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Don't think of a wave! A research note about the current autocratization debate

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ABSTRACT

One of the most fascinating developments in the recent comparative politics scholarship is undoubtedly the turn from the studies on the process of democratization to those on the opposite phenomenon, that is, autocratization. After the recent, initial wave of empirical studies, only recently scholars began to tackle some underlying albeit essential issues, such as the problem of conceptualization and measurement of this concept. On the pages of *Democratization*, a crucial debate recently emerged when Svend-Erik Skaaning reacted to the high-impact 2018 article by Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg. This piece aims to contribute to this stimulating debate. The main message of this piece is: don't think of a wave! Autocratization matters and deserves to be studied, even if there is no such a "third wave." This research note claims that steering the debate on the concept of wave(s), which is of limited analytical and explanatory power, is misleading and risks taking the entire discussion down a blind alley. In the second part, the research note discusses some of the open issues of this literature, and in particular a) the very conceptualization of autocratization and b) the problem of thresholds and false positives. In the same way, the third part deals with three new areas of inquiry: c) the multi-dimensional nature of autocratization d) the multi-level dimension of autocratization and e) the opposition to autocratization.

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One of the most fascinating developments in the recent comparative politics scholarship is undoubtedly the turn from the studies on the process of democratization to those on the opposite phenomenon, that is, transitions towards autocracy. After the initial wave of empirical studies, only recently scholars began to tackle some underlying albeit essential issues, such as the problem of conceptualization and measurement of the opposite process to democratization. The scholarship progressively developed with contributions that framed the phenomenon through the lens of the umbrella concept of autocratization¹ and, eventually, on the pages of *Democratization*, a crucial debate recently emerged when Svend-Erik Skaaning reacted to the high-impact 2018 article by Lührmann and Lindberg (from here, L&L)² on the waves of autocratization.

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This research note aims to contribute to this stimulating debate. The main message of this piece is: don't think of a wave! Autocratization matters and deserves to be studied, even if there is no such a "third wave." This paper claims that steering the debate on the concept of wave(s), which is of limited analytical and explanatory power, is misleading and risks taking the entire discussion down a blind alley. Moreover, I see a clear risk of overshadowing some still open issues of this literature, and in particular a) the very conceptualization of autocratization and b) the problem of thresholds and false positives. In the same way, the discussion about waves risks slowing the evolution of the research agenda on autocratization towards three new areas of inquiry: c) the multi-dimensional nature of autocratization d) the multi-level dimension of autocratization and e) the opposition to autocratization.

Don't think of a wave!

It is well known how the concept of wave applied to democratization processes was made famous by Samuel P. Huntington in his influential 1991 book.³ We should recognize that after almost thirty years the idea of the wave has not lost its charm, despite the numerous criticisms that the same concept has received, especially in the early 2000s.⁴ Having undergone numerous empirical tests with different datasets, it can be stated without difficulty that the wave metaphor still maintains a small *descriptive value*. Beyond the data used and the conceptualization of democracy that has been made, it is a matter of fact that the spread of democracy in the last 200 years is not linear and progressive, and it probably followed sequences of ebbs, flows, and periods marked by stability. At the same time, the concept also assumes an *evocative power*. The message of Huntington in the early nineties was loud and clear and resonated with the *Weltanschauung* of the end of history.⁵ (Liberal) democracy was supposed to be the last remaining legitimate political system, and that system was expanding across the world at rates never seen before. It is therefore understandable that the same metaphor is easily adaptable to the current context. A "wave of autocratization" resonates strongly with the narrative on the crisis of the Western model of liberal democracy, with the emergence of great authoritarian powers (China and Russia), and the global disillusionment with the functioning of democracy in providing well-being and good governance. However, I argue that the advantages of the concept of wave stop precisely in the descriptive and evocative use that has been made of it. On the contrary, numerous disadvantages lead me to advise against using the wave metaphor for analytical purposes in the research agenda on autocratization.⁶

