the Revolution of Dignity paved the way for the democratization and liberalization of Ukraine's political and economic systems, Ukrainian democracy is still at risk. More precisely, the strength of Ukraine's drive to democracy within the last 30 years led to armed resistance and war with Russia due to Belarus's open and vivid support. Nevertheless, the

documents on EU membership make us believe that we all will achieve our objectives.

After February 24, 2022, in a new phase of the war with the Russian Federation, Ukraine faced a state which looked more totalitarian using the ideology of ruscism.<sup>1,2</sup> Everyone—political scientists, journalists, and military experts to a greater extent—discusses this topic now. This article was written in the limelight of recent events when the Russian Federation was just on the way to war, using tools more similar to neo-authoritarianism. Certain circumstances have appeared since the full-scale invasion started, which must be mentioned here. The facts are rapidly changing; therefore, today's description of Russia, which regularly attacks and bombs the entire territory of Ukraine, trying to capture Kyiv, is a topic for another article.

As is pointed out in the latest Freedom House report, in 2021, democracy is “under siege” worldwide. The global trend for the decline of the level of political freedom that began in 2006 reached its peak due to the number of countries experiencing deterioration. Authoritarian regimes used the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurity, and violent conflicts in their favor and became more repressive.

Even if Ukraine is fighting for brand new freedom and an independent democratic way of development nowadays, there is a high risk of giving in to the temptation of authoritarianism in some of its forms. Authoritarian rule is a traditional reaction to war needs since Roman dictators. On the other hand, the myth of authoritarianism as a way to prosperity is also present in Ukrainian political discourse.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, of the one-party majority in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament), appears to some to be in a position wherein he could abuse power if he were so inclined. However, this article proposes that Ukraine was constantly threatened by authoritarianism, and only the society's commitment to democratic principles has protected its pro-European direction. In this regard, a question arises: How can Ukraine ensure its democratic pathway and protect itself from authoritarianism (assuming it survives Putin's war)?

This article identifies authoritarianism and neo-authoritarianism as types of non-democratic political regimes, evaluates the risks of establishing a neo-authoritarian regime in Ukraine, and proposes the most relevant model of political leadership for reaching the goal of a prosperous Ukraine.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Ruscism is a concept that will be in history books, in conventional wikipedias, will remain in lessons – Zelenskyi,” *TSN.ua*, April 23, 2022, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://tsn.ua/ato/rashizm-ce-ponyattya-yake-bude-v-istorichnih-knizhkah-v-umovnih-vikipediyah-zalishitsya-na-urokah-zelenskiy-2044717.html>. – in Ukrainian.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Snyder, “The War in Ukraine Has Unleashed a New Word: In a Creative Play on Three Different Languages, Ukrainians Identify an Enemy: ‘Ruscism’,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 22, 2022, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html>.

## Authoritarianism: History and Definition

Broadly defined, authoritarianism can be considered the most common political regime throughout human history. Among its direct predecessors is tyranny, a term applied since antiquity to mark the absolutist and unrestrained rule by the law of rulers in power, usually by usurpers. Although authoritarianism initially did not have a negative connotation, tyrants received strong criticism as early as in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The past can offer many more illustrations of authoritarian rule, from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the absolutist monarchies of Europe. However, Frantz<sup>3</sup> rightly points out the essential difference between contemporary dictators and rulers of the past: concentration of power by sole individuals (like monarchs or chiefs) was then a norm, and, as a result, they aimed to demonstrate the completeness of control instead of hiding it.

Proposing a single definition of authoritarianism is not an easy task. Firstly, the interpretation of this term requires defining the concept of regime. Secondly, the nature of the authoritarian rule is not stable over time, and research approaches constantly need to adapt to these changes. There is a need to pay attention to both these issues to discuss neo-authoritarianism as a new threat to democracy.

As with interpretations of authoritarianism, there are a plethora of definitions for the term “regime.” Although this term often receives negative connotations in the press, scholars prefer to stay neutral. For a practical purpose, this article follows the definition provided by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, who explain the term “regime” as a “set of basic formal and informal rules that determine who influences the choice of leaders—including rules that identify the group from which leaders can be selected—and policies.”<sup>4</sup> However, as Frantz<sup>5</sup> notes, this definition is rather minimalistic as it excludes such factors as human rights violations, degree of freedom of speech, or economic openness. This incompleteness can be partially explained by the history of research in this field.

