


# Russia in the Putin era – a case of bureaucratic authoritarianism?

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## Abstract

There has been much debate surrounding the classification of the kind of regime which developed in Russia following the collapse of communism and this has only intensified during the Putin era. This article considers whether the concept of bureaucratic-authoritarianism is really applicable in the case of Russia. Lilia Shevtsova was the first to tentatively state that Russia is a case of bureaucratic-authoritarianism. However, to provide more assured acceptance or rejection of the concept, this article returns to the paradigm's roots. The concept of bureaucratic-authoritarianism was developed by Guillermo O'Donnell and thus the characteristics he outlined are applied to the case of Russia in the Putin era. Doing so allows for a level of precision and depth in concluding that bureaucratic-authoritarianism is a relevant paradigm. Confirmatory evidence for all seven of the characteristics enumerated by O'Donnell is found, suggesting that Russia in the Putin era can be considered a case of bureaucratic-authoritarianism.

## Keywords

Russia, bureaucratic-authoritarianism, Putinism, Guillermo O'Donnell, Lilia Shevtsova

## Introduction

This article considers whether the concept of bureaucratic-authoritarianism, a *'form of bureaucratic and technocratic military rule that seeks to curtail popular mobilisation and is built on a political coalition and a policy orientation that entails strong ties to international economic actors'* (Collier, 2001), is applicable in the case of Russia. The article asks whether bureaucratic-authoritarianism is really an appropriate paradigm for modern, post-Soviet, Russia in the Putin era, the period which has been claimed to be a case of bureaucratic-authoritarianism. This period may be defined as beginning with his ascent to the prime ministership and presidency in 1999, incorporating his second stint as PM, and proceeding to the present day, as throughout this period he remained the dominant politician in Russia (Sakwa, 2014). The type of regime and system of government which has

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developed in Russia since the collapse of the USSR is subject to much debate, going through several stages. Firstly, prior to Putin there were discussions of the rebirth of Russian democracy (Petro, 1995), although growing pains were noted (Colton and Hough, 1998), and it was ‘difficult to be optimistic about its evolution toward democracy’ as Russia continued to confound hopes, as well as economic and political theories, of the global triumph of democracy and liberal capitalism (Blank, 1998). Then, from around the turn of the century through the first decade of Putin, most analysts preferred to define the Russian reality as some form of democracy with adjectives (Collier and Levitsky, 1997), managed democracy (Balzer, 2003; Colton and McFaul, 2003; Lipman and McFaul, 2001; White, 2007) or hybrid regime (Colton and Hale, 2009; March 2009; McMann, 2006; Petrov et al., 2014; Shevtsova, 2001; Treisman, 2011). However, ever since Vladimir Gel’man’s (2015) book, ‘Authoritarian Russia’, scholars have generally agreed that Russia is a type of authoritarian regime. From this point forward the debate shifted, as Russia was seen to be building an authoritarian polity (Gill, 2015), returning to the past in an authoritarian resurgence (Shevtsova, 2015), building authoritarian institutions (Reuter, 2017) and engaging in authoritarian modernisation (Gel’man, 2016).

Interestingly, however, a decade earlier Shevtsova (2004, 2005) had already suggested that the Russian case was best described as a case of Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism (BA). Given that most have preferred different terminology, or arrived at the conclusion that Russia was authoritarian a full decade later than Shevtsova, this is an interesting claim which deserves closer attention, as such this paper tests the applicability of BA to the case of modern Russia. Beyond Russia, the tendency for democratic waves and counter or reverse waves of democracy has been identified (Huntington, 1991). The first wave Huntington identified began in the 19th century with the granting of voting rights to the majority of white males in the USA, so-called Jacksonian democracy peaked with a total of 29 democracies. However, the first counter wave was identified as beginning in 1922, with the rise of Mussolini, and by 1942 it had reduced the number of democracies in the world to a mere 12. Similarly, the second wave began with Allied victory in World War II and peaked in 1962 with 36 democracies, but the second reverse wave, which took place between 1960 and 1975, reduced the number of democracies to 30 (Huntington, 1991). In 1991 Huntington pondered the fate of the third wave, which he had identified, asking:

*‘At what stage are we within the third wave? Early in a long wave, or at or near the end of a short one? And if the third wave comes to a halt, will it be followed by a significant third reverse wave eliminating many of democracy’s gains in the 1970s and 1980s?’*

This question is once again becoming relevant. Across the world, democracy is facing challenges (Mechkova et al., 2017), with scholars increasingly paying attention to the phenomenon of democratic backsliding (Waldner and Lust, 2018), and noting a global decline in democracy (Diamond et al., 2015). Brooker (2014: 2) argued that ‘the 1990s–2010s will likely be viewed as the era in which disguised dictatorships and authoritarian hybrids rose to power’. However, as this counter or reverse wave develops, and just as the third wave of democratisation garnered much attention on the processes at play, now it seems that closer attention is to be paid to non-democratic regimes.

Returning to the case at hand, the logic of deeming Russia a case of BA is as follows: early in Putin’s reign, the weakness of the Russian state was noted in the face of the new corporate power-centres in Russian politics, which took full advantage of the government’s weakness and forged close links with the entrenched bureaucracy, made up of a career bureaucracy inherited by the Russian government from the Soviet era. Together, these sectors represented a formidable coalition

(Rumer and Wallander, 2003). However, perhaps unexpectedly, Putin was able to create a political regime in which the main resource for personified power was the bureaucracy. It sought to subordinate the technocrats and big business, and by the end of Putin's first term it had largely been successful. This led Shevtsova (2005: 324) to state that '*tentatively, Putin's rule can be described as a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime*'. Shevtsova focused on the fact that the approach rests on the state bureaucracy and especially the power ministries, as well as making the secret services and power ministries pillars of the Putin regime (Shevtsova, 2004). It was also noted that the concept originated with O'Donnell's studies and that Russia also had a modernising economy based on natural resources, but Shevtsova (2005: 324) advised that '*the direct parallels between Russian and Latin American political regimes should not be overemphasised*'. However, this article addresses the issue in such a way as to delve deeper than tentative conclusions, instead testing whether a stricter definition of BA may be applicable to the Russian case. In order to do so, a summary of bureaucratic-authoritarianism is provided, before then applying the seven elements, or characteristics, outlined by O'Donnell to the Russian case and considering whether there exists evidence for each, allowing for the verification or rejection of the applicability of the concept, in a strict sense, to the Russian case.