First, an *inconclusive debate*. After almost 30 years since Huntington's book, the difficulty of finding an agreement on the definition and operationalization of the concept and the extent of waves is still there. The problem was first revealed with the stream of studies that tried to test and criticize Huntington's analysis at the beginning of the 2000s and has re-emerged as an issue in the recent debate on autocratization between Skaaning, and L&L on *Democratization*. Using different definitions of wave, different conceptualizations of democracy (gradual vs dichotomic) and different dataset, the findings, while confirming a general framework characterized by ebbs and flow, differ significantly concerning the start and end of the single waves and the number of countries involved. Writing on autocratization, Skaaning⁷ showed how, by using the same V-DEM data and samples, it is possible to reach different conclusions than L&L in their article. For the authors of Gothenburg, the

third wave of autocratization would have begun in the mid-nineties and would still be in progress, in fact constituting a paradoxical overlapping with the third wave of democratization. For Skaaning (and others)⁸, the very existence of a recent wave of autocratization is denied or severely limited in its scope. Maybe it is time to take seriously what Dorenspleet wrote in her influential 2000 article: “there is real doubt whether the wave metaphor is the most appropriate way to conceptualize the problem [of democratization and reverse wave].”⁹ Rather than revealing something about the excellence of the scholars that try to use this metaphor, the problems concerning the wave debate is showing how flawed the concept itself is and how difficult is to build robust empirical analyses upon it.

Second, *the obsession with periodization*. I strongly argue in favour of comparative strategies to assess common causes and modalities of autocratization, and this research note does not suggest that the recent cases of autocratization should be studied only as individual cases. My main point instead is that comparative strategies on contemporary autocratization can do without a framework, that of the “wave,” which essentially conflates cases under the same label forcing common causal interpretations only because these cases occur in a similar (loosely defined) time frame. Rather than starting from the assumption that there is a wave of autocratization based on an admittedly raw quantitative assessment of the number of democratizing and autocratizing countries in a given time-frame,¹⁰ and on *this basis* looking for common causal explanation, we should do the other way around: *first*, build a comparative research design linked to a theoretical framework that justifies all design decisions, then conduct empirical research and *eventually* establish if the common causal elements are sufficient to group some cases under the same label (“wave”) or category. Justifying the comparison on a more solid foundations is even more important if the aim is to analyse contemporary cases of autocratization. Compared to the past experiences of autocratization (for instance, the cases between the two world wars¹¹), the closer we get to the early twenty-first century, the more the types of regimes, their geographical distribution, and their paths of democratization and autocratization are heterogeneous. Consequently, the supposed new wave of autocratization brings together, under a single label, phenomena that are significantly different from each other. For instance, on the one hand, the Latin American cases of Venezuela (under Chavez and Maduro), Ecuador (under Correa), Nicaragua (under Ortega) (among others in the region) are contemporary cases of autocratization, and they can and should be studied in a comparative perspective. However, most of the domestic and international causes are specific to the Latin American context of the period, such as the social effects of neoliberal policies, the crisis of the economic model, the social pressure for the participation of marginalized ethnic and social groups. On the other hand, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and other CEECs are also contemporary cases of autocratization. Here too there are idiosyncratic causal factors such as the legacy of the communist and post-communist period, the relationship with the European Union, the 2008 financial crisis and debt crisis, and the migration crisis. Therefore, what is the need to conflate these cases into a single wave? Couldn't there be a Latin American wave and one from Central and Eastern Europe (and many others more), that are entirely distinct and independent from each other? The point is that while it is desirable to produce comparative analyses (on a regional, local, trans-regional scale; cross-country or cross-time), there is no scientific justification to bring *ex-ante* all these cases together under a single label. If we want to compare them and found similarities and differences

between contemporary and past cases of autocratization, this obsession with periodization does not actually add anything from an analytical point of view to improve our understanding of the phenomenon.