The first wave of interest in the concept of “regime” reflected the establishment of the dictatorships of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany and Josef Stalin in the USSR. Among the distinctive features of such regimes were the single-party system, unifying ideology, and state control of all aspects of human life, including those executed by the secret police. The aim of these means was a complete transformation of society, highlighted by theories of totalitarianism. Nonetheless, plenty of brand-new dictatorships were formed after WW2 and the subsequent collapse of colonial empires. Even though they inherited a few features of

---

<sup>3</sup> Erica Frantz, “Authoritarian Politics: Trends and Debates,” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 2 (2018): 87-89, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i2.1498>.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (June 2014): 313-331, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714000851>.

<sup>5</sup> Frantz, “Authoritarian Politics.”

totalitarian states, like the single-party system in some instances, the state control was far less penetrating. Moreover, the Cold War also fueled the process of the establishment of authoritarian regimes as both superpowers were ready to provide support to loyal dictatorships.

The nature of authoritarian regimes in their opposition to totalitarian and democratic ones can be highlighted by the classical description by Linz, who based it on his observations of Franco's Spain. In this regard, authoritarianism is:

A political system with limited, not responsible political pluralism, without an elaborated and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader, or occasionally a small group, exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its age (this definition was coined more than 50 years ago), this definition is still widely used. Such an approach emphasizes five dimensions of authoritarianism: (1) limited pluralism, including strict restrictions on who can be an apolitical actor; (2) a set of values or, in other words, mentality, which serves to justify the regime; (3) low political mobilization or its complete absence; (4) political power belongs to a single leader or small group; and, (5) limited rights of citizens.

Among these five dimensions, the most important one is the limitation of pluralism imposed by a few elite actors. These elites may own the bureaucracy, army, religious institutions, a single party, oligarchs (industrial entrepreneurs and large landowners), or even transnational economic groups or unions.

However, it is important to note that in later works, Linz and Stepan criticize the classical triangle of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy and even mark this as an "obstacle."<sup>7</sup> Thus, from the scholarly perspective, there are more authoritarian countries worldwide than democratic and totalitarian ones combined. In this regard, it becomes clear that autocracies are not similar, so there is a need for a more detailed classification of authoritarian regimes.

## Typology of Authoritarianism

It is not a surprise that such a broad category as authoritarianism includes very contrasting examples of political systems. As observed by Frantz, authoritarian regimes can "seem more different from one another than they are from democracies."<sup>8</sup> As a result, various scholars have developed distinct classification systems, and highlighting all of them is not feasible. Nevertheless, it is at least possible to provide a "typology of typologies."

---

<sup>6</sup> Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*.

<sup>8</sup> Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 64.

There are two rather different approaches to the typology of authoritarian regimes: *continuous*, which sees authoritarianism as a linear concept where systems can be placed on a scale ranging from fully authoritarian to fully democratic, and examples including the broad array of typologies that emphasize hybrid political systems, often referred to as gray zone;<sup>9</sup> and *categorical* which views dictatorships as equally authoritarian, with the key distinction of interest being various features of their rule and with dictatorships classified as civilian, monarchic, or military<sup>10</sup> as examples. Continuous typologies consider authoritarianism and democracy as points on a scale. This idea seems to be quite attractive due to two reasons. Firstly, continuous typologies allow evaluation of each country and judging whether one regime is less or more authoritarian than the other. Secondly, such an approach can be used for tracing a regime's democratization process. However, the latter advantage can be easily turned into a disadvantage as an authoritarian rule is not necessarily making progress towards democracy but conserving the nature of a regime. Moreover, the continuous approach often faces problems similar to those described by Linz and Stepan.<sup>11</sup> Instead of marking most countries as authoritarian, such a typology overuses the "hybrid" label.

In contrast, categorical typologies focus on specific features of regimes, such as what social group strategies, leaders, and elites rule or from what groups they originate. For example, Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland distinguish civilian, monarchic, and military dictatorships. A classification by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz<sup>12</sup> is quite similar, differentiating personalist, monarchic, dominant-party, and authoritarian military regimes.