## Bureaucratic-authoritarianism

Prior to addressing the case of Russia, the concept of bureaucratic-authoritarianism requires some explanation and contextualisation. The work of Guillermo O'Donnell was central to the development of this concept, with his early work *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* focussing on the prevailing view that socio-economic improvements in a nation result in a democratic political system, expressed quantitatively by Lipset, in what O'Donnell thought could be called 'the optimistic equation' (O'Donnell, 1973: 4). However, the realities of South America, with the most highly developed nations of Brazil and Argentina having both undemocratic and excluding systems, proved to contradict such expectations (O'Donnell, 1973: 110).

In explaining Brazil and Argentina's confounding of expectations and the rise of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in these nations, O'Donnell noted 'horizontal' industrial growth, economic 'bottlenecks', the increased significance of technocratic roles and the increasingly significant technocratic role of incumbents in both private and public sectors (Remmer and Merckx, 1982). In general, the focus on modern technocrats and professional military advanced the debate about non-democratic regimes in South America. The changing nature of Brazilian and Argentinian society was often presented through the lens of group conflict and conflicting demands. The issue of modern cores and peripheral areas was also important in understanding the development of BA in Brazil and Argentina (O'Donnell, 1973: 18–21). Furthermore, it was noted that since few economic and psychological payoffs are available, the use of coercion is indispensable for the inauguration and implementation of the socio-economic policies characteristic of BA (O'Donnell, 1973: 162).

Bureaucratic-authoritarianism has been described in basic terms as a '*form of bureaucratic and technocratic military rule that seeks to curtail popular mobilisation and is built on a political coalition and a policy orientation that entails strong ties to international economic actors*' (Collier, 2001). In a later work, O'Donnell (1988: 31–33) himself enumerated the following principal characteristics of BA states:

- (1) A class structure subordinated to the upper fractions of a highly oligopolised and transnationalised bourgeoisie, the principal social base of the BA is this upper bourgeoisie.

- (2) Institutionally, specialists in coercion and those wishing to restore order and normalise the economy have decisive weight.
- (3) The system is one of the political exclusions of a previously activated popular sector. In the name of order and future viability, coercion and the destruction or strict governmental control of the resources enabling previous activation are undertaken.
- (4) The suppression of citizenship and political democracy, as well as the institutional roles and channels of access to the government, the prohibition of any appeals to the population.<sup>1</sup>
- (5) Exclusion is also central to the economic system, with a pattern of capital accumulation strongly biased in favour of large, oligopolistic units of private capital and some state institutions promoted. Pre-existing inequalities are thus increased.
- (6) Social issues are depoliticised and entrusted to those who deal with them according to the supposedly neutral and objective criteria of technical rationality.
- (7) The, usually unformalised, regime involves closing the democratic channels of access to the government. More generally, it involves closing the channels for the representation of popular and working-class interests. Access is limited to those who stand at the apex of large organisations (both state and private), especially the armed forces, large enterprises and certain segments of the state's civil bureaucracy.

O'Donnell further developed this theory as developments in South America provided more data with which to build the theory (O'Donnell, 1978, 1979). Other scholars also applied BA to different states in South America (Ma, 1999). However, the approach was also applied to other parts of the world, including Asia, where in South Korea it was judged that bureaucratic-authoritarianism did not emerge to establish a strong state, but that '*a pre-existing strong state contributed to the emergence of bureaucratic authoritarianism*' (Im, 1987). In Africa, Berman (1992: 144) regarded the colonial state as '*one of the most striking examples of bureaucratic authoritarianism*'. In the specific case of Ethiopia, the term was applied as part of refuting the depth of the democratic development and consolidation there (Harbeson, 1998). Therefore, while the concept was originally designed for Latin America, its popularity and global application indicates that it is well developed and has been applied in many contexts. Evidently, the application of BA to communist regimes and later to Russia itself followed a well-trodden path of the expansion of the application of the term bureaucratic-authoritarianism.

The application of BA to communist regimes occurred despite O'Donnell stating that: '*BA is a type of capitalist state, and should therefore be understood in the light of the distinctive attributes of capitalist states in general*' (O'Donnell, 1988: 7). Nevertheless, in *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation and Inter-Party Cooperation*, three variants of communist rule were distinguished. Namely, patrimonial communism, national-accommodative communism and bureaucratic-authoritarian communism. The features of the first type of communist rule, patrimonial communism, are that it relies on vertical chains of personal dependence between leaders in the state and party apparatus and their entourage, buttressed by extensive patronage and clientelist networks (Kitschelt, 1999: 23). The second type of communist rule, national-accommodative communism, arose following the wane of Soviet support for Stalin's direct representatives in the leadership of communist parties throughout Eastern Europe. As a result, indigenous communist rulers discovered they could govern only by broadening their societal support base, doing so by attempting to craft a tacit political and economic accommodation with their domestic challengers. Modest steps toward economic or political liberalisation were conceded and tacit mutual accommodation between ruling party and potential civic challengers intimated, somewhat relaxed party control and considerable patronage politics, as well as a sectorisation of the state apparatus into competing interests vying for

resources are features of this kind of communist rule (Kitschelt, 1999: 24–25). In bureaucratic-authoritarian communism, the third type of communist rule, opposition forces encountered a much harsher and more hostile climate than in national-accommodative communism, but for reasons which differed from patrimonial communism.

