Abstract

The failure of both democratic transformation and the transition paradigm in the post-soviet space has contributed significantly to the study of durable authoritarianism. For the most part, this research has focused on institutions – both formal and informal, and the ways in which they are both captured and subverted – and on the behaviour of elites. Increasingly, however, research on Russia in particular has begun to elucidate a range of pro-autocratic phenomena that lie deeper in the social equation – factors including personality, emotion, and the evidently careful calculations that inform the expression and/or falsification of preferences. This paper suggests that scholars should push even further in that direction. While not negating the importance of institutions and elites, the suggestion here is that research should move beyond received assumptions about the ways in which autocratic “distortions” originating at the top of the political hierarchy might cascade downwards. Rather, a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of Russia can help understand the ways in which autocratic governance produces not just political behaviours, but also more deeply engrained social incentives and preferences, which in turn lend internal coherence - and thus durability - to authoritarian systems.