Unfortunately, the internal typology of authoritarianism is still unable to illuminate worldwide contemporary challenges to democracy. This problem can be illustrated by the proposed changes in the methodology of studies of non-democratic regimes proposed by Linz and Stepan.<sup>13</sup> As a possible solution, the researchers added the categories of *post-totalitarianism* and *sultanism* to mark regimes that do not fall into the tripartite type distinction.<sup>14</sup> The first of them is suitable mainly for the description of post-Stalinist processes in the USSR and so-called countries of People's Democracies, and it considers the stage of development of these processes. Thus, for post-totalitarian states, the ruling party's role remains until the very end of the regime, and the economic sphere is placed under state control. On the other hand, sultanism stands for a dictator's despotic and unpredictable rule (Romania under Ceaușescu is a remarkable example).

---

<sup>9</sup> Frantz, "Authoritarian Politics: Trends and Debates."

<sup>10</sup> Frantz, "Authoritarian Politics: Trends and Debates."

<sup>11</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*.

<sup>12</sup> Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions."

<sup>13</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 293-295.

Both these types, though useful for research purposes, do not reflect some remarkable recent changes. Therefore, this article highlights the concept of *neo-authoritarianism*.

## Features of Neo-Authoritarian Regimes

As we already mentioned, past authoritarian regimes do not always share the features of modern ones. As with the shift after WW2, the end of the Cold War also changed the nature of dictatorships. The distinguishing feature of post-Cold War neo-authoritarianism is the greater use of pseudo-democratic institutions to ensure a regime's survival. This phenomenon is partially connected to the rise in demand for democracy, both by the international community (closely tied to the opportunity for a country to receive foreign funding and assistance) and society within a country.

In recent years, scholars have applied the term *neo-authoritarianism* (or, sometimes, *new authoritarianism*) to label quite different regimes with many common characteristics discussed below. Firstly, to mark the changes that occurred in China since the rise of Xi Jinping in 2013 and the relatively soft and restricted state control. Secondly, to consider the dictatorship of Vladimir Putin that, despite its authoritarian nature, is quite different from its Soviet totalitarian and post-totalitarian predecessors. Thirdly, to indicate the somewhat surprising shift towards authoritarianism in some democratic countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

To better understand what neo-authoritarianism is, we will use the classification system designed by Linz and Stepan, who based their analysis on four broad characteristics: *pluralism*, *ideology*, *mobilization*, and *leadership*. These characteristics, with the addition of *state control*,<sup>15</sup> are discussed below.

### *Ideology*

Ideology for neo-authoritarianism, as well as for authoritarianism, is not a fundamental issue. If the regime needs an ideology, it can be temporarily activated for tactical purposes. *The strength of the neo-authoritarian regime lies in its flexibility.* The main principle is to prohibit everything that can cause harm to the authorities and their power. However, to exist and have social support, neo-authoritarianism is forced to adapt to the demands of society. One of the possible tactics for neo-authoritarian regimes is to artificially create a demand for certain policies among the population and then satisfy it instead of following people's needs or desires. With the development of social networks and tools of manipulation, this trend poses a significant threat to democracy.

It turns out that there is quite the opposite approach to analyzing the question of neo-authoritarianism and ideology. Often there are attempts to find similar ideological characteristics in each modern neo-authoritarian state to discern what unifies these regimes. Researchers from the Institut Montaigne decided to

---

<sup>15</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 38.

examine which ideological doctrines, daily practices, and discourses are denied by neo-authoritarianism. It turned out that the rise of such regimes is likely combined with “the economy – globalization, 40 years of neoliberalism, the 2008 crisis. ... The latter is certainly inseparable from the middle-class crisis, the explosion of inequalities, the devaluation of politics, perceived by many as subjected to the market.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, all neo-authoritarian countries are similar in their attempts to defend themselves from such crises of the last twenty years; it can be summed up that neo-authoritarianism denies the values declared by neoliberalism.

### **Mentality**

The mentality of the people is also an important characteristic in describing political regimes. Linz and Stepan suggest that mentality is primary while ideology (either its presence or absence) is secondary. Mentalities are ways of thinking and feeling, more emotional than rational, that provide noncodified ways of reacting to different situations.<sup>17</sup> So, awareness of the influence of daily practices, rooted in common views, morality, biases, etc., of a particular group of people on policies is a crucial tool required to examine differences among current neo-authoritarian regimes.