Bureaucratic-authoritarian communist rule is the variation which came the closest to the totalitarian model of a party state with an all-powerful, rule-guided bureaucratic machine governed by a planning technocracy and a disciplined, hierarchically stratified communist party. This kind of communist rule relied on a tier of sophisticated economic and administrative professionals who governed a planned economy which produced comparatively advanced industrial goods and services. Notably, bureaucratic-authoritarian communism resorted more to the repression and exclusion of sometimes vocal opposition movements than national-accommodative communism. This third type is a form of political rule which coincides with a relatively advanced stage of capital-intensive industrialisation and relies on a technocratic governance structure that tolerates no political diversity (Kitschelt, 1999: 25–26). Important for the matter at hand is that *'bureaucratic-authoritarian communism occurred in countries with considerable liberal-democratic experience in the inter-war period, an early and comparatively advanced industrialisation, and a simultaneous mobilisation of bourgeois and proletarian political forces around class-based parties beginning in the late 19th century'* (Kitschelt, 1999: 26). Czechoslovakia was judged to be the single purest case of bureaucratic-authoritarian communism, with a vibrant democratic pluralism in the inter-war period and a long history of working-class mobilisation spearheaded by popular socialist and communist parties (Kitschelt, 1999: 36–37).

It is notable that in O'Donnell's original work on the subject, it was remarked that Eastern European countries of the 1930s had been termed 'bureaucratic regimes'. As with Brazil and Argentina, they had developed beyond stereotypical 'traditional' societies, with relatively large modern centres, high political activation of the urban popular sector, developmental bottlenecks, and persistent social-structural rigidities (more so than previously developed nations). Moreover, Eastern European 'bureaucratic regimes' were based on a coalition of military high-level civil servants, big businessmen and sectors of the traditional landowning strata, with the initial support of a large dependent urban middle class (O'Donnell, 1973: 89). There are unmistakable similarities between both this and the bureaucratic-authoritarian communism described by Kitschelt and the experiences of Brazil and Argentina.

The description of bureaucratic-authoritarian communism and its antecedents do not seem to particularly strongly relate to the Russian experience at all. At no point in Russian history, least of all during the Soviet Union, has there been a period of vibrant democratic pluralism, a long history of working-class mobilisation spearheaded by popular socialist and communist parties is also conspicuously absent. This lack of previous Russian experience with BA, particularly under communism makes Shevtsova's definition of modern Russia as a case of BA quite unexpected. Yet, as shall be seen, there is persuasive evidence which suggests that a modern form of BA has developed in the modern-day Russian state. This may be further unexpected due to Russia's history and the oft discussed inefficiency of the Russian state in general.

Some have argued, however, that the broad application of the concept of BA became something of a problem, with Collier suggesting that it should be retained as a 'zone word' or a signpost. Essentially, conceding that the concept has so many definitions and so many defining characteristics that often it failed to serve as a tool for comparative analysis, leading to confusion rather than clarity in the effort to bring into sharp focus the similarities and differences among countries that are the most important for understanding contemporary authoritarianism (Collier, 1979). This largely resembles the approach taken by Shevtsova and noted in the introduction to this text. However, the

subsequent section considers the applicability of bureaucratic-authoritarianism to Russia, bearing in mind that the case of Russia may find itself under BA as a 'zone word' or a signpost, fit O'Donnell's definition closely, or perhaps not at all.

## Russian bureaucratic authoritarianism?

This section directly addresses the research question, whether bureaucratic-authoritarianism is really an appropriate paradigm for modern Russia, considering the different ways the literature has engaged with the issue of defining post-communist regimes and the Russian regime particularly. The sudden collapse of communist regimes across Europe saw the opening up of those societies and the reimagining of politics in those states. However, it also saw a diversification in the results of transition which has produced much literature. Generally, the idea of studying democracy and authoritarianism in the post-communist world has been popular, sometimes in terms of the democracy/authoritarianism paradigm (Bunce et al., 2010), but many 'democracies with adjectives' have also been coined, including 'authoritarian democracy', 'neopatrimonial democracy', 'military-dominated democracy', and 'protodemocracy' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). The diversity between the emergent regimes was evident from a very early stage. (Kitschelt, 2003) noted that this post-communist diversity occurred in a window of around 3 years (1990-93) and that following this window the new regime structures were more or less 'locked in' in almost all polities.

Ten years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Shevtsova identified three divergent paths of former Soviet states: firstly, polyarchy; secondly, those which formed weak institutions but still suffered under personalistic government; thirdly, neopatrimonial and even openly Sultanistic regimes (Shevtsova, 2001). Russia was placed in the second group, characterised by weak institutions and still suffering under personalistic government. However, around this time the situation in the country was also conceptualised as a flawed democracy (Rutland, 1998), or a democracy experiencing growing pains (Colton and Hough, 1998), about which it was difficult to be optimistic (Blank, 1998). From around this time onwards a rise in the terms managed democracy (Balzer, 2003; Colton and McFaul, 2003; Lipman and McFaul, 2001; White, 2007), and hybrid regime was notable (Colton and Hale, 2009; March, 2009; McMann, 2006; Petrov et al., 2014; Shevtsova, 2001; Treisman, 2011). Although sometimes other terms, such as sovereign democracy (Okara, 2007), were applied. However, there did seem to be agreement that Russia did not boast a fully functional democracy. Moreover, there were claims that the media system in Russia was neo-authoritarian (Becker, 2004).