The current autocratization debate: tacking stock

The possibility that the debate on autocratization comes to a halt once oriented towards the issue of waves constitutes a risk for the reasons set out in the previous section. On the other hand, in my opinion, there are two topics full of theoretical and empirical consequences that still deserve scholarly attention.

First, *straighten the definition of autocratization up*. My claim here is that autocratization scholars should engage more in defining and debating their concepts. Otherwise, it will be increasingly difficult to compare empirical results and assess the quality of findings. In their 2018 article about the third wave, L&L defined autocratization as “any move away from [full] democracy” and basically as “democratization in reverse,” operationalizing the concept through a “decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy” using the V-DEM Electoral democracy index.¹² My criticism on this conceptualization essentially concerns the “negative” definition of the phenomenon. Take the concept of democratization. Could it ever be defined as “any movement away from full autocracy”? I argue that this kind of definition would say nothing about the actual process of building democratic institutions and norms, as it would be focused only on “dismantling” authoritarianism. In other words, autocratization is not only about “moving away” from an ideal type (which is difficult to identify empirically) of “full democracy,” but rather about building a new political regime with peculiar and original authoritarian characteristics. Furthermore, the concept of “democratization in reverse” risks confusing rather than clarifying, because it suggests a symmetry that has not been proven between the two processes of political change in the forms, in the actors involved and in the modalities. Instead, I suggest that we should define autocratization *positively*, as a “process of regime change towards autocracy that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for public contestation and political participation in the process of government selection.”¹³ This definition allows unpacking the empirical process of change into three dimensions that characterize every type of political regime in the autocracy-democracy spectrum: executive limitation, public contestation, and political participation. This conceptualization of autocratization, compared to that offered by L&L, also include the indicators of liberal democracy in the operationalization. Empirical research shows that the dimensions of legislative and judicial control over the executive and Rule of Law are precisely the ones in which most changes take place in the transition from liberal to defective democracy and, more generally, is usually the first target of autocratizer leaders.¹⁴ The liberal dimension of democracy, if it might be irrelevant when studying autocratization in authoritarian regimes, is essential to have a complete picture of autocratization processes beginning in democratic regimes.

Second, *raising the threshold, avoiding false positives*. Defining and operationalizing the concept of autocratization presents the same challenges scholars faced with the concept of democratization. Basically, the preliminary question concerns the choice between approach “by degree” or “by kind,” or a combination of both.¹⁵ Each perspective has pros and cons, but it is crucial to explicitly discuss the consequences of this

choice when defining this concept. Usually, quantitative research is leaning towards an approach “by degree,” because it allows multiplying the number of cases. Accordingly, L&L clearly chose a continuous approach. However, Skaaning criticized the inconsistency between their conceptualization of autocratization “by degree” and their choice to operationalize the phenomenon using the 0.1 threshold in the EDI index to identify autocratization events.¹⁶ Instead, for Skaaning a consistent, continuous perspective should have considered “all negative movements on the autocracy-democracy spectrum as instances of autocratization.”¹⁷ This point of view is legitimate and has undeniable advantages: the choice of a continuous perspective allows to identify even small changes that can definitely be real and relevant and is the preferred option when looking for broad explanations and generalization. However, it also contains undeniable drawbacks which, in my opinion, lead to advice against this approach in the case of autocratization. The continuous perspective leads, by definition, to reduce the problem of “false negatives”: potentially no case of autocratization will be excluded from the analysis. However, the same approach dramatically multiplies the presence of “false positives” of autocratization. In other words, the analysis will be full of cases of alleged autocratization when, in reality, they are not. This problem is a typical consequence of the conceptual stretching of the phenomenon and has already been noticed when the concept of autocratization and populism began to be dangerously confused, counting as cases of autocratization events such as the arrival in power of Trump in the USA or far-right parties in Austria, for instance.¹⁸ The inclusion of many false positives has also resulted in what Cianetti and Hanley have recently defined “backsliding paradigm,” namely “a pessimistic outlook viewing all political processes through the lens of backsliding”¹⁹ which eventually prevents a proper understanding of some dynamics of political change which are hastily classified as instances of autocratization.