One of the examples of how a neo-authoritarian regime can pragmatically use mentality is that of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.<sup>18</sup> According to Magyar,<sup>19</sup> this autocracy cannot be understood in terms of nationalism, religion, or conservatism. For instance, antisemitism and xenophobia are used not due to ideological reasons but to increase support. No less pragmatic is Fidesz’s adherence to faith.<sup>20</sup> Fidesz is one of the two biggest political parties in Hungary, which is quite actively transforming its ideology from liberalism to etatism, from centrist to right-centrist, and cooperating with various coalitions under the rule of Viktor Orbán. Appeals to religiosity aim to transfer the legitimization of power from a democratic foundation, when the politicians in power are accountable for their actions, into the sphere of absolute authority. Secondly, it becomes possible to ritualize all social problems with the help of a language that cannot be involved in the discussion space. Thirdly, with the help of religion, the power of Fidesz is rooted in regions and social groups that are otherwise difficult to reach.

---

<sup>16</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, “The End of Neoliberalism and the Rebirth of History,” *Project Syndicate*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/end-of-neoliberalism-unfettered-markets-fail-by-joseph-e-stiglitz-2019-11>.

<sup>17</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*.

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Heinrich, “From Horthy to Orbán: Neo-Authoritarianism in Hungary. Essay,” in *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Jerzy J. Wiatr (Opladen, Berlin & Toronto: Barbara Budrich, 2019), <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/53298/9783847412496.pdf>, 100-128.

<sup>19</sup> Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Press, in association with Noran Libro, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State*.

Finally, religion serves as a means of ideological indoctrination in the field of education. As Magyar illustrates, “the link between the Church and the political power is businesslike, in a very secular way.”<sup>21</sup>

China, for example, is one of the most ancient civilizations, which has existed for about 6,000 years. China’s growing strength (seventh in the late twentieth century and now second in the world in terms of GDP) seems to support the effectiveness of neo-authoritarianism. Still, this success is most likely due to the unique socio-cultural code of the Chinese, their understanding of leadership as authoritarians, and the supremacy of the public over the private. Chinese collectivism is deeply rooted in mentality. Andrejevic demonstrates that the sources of this phenomenon lie in Confucianism (respect for seniority, obedience to authority, etc.), Buddhism (denial of individual ego, social position, family), and Taoism (all beings and things are fundamentally one).<sup>22</sup>

Russia also wants to feel like an ancient civilization but not of its own. That is why it is trying to keep Ukraine in its zone of influence – with it in alliance, Russia is also part of Kyivan Rus (for example, attempts to “privatize” the roots of the French Queen Anne Yaroslavna).<sup>23</sup> The intention to appropriate Ukrainian cultural heritage is also evident in Putin’s recent essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”<sup>24</sup> This lengthy amateur opus with numerous historical inaccuracies was issued with clearly imperialistic ambitions. Absolutely the same was his on-air appeal on February 24, 2022. Just after this statement, Russia attacked with missiles Kyiv and the other territories of Ukraine. Thus, the war that started in 2014 transformed into a full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war with many more casualties, mainly civilians. This full-scale war is being followed by pseudo-historical spam as they have to explain to their citizens the reasons for killing Ukrainians. And the Russians themselves identify this process as a self-identification of their nation, as stated by the Ermitazh Museum’s Head, Mikhail Piotrovsky.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State*.

<sup>22</sup> Tatjana K. Andrejevic, “Understanding the Chinese Mentality – Some Basic Hints,” in Proceedings of the *I International Symposium Engineering Management And Competitiveness* 2011 (EMC2011), June 24-25, 2011, Zrenjanin, Serbia, <http://www.tfzr.uns.ac.rs/emc/emc2011/Files/D%2004.pdf>, 281-86.

<sup>23</sup> “Putin Called the Queen of France Anna as Russian in Paris,” *Radio Svoboda*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/28517175.html>. – in Ukrainian.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” *Kremlin.ru*, July 12, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/17>.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mikhail Piotrovsky, “‘He strangled himself.’ Piotrovsky gave an interview about ‘militarists and imperialists,’” *Sever.Real*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.severreal.org/a/byt-nemnozhechko-lyudoedom-piotrovskiy-dal-intervyu-o-militaristah-i-impertsah-/31913618.html>. – in Russian.

### **Mobilization and Politicization**

Contrary to totalitarianism, neo-authoritarianism does not require the whole society to be mobilized or politicized. The exception is during the moment of need or at some stage of the regime's development.