The developing consensus saw Russia as becoming less and less democratic; indeed, ever since Vladimir Gel'man's (2015) book, 'Authoritarian Russia', scholars have generally agreed that Russia is a type of authoritarian regime. From this point forward the debate changed, as Russia was seen to be building an authoritarian polity (Gill, 2015), returning to the past (Shevtsova, 2015), building authoritarian institutions (Reuter, 2017) and engaging in authoritarian modernisation (Gel'man, 2016). Putin's brand was seen as something of a populist authoritarian (Kimmage, 2018), and his support was noted to be particularly strong in rural areas (Mamonova, 2019).

A full decade before Gel'man's publication, Shevtsova (2004, 2005) had already declared Russia a case of BA. While this application of authoritarianism differs somewhat from others' conceptualisations, it deserves closer attention in part because of its precedency and also because of its specificity. Shevtsova (2006) argued that there was an expansion of the state bureaucratic corporation, which had assumed certain powers that the president formally, but no longer actually, controlled. The result being a situation whereby the institution of personified power became an idea mechanism for the realisation of the interests of the bureaucracy. Shevtsova also notes that while

*'only the leader can legitimise government decisions in a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime, the leader is also dependent on the bureaucracy, and this dependence only increases over time'* (Shevtsova, 2006).

Although Shevtsova must be praised for the approach's precedency, the application of a highly specific theory was somewhat lacking in detail. Returning to the seven points which O'Donnell laid out will better allow an informed judgement on whether or not Russia can be classified as a case of bureaucratic-authoritarianism. Specifically, O'Donnell laid out seven points and there are several possible outcomes: no evidence may be found for any of the points to be applicable to Russia; evidence may be found for a minority of the points to be applicable to Russia; evidence may be found for a majority of the points to be applicable to Russia; and finally, evidence may be found for all of the points to be applicable to Russia. If no evidence is found, then Russia will self-evidently not be able to be considered a case of BA, if a minority of the points are applicable then the label of BA must also be considered not applicable. Evidence for a majority of the points would indicate that Russia may be considered a case of BA, but with reservations. If all the points are found to be applicable to Russia than that would indicate that Russia may be considered a case of BA

### *Oligopolised and transnationalised*

The first point outlined by O'Donnell (1988: 31) was that BA is *'primarily and fundamentally, the aspect of global society that guarantees and organises the domination exercised through a class structure subordinated to the upper fractions of a highly oligopolised and transnationalised bourgeoisie. In other words, the principal social base of the BA is this upper bourgeoisie.'* This was at a time when there was significant authoritarianism in non-capitalist countries in what was called authoritarian socialism, or socialism from above (Draper and Gallin, 1966). Meanwhile, other studies focused on one-party political systems in communist and non-communist states (Huntington and Moore, 1970).

In the Putin era, there have not been many states which may be considered non-capitalist in nature. However, that does not mean there are no examples at all; for example, Venezuela represents a socialist state which engaged in 'autocratic legalism' (Corrales, 2015), after shifting from an authoritarian regime to a naked dictatorship (The Economist, 2015), the autocratic regime in Venezuela survived despite a multitude of crises (Corrales, 2020). Russia, on the other hand, is certainly a capitalist state; indeed, the relative success of capitalism, in comparison to democracy, has often been a topic for debate and research (Aslund, 2013; McMann, 2006). However, Russia is not simply capitalist, it fits O'Donnell's highly oligopolised definition, as a case of crony capitalism (Sharafutdinova, 2010) or oligarchy (Braguinsky, 2009; Novokmet et al., 2018). Having administered the coup de grace to the Soviet oligarchy, Yeltsin disbanded the CPSU, eliminating the core oligarchic structure, and undertook huge economic reform, but Yeltsin's policies did not, however, change the close link between power and property (Graham, 1999). The fact remained that access to power was still key to obtaining and retaining property in the Yeltsin era (Graham, 1999). However, Putin quickly cracked down on oligarchs, striking a bargain with the remaining oligarchs: *'invest your ill-gotten gains in the manufacturing ("real") part of the Russian economy or else face the consequences'* (Sakwa, 2004: 243). Sometimes there has been talk of a 'grand bargain' in Russia during the Putin era, whereby freedom is traded for stability (Coalson, 2007). In terms of their GINI coefficient, Russia sat at 37.4 in 1999 and reached heights of 42.3 in 2007, as of 2018 it was 37.5 (The World Bank, 2021).

The Russian case also fits O'Donnell's highly transnationalised definition. There was a rise in Russian transnational corporations noted; they 'leapfrogged' onto the global scene and did not

merely represent a simple continuation of the rather limited international trading presence of the ‘red multinationals’ (Kalotay, 2007). Despite the conflict in Ukraine, Russia has continued to be a part of the international economic system with Nord Stream-1, Blue Stream and Nord Stream-2 indicating the continued importance of Russian energy (Kutcherov et al., 2020). There are also opportunities to further expand into Asian markets (Kutcherov et al., 2020). As for the upper bourgeoisie themselves, according to one report, Russian millionaires hold two-thirds of their money abroad (The Moscow Times, 2018). Although the term upper bourgeoisie may have gone out of fashion, the reality is that the Russian system is indeed subordinated to the upper fractions of a highly oligopolised and transnationalised bourgeoisie.

### Coercion and order

On the second point O’Donnell (1988: 31–32) stated that *‘on the institutional level, it is a set of organisations in which specialists in coercion have decisive weight, as do those who seek to “normalise” the economy. The crucial role played by these actors is the institutional expression of the main tasks that the BA undertakes: the restoration of “order” by means of the political deactivation of the popular sector, on the one hand, and the “normalisation” of the economy, on the other’*. In the Russian case, these tendencies are present, but somewhat predate Putin. The populism of the Communists was a threat throughout the 1990s, but especially in the 1996 election. In this election Yeltsin ran with the help of certain business oligarchs, in return they received positions in his new government and the chance to buy large state companies cheaply in return (Treisman, 1999).