Straight to the point: we should be careful and conservative before labelling one country as autocratizing, also for all political implications of this scientific choice. To minimize false positives, I suggest defining autocratization *only those processes of change that imply a transition from one regime to another*, referring to a robust literature that proposes a widely accepted four-fold distinction between political regimes (liberal democracy, defective democracy, electoral autocracy and closed autocracy²⁰) based on the three dimensions affected by autocratization: executive limitation, public contestation, and political participation. Regime transitions towards autocracy can there take several forms, depending on the combination of the political regime that can suffer autocratization and of the regime that can be installed as a consequence of this process. In a nutshell, this research note argues that the definition of autocratization must be much more demanding: not any transformations in terms of executive limitation, public contestation or political participation necessarily trigger regime change. Consequently, and in terms of research strategy, we cannot rely only on the variation of indexes to tell autocratization. Often the relatively high sensitivity of these indexes may induce to overestimate the empirical relevance of the phenomenon. The “early signs” or “minor changes” in the indexes are definitely relevant but should be over-interpreted as “instances” of autocratization alone. Therefore, a mixed approach (i.e. a case-focused, process-oriented, comparative perspective on autocratization) that can rest on the existing indexes and datasets but integrates the sometimes too concise information they provide through an in-depth examination of the potential cases of autocratization, focusing on the identification of causally connected sequences

of actions and events that produce a qualitative transformation of the nature of the object under consideration (i.e. regime change), and not only on the mere sequence of index variation, has to be preferred. The negative side of this choice is the risk (which can, however, be limited thanks to the attention to individual cases inherent in this approach) of excluding some cases of autocratization from the sample. However, I argue that today this is a risk that can be accepted far longer than its opposite, i.e. making inferences based on false positives, that will result in misinterpreting all different types of changes, fluctuations and adaptations of political regimes.

The future autocratization debate: moving ahead

Just as there are issues that still need debate, there are also current and future developments that deserve to be spelt out and discussed.

First, *acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of autocratization*. One of the most important recent findings was to show how the post-Cold War autocratization differs from similar processes in the twentieth century. In the majority of cases, autocratization no longer occurred rapidly and violently, but through the regular elections of democratic disloyal leaders that progressively dismantle the democratic system from the inside, often with the consent of citizens, and through a process of “executive aggrandizement.”²¹ However, even though this modality has become the prevalent one, we must not forget the fact that the autocratization process is multi-modal (it also occurs through the combination of multiple modalities) as well as multi-causal²², and therefore the other possible causal paths to autocracy should not be overlooked and dismissed if we want to have the comprehensive picture of contemporary autocratization phenomena.

In a first place, the always relevant (albeit much more limited) role of the military forces should not be set aside. In general, the armed forces no longer play a role as relevant as in the twentieth century. Even in Latin America, where military coups d'états were more common, the phenomena of contemporary autocratization occur mainly due to civilian governmental actors. However, the military remains an essential player for understanding some of the most relevant cases of recent autocratization, either as direct perpetrators, or as supporting actors, or as a force that allows resisting a process of autocratization. The political evolution in Venezuela since the nineties saw the military play an essential role in the rise and maintenance of power of Chavez and then Maduro. The end of the democratic experience in Thailand with the military coups of 2006 and then of 2014, as well as the development of Turkish democracy in a further authoritarian sense after the attempted military coup of 2016, or even other cases such as the military intervention in politics in Mali in 2012 or in the Gambia in 2016, all show how the armed forces are often crucial in a complete analysis of autocratization processes.

In a second place, additional actors outside the government such as “powerful oligarchical structures or concentrations of corporate power capable of state capture” (Cianetti and Hanley 2021, writing on Central and Eastern Europe)²³ may be responsible, or at least might play a significant role in causing or influencing the outcomes of autocratization. This is deeply true because it highlights how autocratization can also be a multi-stage process, in which not a single, but a plurality of actors (be they political, economic, social or international) combine to transform a country's regime towards autocracy through different steps, in which different actors take the lead.