One of the examples of extreme mobilization and politicization of society under neo-authoritarian dictatorship is visible in the events that followed the Russian occupation of Crimea when anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian discourses became hegemonic as a result of state propaganda. The distinction between Us and the Enemy is not anything new, but the success of its use in these circumstances remains notable. Thus, Shevtsova admits "the amazingly successful military-patriotic Kremlin mobilization of the Russian society after the Crimea annexation" and links it with the "search for an enemy."<sup>26</sup> This point is supported by Lewis, who notes that "the identification of an existential distinction between friend and enemy was—at least for a short time—a highly effective means of mobilizing society, as evidenced by the success of anti-Western propaganda in Russia after 2014."<sup>27</sup> The aggressor continues the mobilization, which requires regular outcomes; that is why Russia opens new frontiers to fight in Ukraine. If the results are unsatisfactory, Russia closes it. Thus the aggressor nihilates all the social movements inside the country, changing society's attention in order to secure Russian political elites. On the other hand, the country's worsening economic situation and the sanction policy of the West lead to a noticeable increase and escalation of social problems, which influences some individuals from Putin's ruling circle. So, society's alienation from active participation in actual policy-making is a standard pattern. Politics is often labeled as the task of specially prepared people, not the whole society, with people of different origins, beliefs, and experiences. Such regimes tend to enact laws on behalf of the people without any previous public discussion or direct demand.

### **State Control**

Only totalitarianism implies all-encompassing control over all areas of a country's life. The authoritarian and neo-authoritarian regimes tend to impose their control on certain spheres, giving space for social and/or economic autonomy. There are a couple of pragmatic reasons for doing so. Firstly, the modern world is globalized, and ruling elites, or even transnational economic groups, can follow their own interests while the regime allows some uncontrolled activities.

Secondly, neo-authoritarianism can use various tools designed by other political regimes if it helps them achieve their goal. The striking example is the exploitation of the liberal approach by the Russian neo-authoritarian elites, as they

---

<sup>26</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, "How Long Russians Will Believe in Fairy Tale?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 25, 2014, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/56003>.

<sup>27</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/45793>.

were perceived in the modern academic world, in 2008-2012 to “benefit from facilitating programmatic flexibility” because Vladimir Putin is believed to be “an opportunist rather than an ideologically driven strategist.”<sup>28</sup> So, state control in neo-authoritarianism turns out to be a tool to legitimate and impose power.

One of the possible manifestations of neo-authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet countries is virtual democracy. According to Wilson, virtual democracies are based on five key principles: (1) the extensive use of mudslinging and compromising information to blackmail opponents; (2) abuse of state power (so-called administrative resources) to assist pro-government candidates and hinder opposition candidates; (3) the use of underhanded tactics that can include infiltrating an opponent’s party or introduction of full namesake candidates with names similar to opposition’s candidates to distract voters; (4) creation of virtual objects like political parties that exist only for drawing votes or making claims that a mainstream party is unwilling to make; and (5) application of *dramaturgy* – “the creation of a narrative around an election or other event, allowing technologists to control the content and tone of political discourse.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, this article turns to Wilson’s concept of virtual democracy to discuss Ukraine’s resistance to neo-authoritarianism.

Neo-authoritarianism, if necessary, seeks to oversee all spheres of its citizens’ lives. In China, the formula for a strong liberal leader was proposed in the 1980s as an answer to the question of sparing democratization and market reform in China. Initially, a strong leader meant an authoritarian leader (leadership group) with opportunities and tools that were far from democratic. The assumption was that such an approach was safer for the stability of the state.<sup>30</sup> More recently, China has perfected its control over its population. Speaking on the issue of the increase in the intensity of state supervision in China, *the Economist* noted:

The bureaucracy, army, and police have undergone purges of deviant and corrupt officials. Big business is being brought into line. Mr. Xi has rebuilt the party at the grassroots, creating a network of neighborhood spies and injecting cadres into private firms to watch over them. Not since Mao’s day has society been so tightly controlled.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Susan B. Glasser, Interview with Carl Bildt, “Carl Bildt: The Full Transcript,” *Politico Magazine*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/01/carl-bildt-the-full-transcript-215086/>.