The ‘normalisation’ of the economy and the deactivation of the popular sector continued through the Putin period, when specialists in coercion have enjoyed an elevated position in terms of importance. Moreover, the entire Putin project has been built on restoring order and normalising the economy after the chaos of the Yeltsin period. During his first presidential campaign Putin constructed his political campaign around the binary of order–chaos (Lewis, 2020: 8). However, this was a binary which resonated with the public, as it did in the cases of Argentina and Brazil. Matovski (2018) argued that Russian mass attitudes in the post-communist era were dominated by the overarching desire of the public to achieve greater stability. In the O’Donnell cases, there were many that felt that they were stepping into the abyss and it must be prevented (O’Donnell, 1973: 208), such feelings after the collapse of the USSR and the Yeltsin era would not be unreasonable.

In this context, specialists in coercion were exactly who Putin turned to at the start of his presidency, Putin sought to turn the officers of the FSB, along with various KGB veterans, into what his associate, Nikolai Patrushev, termed a ‘new nobility’ (Soldatov and Rochlitz, 2018). Although this tendency was somewhat reduced as time went on, and coercion tended to be restricted to a limited number of cases, in those cases the government demonstrated its willingness and propensity to repress with vigour (Rogov, 2018), it is evident that, institutionally, specialists in coercion and those wishing to restore order and normalise the economy have decisive weight.

### Exclusion of popular sector

Thirdly, O’Donnell (1988: 32) stated that: *‘it is a system of political exclusion of a previously activated popular sector, which is subjected to strict controls designed to eliminate its earlier presence in the political arena. This is achieved by coercion, as well as by the destruction or strict governmental control of the resources (especially those embodied in class organisations and political parties or movements) that sustained this activation. Such exclusion is guided by the determination to impose “order” on society and to ensure its future viability.’*



In the Russian case this exclusion initially focussed on the Communists in the 1990s, which was considered something of an existential threat to Russia's future viability. [McFaul \(1996\)](#) argued that Yeltsin was able to make the Russian voter understand (or convince them) that the 1996 election was another referendum on communism, that *'they were choosing between two systems, not two candidates'*. This was an opinion shared internationally, with Time even describing American assistance to Yeltsin as 'Yanks to the rescue' ([Kramer, 1996](#)). In the early years of Putin, the drive for total exclusion of the KPRF from the electoral arena continued ([Gel'man, 2005](#)). However, it was not just political parties being targeted, but also the entire federal system. The power to appoint regional governors was granted to Putin and then, between 2003 and 2006, major legislation on parties and elections was adopted, thwarting the development of democracy at the regional and local levels ([Ross, 2011](#)).

Given the role of nationalism and local populism in the end of the Soviet Union, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that the Kremlin shifted from viewing the Communist Party as the main popular front, to fearing localism, nationalism and ethnopopulism. In this context, it is no surprise that Moscow tightened its grip on regional governors and budgets with a series of removals of governors ([Burkhardt and Kluge, 2017](#)). Moreover, their treatment of Alexey Navalny, whose communications on YouTube have been noted to be populist ([Glazunova, 2020](#)), can be understood as a move to block another potential popular front – this time nationalist. Navalny's calling of Muslims flies and cockroaches, attending of far-right rallies and running for Moscow mayor on an anti-migrant platform, coming second with 27% of the vote, created the image of a nationalist or 'national democrat' ([Mirovalev, 2021](#)). It also alarmed the authorities, having been poisoned and sent to prison, Navalny's NGO was then outlawed ([Amnesty International, 2021a](#)). Strict governmental control of the resources which could sustain political activation, often media and energy, is also evident – no more so than in Khodorkovsky's case ([Woodruff, 2003](#)). The constant from the Yeltsin and early Putin years to the present is that steps will be taken to exclude popular fronts. Although O'Donnell's third point repeats the coercion and order of point two, the main element of the exclusion of popular fronts is also present in the Russian case.

### **Suppression of democracy**

Fourthly, [O'Donnell \(1988: 32\)](#) outlined that the aforementioned exclusion *'brings with it the suppression of citizenship and political democracy. It also involves prohibiting (and enforcing this prohibition with coercion) any appeals to the population as pueblo and, of course, as class. The suppression of the institutional roles and channels of access to the government characteristic of political democracy is aimed at the elimination of the roles and organisations (political parties among them) that once served as channels for appeals for substantive justice. These channels are considered incompatible with the reimposition of order and with the normalisation of the economy. The BA is thus based on the suppression of two fundamental mediations between state and society: citizenship and pueblo.'*

In the Russian case it quickly became clear that *'emphasis is placed on political stability, elections are held but results are more or less foreordained, and serious political challenges to executive power are either absent or muted. Upheavals, spontaneity, and unpredictability are precluded'* ([Wegren and Konitzer, 2007](#)). The suppression of institutional roles and channels of access to the government sees would be challengers barred from competing in elections or taking positions in the apparatus of government. Convictions for crimes such as theft may provide the foundation for such barring, as with Navalny ([Al Jazeera, 2013](#)), but increasingly other means, such as the definition of foreign agent, have been relied upon and may be expanded ([Meduza, 2020](#)). The

ability of parties such as Yabloko to appeal to the population was cut off by this system, but those who allied with the pro-Kremlin bloc, for example, Rodina and LDPR, have also long since lost their political independence (White, 2007). Splits have begun to become visible between the traditionally pro-Kremlin leadership of the Russian Communist Party (KPRF) and its increasingly radical grassroots membership (Light, 2021).

