Summary

Countering the Color Revolutions: Russian Interventions in Ukraine and the U.S.

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July 16, 2018

Why do despots do what they do? Most recent studies of authoritarian politics offer a three-step answer to this question. First, what matters most to authoritarian leaders is staying in power. Second, authoritarian rulers cannot take their power for granted, because members of their ruling circle and/or rebellious citizens can depose them at virtually any time. Finally, because their over-arching goal is to remain in office, but they operate in an environment of political uncertainty, rational dictators devote enormous energy to preempting and, failing that, suppressing domestic challenges to their rule.

In this paper, I internationalize these three claims about authoritarian rulers by analyzing both international threats to their power and their use of foreign policies to manage those threats. To illustrate what it means to embed “rational dictators” in the international system, I focus on one case—Russia— and assess how Russian perceptions of Western and especially U.S. threats to Putin’s power led Russia to intervene in the domestic politics of both Ukraine and the United States.

I present two arguments. First, since the Presidential election in Ukraine in 2004 when Russia’s favored candidate for the Presidency lost to the candidate favored by the West, the Russian leadership has coded Western democracy assistance as an existential threat. They have had some good reasons to do so—though they have exaggerated the role of the United State as a force for regime change in both Russia’s neighborhood and elsewhere. For example, it is undeniable that, since the mid-1980s, the United States (until the election of Donald Trump) has preferred democracy to dictatorship and has place a high priority on promoting
democratic change in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia in particular. Moreover, the United States played an important role in the color revolutions; that is, the wave of electoral defeats of authoritarian rulers that took place from 1998 to 2005 in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. Finally, the wave of democratic change in so many countries resembling and neighboring Russia was accompanied by other developments that threatened the Putin regime—for instance, the expansion of the EU and especially NATO and the decision by countries experiencing the color revolutions to move away from the Russian sphere of influence and closer to the West.

Second, Russia responded to this dual threat—that is, to Russian national security and Putin’s job security—in two ways. One was to take steps at home and abroad to insulate Russia from international pressures for democratic change (diffusion-proofing). The other was to give the West a taste of its own medicine by intervening in electoral politics in the West and thereby engaging in a process of equivalent retaliation (tit-for-tat). While the Russian invasion of Ukraine, beginning in 2014, and growing repression at home exemplify the first strategy, Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election (and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom in mid-2016, among other interventions in Europe) exemplifies the second. Indeed, what is striking about these examples are the similarities between Russian de-stabilization of the United States, beginning in 2014 and its destabilization of eastern Ukraine, also starting in the same year, and between Russian interventions in the 2016 U.S. election and the Russian reading (not that accurate) of U.S interventions in electoral politics in Russia’s neighborhood.
This study has several implications—aside from the obvious corrective that rational authoritarians are, and must be in a globalized world, international as well as domestic actors. One implication is that political leaders, whether democratic or authoritarian, worry about national and job security, and these concerns shape foreign, as well as domestic policy. Another is that democracy promotion has had some powerful, unintended costs. For example, it has weaponized elections, and it created strong incentives for authoritarian leaders to defend themselves by becoming more authoritarian at home (ironically) and more aggressive abroad.