<sup>29</sup> Erin Trouth Hofmann, “Virtual Politics and the Corruption of Post-Soviet Democracy,” *Wilson Center*, 2006, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/virtual-politics-and-the-corruption-post-soviet-democracy>.

<sup>30</sup> “China’s Communist Party at 100: The Secret of Its Longevity,” *The Economist*, June 26, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/06/26/chinas-communist-party-at-100-the-secret-of-its-longevity>.

<sup>31</sup> “China’s Communist Party at 100.”

### **Political Pluralism and Opposition**

Political pluralism and opposition function within the formal boundaries permitted by the regime. The authoritarian type of political regime presupposes the suppression of non-systemic opposition—parties are “excluded” from the political system because they lack representation in the structures of state power and interaction with the ruling group—or its complete absence, as well as the impossibility for the legal opposition to significantly influence the policy of the state. Authoritarian leaders use power without considering the political views that differ from their opinion, and it is almost impossible to change them through elections. We can examine political regimes by elites’ treatment of their opposition.

### **Authoritarian Leadership**

In new realms, authoritarian leadership presupposes a sole directing influence based on the threat of sanctions and the use of force. Authoritarian leaders do not justify their actions by pursuing high goals. They simply state that society is on the very edge of the abyss and take on the task of saving it, after which, according to them, they are ready to give up power. All political activity becomes the exclusive function of political power. Yilmaz and Turner’s observations can illustrate this:

Authoritarian leaders not only aim to shock and paralyze the minds of political opponents daily through judicial repression, violent manifestations of state authority, and imposition of securitization policies, they also aim to embed a kind of ‘aspectival captivities’ within society and intellectual circles to structure the field of knowledge, opinion, and imagination for the sake of their rule.<sup>32</sup>

The ruling elite is formed not democratically but through appointments from above. As a result, the entourage of an authoritarian leader is selected based on personal sympathy and loyalty to the leader and not on their business qualities and capabilities.

### **Practical Implications for the Case of Ukraine**

As summarized in the report “Ukraine: 30 Years on European Path” by the Razumkov Center, the first half of the 1990s was almost catastrophic for Ukraine, which was going through an economic collapse and an enormous decline in the welfare of citizens.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, further uncertainty in the priorities and directions of growth and development policy, as well as the lack of consistency in

---

<sup>32</sup> Zafer Yilmaz and Bryan S. Turner, “Turkey’s Deepening Authoritarianism and the Fall of Electoral Democracy,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 691–698, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1642662>.

<sup>33</sup> Yu. Yakymenko et al., *Ukraine: 30 Years on the European Path* (Kyiv: The Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies named after Olexander Razumkov,

implementing reforms, have significantly hampered the socio-economic development of Ukraine. As noted in the report, leaders' failures did not allow them to quickly and effectively use the potential that Ukrainian society had – “a relatively high intellectual and cultural level, good natural and climatic conditions, the age-old desire of the Ukrainian people to establish themselves as an independent state.”<sup>34</sup>

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukrainian political life faced tough challenges. Even after thirty years of Ukrainian independence, some researchers and analysts count it as a transitional or hybrid regime. Such a label can be understood by remembering the two revolutions which took place in Ukraine within the last twenty years. Magyar and Madlovics, in their well-respected study on post-communist regimes, analyze these mobilizations of civic society in 2004 and 2013 as absolute denials of the presidents Leonid Kuchma and Victor Yanukovich and their policies and the Ukrainians' political choices.<sup>35</sup> In Ukraine, voters tend to qualify their candidates for their leadership qualities. For instance, Kuchma was known as an “economic man,”<sup>36</sup> and Yanukovich as Zagvar, which means the high position of a person in the Soviet system. So, in this regard, it was not completely unexpected that their presidency would obtain authoritarian features. In both cases, this feature did not define the political landscape. They were elected democratically, although once they showed their authoritarian habits, people stopped admiring their policies and political choices. The high level of society's self-organization and immunity from totalitarianism and the USSR overall led to uprisings such as the campaign “Ukraine Without Kuchma,” the Orange Revolution, and the Revolution of Dignity.