As well as managing the opposition, since 2011 the authorities have concentrated their efforts on preventing opposition parties and candidates from registering for elections (Ross, 2018). Moreover, in anticipation of the 2021 duma elections, a pattern of the Russian authorities opening criminal proceedings against prominent opposition figures after they indicate their intention to stand in the elections was noted (Amnesty International, 2021b). Subsequently, their homes and campaign offices were raided, then steps taken to impede their election campaigns, such as placing them in pretrial detention, under house arrest or strict curfew as criminal suspects (Amnesty International, 2021b). Furthermore, independent and investigative journalistic outlets were targeted in the run up to the Duma elections (Paskhalis et al., 2021). Given the combination of managed opposition and restrictions placed on registration, not to mention the intimidation and closing of independent journalistic outlets, the suppression of democracy is clear. Meaningful appeals to the population are restricted and broadly suppression of citizenship and political democracy, as well as the institutional roles and channels of access to the government occurs, it is possible to once again confirm the relevance of this point to O'Donnell's definition.

### *Exclusionary economic system*

Fifthly, O'Donnell (1988: 32) described that *'it is also a system of economic exclusion of the popular sector, inasmuch as it promotes a pattern of capital accumulation strongly biased in favour of large, oligopolistic units of private capital and some state institutions. Pre-existing inequalities are thus increased.'*

As discussed above, the issue of oligarchy in Russia is very real and extremely serious. The explosion of inequality which occurred during the Yeltsin period can scarcely be overstated. However, the grand bargain of the Putin era (Coalson, 2007) has meant, in practice, that a pattern of capital accumulation strongly biased in favour of large, oligopolistic units of private capital and some state institutions is promoted, but access to this is exclusionary on political grounds. Early in the Putin era, the business environment of Russia was such that businesses, especially small to medium businesses, were vulnerable to bureaucratic extortion or legal harassment, as part of what was termed Russia's statist-patrimonial capitalism (Hanson and Teague, 2005). Such problems did not escape attention at the very highest levels, in 2008 Putin escalated his past criticism of the bureaucracy's pressure on small businesses and the frequent inspections they endure, stating that 'it is impossible to take the existing regime anymore' and directing the inspections from the MVD, tax police, and numerous other government agencies to occur less frequently (Hahn, 2010).

Despite attempts to reduce the burdens on entrepreneurs, significant barriers remain. Even in 2020, bureaucratic nightmares and police raids continue to frustrate those entrepreneurs trying to achieve something in Russia (Troianovski, 2020). Between 1989 and 2016, the bottom 50% of earners benefited from very small or negative growth, the middle 40% from positive but relatively modest growth, and the top 10% from very large growth rates (Novokmet et al., 2018). Moreover, inclusion and exclusion are often decided on political grounds, but presents itself in different ways. Fidrmuc and Gundacker (2017) found that economic inequality among Russian regions, in addition to other factors, is closely related to oligarchic dominance, meaning that Russia's trajectory to a market economy shaped an economic and social structure which is manifesting its exclusive

character in a way that access to political decision making and economic success is limited to small elite circles. Based on the evidence, it can be stated with confidence that there exists a pattern of capital accumulation strongly biased in favour of large, oligopolistic units of private capital, with some state institutions promoted.

### *Depoliticised social issues*

Sixthly, O'Donnell (1988: 32) detailed that *'through its institutions it endeavours to "depoliticise" the handling of social issues, which are entrusted to those who deal with them according to the supposedly neutral and objective criteria of technical rationality. This is the obverse side of the prohibition against raising issues linked to pueblo or class'*. The Russian case tends to be addressed as a case of technocratic authoritarianism (Huskey, 2010), or authoritarian modernisation (Gel'man, 2016). This results in precisely the kind of depoliticisation of which O'Donnell spoke. Even in the first decade of Putin's rule, issues were depoliticised, as attempts were made to introduce management as the key procedure in politics (Casula, 2013). Similarly, it was found that among the ruling elite, when it comes to technical problem-solving versus constituency representation, the Russian case is one of technocratic authoritarianism, in view of the specialised career paths of its elite and a rejection of interest-based politics (Huskey, 2010). Moreover, Gel'man and Starodubtsev (2016) noted that *'a low level of government autonomy leads to the transformation of the cabinet of ministers from a collective entity of key decision-makers to a technocratic set of officials responsible for implementing the commands of the president or prime minister'*.

The conceptualisation of politics as management has been combined with a specific view on modernisation. Modernisation, postmodernism and neo-modernisation have all been applied to Russia with different issues, often centred on unilinear views on development (Sakwa, 2012). Putin has emphasised economic growth, technological modernisation, innovation and international competitiveness as means to secure a powerful and influential role on the world stage for Russia, and ensure its resilience as a nation (Kivinen and Humphreys, 2020: 1). Like Sakwa, Kivinen and Humphreys stress the need to approach Russia with a multiple modernities approach. Despite the other strategies described here, the regime does continue to pursue what it understands as a form of modernisation. However, it does so with an approach depoliticised to social and economic issues, a management rather than a political approach. To again confirm one of O'Donnell's points, the described attitudes of politics as management and authoritarian modernisation leads to depoliticised social issues being entrusted to those who deal with them according to the supposedly neutral and objective criteria of technical rationality.