Take, for example, the case of the autocratization process in Russia: an analysis that focused exclusively on the strategies and role of Vladimir Putin would essentially be blind in understanding the dynamics that brought him to power with the support of the oligarchic and security networks of the country. The process leading to the military coup in Thailand in 2006, with the involvement of monarchical and economic power networks, is another striking example. At the level of analysis, these factors have been often treated as structural or contextual pre-conditions of the autocratization process, enabling the leader to take power and start the process of transition. However, very often economic and security actors, state power networks within institutions such as justice or bureaucracy, should be seen as decisive *collective actors* with a specific agency that must be included in the analytical framework of autocratization.

Finally, the very process of “executive aggrandizement” can hide a great variety in the typology of actors who carry it out and in the reasons that cause it.²⁴ This process might occur as a reaction to a strong social demand for equity and democracy to which ruling elites give an authoritarian response (see the case of progressive autocratization of the Dominican Republic under the Balaguer presidency at the end of the eighties). However, autocratization in the form of executive aggrandizement can also be the responsibility of disloyal political forces that come to power on a strong bottom-up pressure and demands for social and economic change, as in the already cited case of Venezuela under Chavez. The process of executive aggrandizement takes place in the same way as the progressive occupation of all spaces of power and the erosion of the mechanisms that limit executive power. However, the process has a radically different nature: as a closing reaction locking the political system down, in the former case, and as a disruptive or revolutionary change in the latter. This last consideration allows concluding that if the autocratization process is *defined* as a process, it must also be *analysed* as a process, and not as an “event” or an “instance.” In a complex process of this type, the actors co-responsible for the outcome are often manifold. Limiting ourselves only to the (usually male) leader(s) driving autocratization from within will only tell part of the story.

Second, *investigating the multi-level dimension of autocratization*. Both the democratization and autocratization literatures have attempted to analyse political changes within and between political regimes, their causes and the specific correlates of both processes. Among the possible dimensions that have been taken into account and the explanatory models, there is an aspect that has not yet been fully included in the mainstream analytical frameworks: the territorial dimension of democratization and autocratization. A state-centred approach has largely dominated these literatures, where scholars focused on *national* causes, *national* effects, and the role of *national* political leaders and actors in determining and influencing both democratization and autocratization processes. However, since contemporary democracies (and autocracies) are experiencing the growing role of the subnational and supranational level of governance, it is increasingly challenging to provide a comprehensive analysis of autocratization without taking into account these dimensions of analysis. An assessment of democratic or autocratic change should, therefore, overcome the limitation of a state-centred approach and should be able to integrate different levels of governance in the explanation.

In this perspective, research should be at the crossroad of different literatures: democratization and autocratization, territorial politics, federalism studies, multi-

level governance. In particular, research should particularly take into consideration the empirical and theoretical works already existing on authoritarian enclaves²⁵, whose existence and development could be causally linked, and even anticipates, national autocratization. On the other hand, “democratic enclaves”²⁶ could also be linked with a process of national autocratization, as a sub-national arena of resistance and opposition against national autocratizing elites.

Third, including opposition to autocratization in the analytical framework. Eventually, despite the methodological, conceptual and theoretical pluralism, the scholarship on autocratization shares a basic, common autocratizer(s)-oriented perspective, i.e. focus on the actor(s) that drive autocratization. However, we overlooked another pivotal actor: those who resist this process, be they institutional, political or social actors. In other words, the “opponents” of autocratization. If there is someone that drives the process of autocratization (autocratic leaders and coalitions), there is also one or more “opponents” of the same process: those who react, those who resist. We almost know nothing about them, their identity, their roles, their strategies in facing and, often, fighting against such processes of autocratization.