The possibility of this denial allows for examining Ukraine as a patronal democracy. It has some democratic practices like competitive and fair elections, the presence of opposition and pluralism, and continuous public discussions initiated by people or the government. Still, it is ruled by a patron or group of people with political and economic power. Twice, when the Ukrainian people started their revolution, the political regime was transitioning from patronal democracy to patronal autocracy. Such a political evolution is called “back and forth” and is typical for ex-Soviet Republics.<sup>37</sup> In addition, from Wilson's point of view, the Orange Revolution (and we can apply the same logic to the Revolution of Dignity)

---

«Zapovit» Publishing House, 2021), <https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/2021-independence-30.pdf>, 56.

<sup>34</sup> Yakymenko et al., *Ukraine: 30 Years on the European Path*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021), 222-23.

<sup>36</sup> Kateryna Odarchenko, “Ukraine's Presidents, Power Elites, and the Country's Evolution,” *Wilson Center*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraines-presidents-power-elites-and-countrys-evolution>.

<sup>37</sup> Magyar and Madlovics, *Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes*, 222-23.

demonstrated that Ukrainian society rejected “virtual democracy,” one of the models for new authoritarian regimes.<sup>38</sup>

In turn, Hale emphasizes the dynamic nature of the “patronage policy,” associated with competition within elites with the changing expectations of clients and “brokers” (oligarchs, regional leaders, bureaucrats) regarding the prospects of their patrons.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Hale demonstrates that the change of expectations led to the collapse of the “pyramids of power” during the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Hale argues that the expectations of elites are formed and changed under the influence of formal institutions, which arise in part as a by-product of political conflicts but have their own logic of functioning.<sup>40</sup>

The struggle for democracy in Ukraine culminated with the full-scale war with the Russian Federation. The needed and forced action in resisting the enemy was to impose martial law as one of the temporary measures to defend democracy. Despite the support of the Western countries, the economic situation in Ukraine remains challenging due to the gigantic damages and destruction of civilian and military infrastructure throughout the country, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic earlier. These circumstances are favorable for transitioning toward patronage authoritarianism. For various reasons, Ukraine has not been ready for the full-scale Russian aggression. Some new armed elements, such as the Territorial Defense and National Resistance, were created. The destroyed mechanism of weapons procurement was replaced by international technical support. Issues with military logistics, tactical unpreparedness, warnings and alert systems, and bomb shelters were solved during intensive fighting. Nevertheless, one national feature that helps Ukrainians survive and be united in these rough times is autonomy and a high level of responsibility. Consciousness and self-organization were the foundation of the 2014 Maidan and the defense in the consequent war with Russia. Today, it is of utmost importance to use these features as a foundation for solving problems, such as advancing the effectiveness of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, improving the Ukrainian economy, and providing all necessary reforms to achieve the status of a member state of the European Union.<sup>41</sup>

Any discussion on the political situation in Ukraine should consider that the country is situated in a specific region of Europe, where the East meets the West, not only geographically but also ideologically. Moreover, Ukrainian history and mentality, from the democratic institutions of Zaporozhian Sich to the Revolution of Dignity and the war with Russia, are evidence of the population’s expectations of a democratic and European development path.

---

<sup>38</sup> Hofmann, “Virtual Politics and the Corruption of Post-Soviet Democracy.”

<sup>39</sup> Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 209-10.

<sup>40</sup> Hale, *Patronal Politics*, 209-10.

<sup>41</sup> “Ukraine Officially Received the Status of a Candidate for EU Membership,” *European truth*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/news/2022/06/23/7141922/>. – in Ukrainian.

Moreover, not only Ukraine itself but also European allies should be interested in the democratic future of Ukraine. Ukraine's neighbors, most of whom previously belonged to the USSR or its sphere of influence, have not yet achieved democracy and do not even set such a task. The question is not only about ideology but other issues too: "Ukraine is significant for the entire EU in terms of political stability, security, and energy-related matters."<sup>42</sup> In this way, further democratic reforms in Ukraine are a positive sign for European countries. For instance, in reacting to global challenges like the migration crisis, the world community is interested in a democratic and, therefore, predictable and trustworthy partner.

However, the European development of Ukraine is in danger because of the Russian attempts to undermine democratic processes in the country. In many aspects, the success of democracy in Ukraine requires active countering of not only the Russian military aggression but also its information agenda. Ukraine needs to emphasize, among others, the difference in mentalities that makes dictatorship impossible while, in turn, protecting these mentalities also requires defending Ukrainian heritage from Russian encroachments.