### *Closed democratic channels*

Finally, O'Donnell (1988: 32) outlined that the *'regime—which, while usually not formalised, is clearly identifiable—involves closing the democratic channels of access to the government. More generally, it involves closing the channels for the representation of popular and working-class interests. Access is limited to those who stand at the apex of large organisations (both state and private), especially the armed forces, large enterprises, and certain segments of the state's civil bureaucracy'*. In Russia, the issue of non-formalised government is one which is both well-known and has created much debate. Some have argued that the system requires intensive manual control by a small circle in the top leadership, a fact which even Putin himself lamented, for example, when discussing healthcare allocations during his April 2013 national call-in show, calling this phenomenon *'a breakdown precisely in the system of administration'* (Petrov et al., 2014). However,

Treisman (2018) argued that Russia in fact has two systems: ‘normal politics’ or ‘autopilot’ which prevails when Putin does not personally get involved; and, ‘manual control’ (ruchnoe upravlenie) which occurs when Putin takes a clear stand, this type involves a much more top-down dictation of actions.

The channels for the representation of popular and working-class interests are broadly speaking closed and rely on issues becoming a matter of manual control, as they sometimes do, even small issues like unpaid wages (Weir, 2009). On the other hand, special access for those who stand at the apex of large organisations (both state and private) is a central element of the kind of corruption which can be found in Russia (Levin and Satarov, 2000; Pavroz, 2017). In terms of certain segments of the state’s civil bureaucracy, the so-called siloviki hold sway in many important areas, not based on their position but based on their relationship with Putin (Treisman, 2018). Furthermore, some have noted a steadily increasing role of the armed forces in the implementation of Moscow’s strategic aspirations (Banasik, 2020), the consideration of the military as a political actor itself has been ongoing for some time (Mörike, 1998; Stewart and Zhukov, 2009). The fact that Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu is a rumoured successor to Putin also says much of the standing of both him and the military in Russian politics (Galeotti, 2019).

## Summary

O’Donnell enumerated the seven points discussed, which he considered allowed for BA to be distinguished from other authoritarian states, being marked by characteristics that signal the historical specificity (O’Donnell, 1988: 32–33). Having examined those seven points, there are several possible outcomes: no evidence may be found for any of the points to be applicable to Russia; evidence may be found for a minority of the points to be applicable to Russia; evidence may be found for a majority of the points to be applicable to Russia; and finally, evidence may be found for all of the points to be applicable to Russia. If no evidence is found, then Russia will self-evidently not be able to be considered a case of BA, if a minority of the points are applicable then the label of BA must also be considered not applicable. Evidence for a majority of the points would indicate that Russia may be considered a case of BA, but with reservations. If all the points are found to be applicable to Russia than that would indicate that Russia may be considered a case of BA

The fact that, as can be seen in both the seven points and Table 1, there is evidence to suggest that all of the characteristics of BA outlined by O’Donnell correspond to the modern Russian regime allows for a certain degree of confidence in affirming that it represents a case of bureaucratic-authoritarianism.

**Table 1.** Summary of the application of O’Donnell’s characteristics.

Number	Characteristics	Presence of evidence?	
		Argentina and Brazil	Russia
1	Oligopolised and transnationalised	✓	✓
2	Coercion and order	✓	✓
3	Exclusion of popular sector	✓	✓
4	Suppression of democracy	✓	✓
5	Exclusionary economic system	✓	✓
6	Depoliticised social issues	✓	✓
7	Closed democratic channels	✓	✓

There may be some questions raised over how a theory of regime type developed in the 1970s is still applicable to a state 50 years later, especially given the impact of processes such as globalisation, regionalisation, financialisation and fragmentation. However, there remain many similarities between the regimes of Brazil and Argentina of the 1970s and the contemporary regime of Russia. However, as noted by Shevtsova (2005: 324), it would certainly be a mistake to overstate the similarities, what the seven points, outlined above, illustrate is how the regime approaches day-to-day life, how it wrestles with (and/or relies upon) its past, how it prevents what it views as damaging elements from gaining political traction (let alone economic or political power), how it defuses potentially political issues, and how it extracts massive rents while (some may argue due to) engaging in the described behavioural patterns. The tools and mechanisms may change somewhat, due to social and technological changes, but the patterns of behaviour remain remarkably similar in their essence.

There are numerous other similarities, such as the position of Russia in its own region and that of Brazil and Argentina in theirs. In O'Donnell's cases it was noted that despite having the highest level of modernisation in the region, Brazil and Argentina were not democracies; in fact, countries in the middle level of modernisation were the most likely to be democratic (O'Donnell, 1973: 110). The lack of a close relationship between modernisation and democracy in the former USSR region would somewhat reflect this. However, the conflict between a developed core and the periphery (O'Donnell, 1973: 19–26), is even more relevant for the Russian case. As is an explosion of populism which is later repressed, a core element of the O'Donnell text. Despite some broad similarities, following the characteristics of BA outlined by O'Donnell was undertaken as it represents a higher bar than just noting some broad similarities and concluding that Russia is, indeed, a case of BA

## Implications

Evidence has been found that Russia represents a case of BA, but how does this interact with other competing judgements on the type of system or regime which exists in the Russian Federation? Firstly, it is relevant that O'Donnell (1988: 32–33) himself noted that the seven enumerated points allowed BA to be distinguished from other authoritarian states, considering it *'not just any authoritarianism, but one marked by characteristics that signal the historical specificity'*. Furthermore, he considered it unable to be confused with any variant of political democracy. Moreover, it differed from (1) Latin America's traditional forms of authoritarian rule, (2) the more or less authoritarian variants of populism, and, (3) fascism (O'Donnell, 1988: 33). In the first, it was notable that subordinate classes would have undergone little or no political activation and their working-class component was small; in the second, expansionist economic policies promoted the formation of a coalition consisting of nationalist and anti-oligarchic groups; in the third, it was based on a more genuinely national bourgeoisie (O'Donnell, 1988: 33).