My claim is that any research on political regime change towards autocracy cannot be complete without an adequate analysis of the role, actions, and strategies of the actors that oppose and resist to autocratization, and that the existing literature falls short of assessing this complexity. Here are some examples of how a focus on those who resist and oppose to autocratization is relevant: amidst an increasingly authoritarian context, the defeat of the ruling party AKP (Justice and Development Party) in the Istanbul 2019 mayoral election proves that Turkey democracy “don’t die all that easily”²⁷. Political opposition to AKP still exists and matters, despite past defeats. The same can be said for Hungary and the defeat of Fidesz in the October 2019 mayoral election in Budapest, where a united opposition defeated the incumbent Fidesz major István Tarlos. In Poland, institutional resistance to the governmental attempts to erode judicial independence was deployed by Polish judges refusing to abandon their jobs, backed by street protests and the rulings of the European Court of Justice. As noted by Human Rights Watch, even if processes of autocratization are still ongoing worldwide, “the excesses of autocratic rule are fuelling a powerful counterattack.”²⁸ Admittedly, this counterattack is not always successful, but resistance coming from public pressure, political opposition, independent institutions, and international organizations deserve to be brought back under the spotlight.

Conclusion

The concept of wave has accompanied the development of contemporary studies on democratization and autocratization, and the article recognizes its descriptive and evocative power. However, the message that this research note wants to send is straightforward: the research agenda on contemporary autocratization processes is too important (for the sophistication of the studies, the scientific knowledge produced, and the potential political impact) to be oriented towards a debate that, in the long run, risks being sterile and not contributing too much to answer the most relevant questions that researchers are asking: what is autocratization? How and why does it happen? Is it possible to prevent, or stop it? Who are the actors responsible for it, and those resisting to it? What are the political, economic and social consequences of autocratization?

In a nutshell, don't think of a wave, and let's analyse autocratization cases through sound comparative strategies instead, wherever they are and in whatever form they appear.

Notes

1. See, among others, Lindberg, *Democratization by elections*; Cassani and Tomini, "Reversing Regimes and Concepts"; Autocratization in Post-Cold War Regimes; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization"; Pelke and Croissant, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes"; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, "Autocratization and its Pull and Push Factors."
2. Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization"; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization."
3. Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
4. See, among others, Kurzman, "Waves of Democratization"; Doorenspleet, "Reassessing the three waves of democratization"; Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*, Strand et al. Why waves?; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization."
5. Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*.
6. Doorenspleet (1999) already cast doubt on "whether the wave metaphor is the most appropriate way to conceptualize the problem [of democratization]."
7. Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization."
8. Ibid.
9. Doorenspleet, "Reassessing the three waves of democratization," 400.
10. See Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization."
11. See Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell, *Authoritarianism and democracy in Europe, 1919-3*; Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning, *Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis*.
12. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization."
13. Cassani and Tomini, "Reversing Regimes and Concepts."
14. See Cassani and Tomini, "Reversing Regimes and Concepts"; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization."
15. Sartori, "Concept misformation in comparative politics."
16. Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization."
17. Ibid.
18. See, for example, the widely discussed book by Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How democracies die*, and the reviews published by Perspective on Politics, "Discussion of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's How Democracies Die."
19. Cianetti and Hanley, "The end of the backsliding paradigm."
20. The same categories have been used by, among others, the "V-DEM Regime of the world", by L. Diamond, "Thinking about hybrid regimes", and by Boogards, "How to classify hybrid regimes?."
21. Ibid.
22. See Cassani and Tomini, *Autocratization in Post-Cold War Regimes*;
23. Cianetti and Hanley, "The end of the backsliding paradigm?"
24. Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse*.
25. See, among others, Garretón, "Redemocratization in Chile"; Giraudy, "Varieties of Subnational Undemocratic Regimes"
26. See, among others, Rodriguez, "Opening the Electoral Space in Mexico"; Gilley, "Democratic enclaves in authoritarian regimes."
27. Foreign Policy. "Turkish Democracy Is Still Alive", 2019.
28. Human Rights Watch. "World Report 2019", 2019.

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