That is a reason why Ukraine should actively reflect on the requirements for a political leader. Ukraine needs a person who can unite people and continue to implement democratic reforms, bringing the country closer to joining the EU. Additionally, in developing a portrait of a political leader, it is necessary to take into account the experience of foreign countries, including the negative ones. Notably, this requires an emphasis on the necessity of splitting out with the Russian authoritarian leadership vision. This geopolitical choice does not mean rejecting the possibility of dialogue between the countries entirely but asks to check power positions and ensure that both sides are treated equally as sovereign and independent states.

Finally, in addition to the commitment to democratic principles and pro-reformist agenda, a leader of a prosperous Ukraine requires both virtue and acceptance of other points of view, which are central to the sustainability of pluralism. The legacy of Robert Schuman, who contributed to the development of such institutions as the European Union, the Council of Europe, and NATO, can serve as a guide for future Ukrainian leaders. Schuman, in this context, is important not just as a visionary of a stable and united Europe but because he imagined, described, and implemented the idea of reintegration of Germany back to the peaceful coexistence of European nations via shaping Franco-German Coal and Steel Production. The idea of supranational integration in some areas can be realized by integrating Ukraine into the European Union, convergence with selected neighboring countries like Poland and Turkey, or countries that are a bit further away, such as the UK, the US, or countries of the Baltic region. That might

---

<sup>42</sup> Olga Shumylo-Tapiola, "Why Does Ukraine Matter to the EU?" *Carnegie Europe*, April 16, 2013, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/04/16/why-does-ukraine-matter-to-eu-pub-51522>.

become the core of Ukraine's actual European or trans-Atlantic economic integration. In the near future, Ukraine will need to craft a plan for the full reintegration of occupied territories, so Schuman's heritage and attention to the people, their traumatic experience, and resources must be carefully analyzed and studied by Ukrainian leaders.

## **Conclusion**

In recent decades, despite the claims about global advances in democratization, there has been an increase in the number of political regimes that scholars analyze as authoritarian forms of government. Under an authoritarian regime, fundamental human rights are not respected, so the adequate reaction of the world community remains essential, and neo-authoritarianism, with its tricky ability to mask itself under the facade of democracy, must be of particular concern.

Both authoritarianism and neo-authoritarianism have ambiguous interpretations. Political science is not consistent with the concept of the regime, and authoritarianism has been identified throughout history with different characteristics, causes, and backgrounds. In general, there is a tendency to perceive authoritarianism as opposed to totalitarianism and democracy, and some see it as an intermediate stop on the path of a particular state to democracy or totalitarianism. The definition of neo-authoritarianism poses even more problems. However, it is possible to define its basic characteristics in terms of ideology, mentality, mobilization, and politicization of a population, state control, level of political pluralism, and leadership style.

Ukraine is at a particularly dangerous point in its political development. On the one hand, due to democratic institutions such as fair elections, pluralism, and the right to spontaneous assembly, the Ukrainian people foiled the attempts to completely establish an authoritarian rule. On the other hand, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the occupation of Crimea, and social and economic instability make it especially tempting to elect a leader with authoritarian ambitions.

Democratic Ukraine, which adheres to democratic practices, is a strategic goal of Europe because the region in which this country is located must be secured from openly anti-European and/or anti-democratic agendas. Therefore, preventing the arrival of an authoritarian leader in the leadership of Ukraine is important for the stability of the region and the security of the whole of Europe.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

## Acknowledgment

*Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 21, 2022, is supported by the United States government.

## About the Author

**Anna Kovalenko** is a Head of NGO 39th Sotnia, a former Member of Parliament and a government official, and always an activist. Expert on national security, defense, and regional policy. PhD student at Educational and Scientific Institute of Public Administration and Civil Service of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, researching democratic and civilian control over the intelligence services in Ukraine, and a Head of the Project "Strategical Leadership" at Kyiv-Mohyla Business School (KMBS) in 2016-2018. Since 2014, Anna has advised ministers of defense and information policy, the Committee for National Security and Defense of the Verkhovna Rada, and the Head of the State Service for Special Communications and Information Protection. She served as Deputy Head of the Presidential Office for National Security and Defense (2019-2020), Deputy Minister of Community and Territorial Development (2020), and Head of Chernihiv Oblast Administration (2020-2021).

*E-mail:* a.m.kovalenko39@gmail.com