O'Donnell attempted to differentiate BA from other approaches to non-democratic regime types, clearly indicating that such debates were taking place at the time of writing. In this context it should come as no surprise that the debates surrounding Russia are not particularly unique in that similar debates surrounded the Vargas regime in Brazil, which was dubbed by some a fascist state in the western hemisphere, an old-fashioned 'strong man' military dictatorship, with perhaps a few 'ideological' trappings borrowed from the Axis (Putnam, 1941). Scholars referred the regime which developed following the military coup in 1964 as military rule (Skidmore, 1988), military regime (Napolitano, 2018) or military dictatorship (Cohen, 1987). There was debate over whether it was a military dictatorship or a civilian-military dictatorship (Ridenti, 2018). Other studies broke the

historical development of the regime into different stages (Codato, 2006). In Argentina, Peron was often defined as a populist (Stockemer, 2019: 9), but others saw his brand of politics as irrational and totalitarian (Adelman, 1992). Following Argentina's own coup in 1966 scholars again spoke of military rule (Pion-Berlin, 1985), authoritarian rule (Smith, 1991) or a 'modern' military dictatorship (Munck, 1985).

Contemporarily, such debates and differences in approach continue and the diversity within the post-communist space and the post-Soviet space means that this application of BA to Russia would not necessarily be shared by many of its former Communist and Soviet Republic neighbours. From relatively early in post-Communist transitions there was a visible tendency to often group according to geography (Kopstein and Reilly, 2000), or to generalise the post-Soviet space, with democracy a minority outcome (Gill, 2006). Sometimes, they are merely placed in geographical groupings for ease of analysis (Von Soest and Grauvogel, 2016). However, in order to truly capture the diversity between post-Soviet states, individual case studies testing the applicability of less traditional theories and approaches than hybrid regime, managed democracy, non-democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian may well be necessary. This is undoubtedly going to take place within and outside of the post-communist space, it will also likely involve the creation of new theories and approaches, as well as the returning and repurposing of many existing theories and approaches.

Such disputes over terminology and approaches are unlikely to conclude in the nearest future, or at any point in the future. Especially, given the fact that waves of democracy are often followed by reverse or counter waves (Huntington, 1991), as well as the global challenges to and decline of democracy (Diamond et al., 2015; Mechkova et al., 2017), increased attention being paid to non-democratic regimes should be expected. Some of this attention will likely involve the resurrection or repurposing of theories and approaches from the past. If they are applicable, adaptable and useful tools of analysis for new times and places then there is much to be gained in such an approach.

Unsurprisingly, there has been much promising development in the field of non-democratic regimes (Brooker, 2014). The diversity of non-democratic regimes is important, with them ranging from monarchies to military regimes, from clergy-dominated regimes to communist regimes, and from seeking a totalitarian control of thought through indoctrination to seeking recognition as a multiparty democracy through using semi-competitive elections (Brooker, 2014: 1). The 1990s–2010s will likely be viewed as the era in which disguised dictatorships and authoritarian hybrids rose to power (Brooker, 2014: 2). However, these are large labels and more specific labels allow for a clearer picture to be built of the regime, how it operates, what kind of control it seems to wield and more.

Bureaucratic Authoritarianism is more focused than many broad approaches, such as authoritarianism or totalitarianism, more limited in its application, and seems likely to be more valuable, in no small part, due to being able to communicate much more regarding how the regime approaches day-to-day life, how it wrestles with (and/or relies upon) its past, how it prevents what it views as damaging elements from gaining political traction (let alone economic or political power), how it defuses potentially political issues, and how it extracts massive rents while (some may argue due to) engaging in the described behavioural patterns. A narrow application of BA seems to capture the realities of how history, economy and politics intertwine to create the circumstances which facilitate the continuation of the Putin era in Russia.

## Conclusion

This article has addressed the question of whether bureaucratic authoritarianism is really an appropriate paradigm for Russia in the Putin era. In doing so, it tested whether a stricter definition of

BA than the one utilised by Shevtsova, among others, might be applicable to Russia. Persuasive evidence was found which indicated that bureaucratic authoritarianism can be applied to the case of Russia in this period. This was found by applying the seven elements, or characteristics, outlined by O'Donnell to the Russian case and finding considerable evidence for each, allowing the verification of the applicability of the concept. As such, the stricter approach to defining Russia as a case of BA did not produce different results from that of Shevtsova.

The oligopolised and transnationalised elite of Russia, the emphasis on coercion and order, the exclusion of popular sectors, the suppression of democracy, the exclusionary economic system, the depoliticised social issues and the closed democratic channels all indicate that Russia constitutes a case of BA. As previously noted, there is growing agreement that Russia is authoritarian, but Bureaucratic Authoritarianism is more focussed than simple authoritarianism, or other large categories such as totalitarianism, and is more limited in its application. As such, it seems to be more valuable, due to its ability to communicate much more regarding how the regime approaches day-to-day life, engages with its past, prevents damaging elements from gaining power, defuses potentially political issues, and how it extracts massive rents while engaging in the described behavioural patterns. A narrow application of BA seems to capture the realities of how history, economy and politics intertwine to create the circumstances which facilitate the continuation of the Putin era in Russia.

Looking beyond the individual case of Russia, there is reason to believe that increased attention may be paid to non-democratic regimes, as a result of the fact that waves of democracy are often followed by reverse or counter waves (Huntington, 1991), as well as the global challenges to and decline of democracy (Diamond et al., 2015; Mechkova et al., 2017). Although some of this attention, especially large-N studies, will continue to utilise broad definitions, other approaches will likely involve the resurrection or repurposing of theories and approaches from the past. Given that BA was relevant in the case of Russia, there is no reason to believe that BA, or other out-of-fashion approaches, if they are applicable, adaptable and useful tools of analysis for new times and places, would not be valuable additions to present and future debates on non-democratic regimes.

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1. O'Donnell's use of the term *pueblo* may be analogous to *naroda*.

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