



PROTEST IN SPACE, AMONG SOCIAL GROUPS AND IN TIME: Towards an Historically Informed Agenda of Studying Urban Discontent in Autocracies

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Urban protest has been a subject of burgeoning scholarship on regime vulnerabilities and resilience in autocracies (Onuch 2015, 2014; Lorentzen 2013; King et al. 2013; Rød and Weidmann 2015; Beissinger 2013; Little et al. 2013; Tucker 2007; Robertson 2011; Harris and Hern 2019; Plantan 2014; Frye and Borisova 2019). In this essay, I discuss how careful attention to historical legacies of social structure that are spatially varied, could further enrich the recent empirical and conceptual innovations in the study of protest. Specifically, I sketch out how and in what ways history matters for understanding present-day protest and *non*-protest; in what ways lack of sensitivity to historical legacies can hamper understanding of discontent in post-communist societies; and how my ongoing historically-grounded research contributes to this research agenda. Although the discussion largely concerns protest in Russia and other post-communist states, the arguments are applicable to a variety of settings. They sensitize us to broad patterns of historical conditioning of the political economy of sub-national urban spaces and social structures underpinning varieties and intensities of mobilization.

Recent contributions: Space, Issue Salience and Time

Before I outline how history matters for understanding urban street contention in post-communist states, I will highlight recent data innovations and contributions to the study of protest. I then proceed to illustrate how the rich data contributions could be fruitfully analysed in conjunction with historical source materials.

The global wave of high-profile colour revolutions has highlighted the significance of urban street contention to effect pivotal change in political institutions and regimes. These rare events, often limited to national capitals and a handful of metropolises, do not by themselves provide a window into the long-term dynamics of the germination of grievances, incentives and accumulation of tangible and intangible protest-supportive resources, processes that may or may not culminate in a successful uprising (Robertson 2013). Understanding the dynamics of the singular high-profile event requires unpacking the hidden inter-connected mechanisms structuring contention across issue areas, across space and in time (Lankina and Tertychnaya 2019). Building on cross-



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national data generation efforts (Banks 2011), researchers have begun to assemble sub-national over-time event data disaggregated by issue area, activist base and locality (Rød and Weidmann 2014; Weidmann and Rød 2019; Lankina 2018; Daxecker et al. 2019; Robertson 2011).¹ These data may be instrumental in revealing the patterned nature of the articulation of grievances in urban politics. These are intrinsic not only to types of issues and causes people care about, but also to locality-specific structures of patronage, clientelism, social control. In turn, theorizing into authoritarian resilience informs us that these sub-national political-institutional features of authoritarian regimes constitute bottom-up support structures for national incumbents (Hale 2015).

Furthermore, spatial variations in institutional-political landscapes within an autocracy may crucially affect not only citizen propensity to engage in civic and contentious street acts, but the type of activism that is “permitted,” “safe” or tactically desirable from the point of view of protesters’ goals. For instance, sub-national data for Russia reveal that even in the more politically liberal metropolitan urban conglomerates outside of the high-profile electoral protests or other intensely politicised mass contentious acts, the bulk of protest events will concern variants of post-material engagements. Some examples are protests against illegal construction, street activism concerning the destruction of parks, nature reserves, children leisure facilities (Lankina and Tertychnaya 2019; Smyth 2020). These apparently harmless forms of discontent constitute however crucial channels of

engendering political constituencies for protest. Indeed, studies have shown that the same individuals assume leadership roles, are active in, and instrumental in the spurring of, politicised discontent when political opportunities change (Greene and Robertson 2019; Lankina 2015).

The Lankina Russian Protest-Event Dataset (LARuPED) (Lankina 2018) is sensitive to these inter-connected possibilities in that it distinguishes between civic, social, economic, political types of activism across space and in time. The data allow scholars to track shifting issue salience and its relevance for building authoritarian challenges in the long run. The data also show heterogeneity in the types of protest that citizens in the various localities habitually engage in. In some regions, strikes and labour activism around bread and butter issues are prevalent. Elsewhere, individuals routinely engage in protest around civic causes, something that facilitates political forms of contention when opportunities open up at the national level.

The focus in much of the literature has been on identifying temporally-proximate causal mechanisms related to the intricacies of immediate politics, tactics and resources of activists and political actors. Yet, I argue that spatial heterogeneity in mobilizational dynamics with crucial implications for national-level contention and authoritarian regime erosion could be best understood with reference to the broader historical processes of regional economic development shaping social structure, resources and incentives. Below I discuss how sensitivity to the historical underpinnings of regional political economies would help us develop a more fine-

1. For an overview of the various datasets, see (Rød and Weidmann 2014).

grained and textured knowledge of spatial-temporal variations in protest.

The political economy of sub-national protest

Most scholars would concur that the economic dimension of citizen grievances, incentives and opportunities, is of pivotal importance for understanding spatial heterogeneity in urban protest in autocracies. Nevertheless, we need a better understanding of the mechanisms linking social rebellion or compliance to the broader, spatially varied political and economic legacies associated with distinct forms of economic development, urbanization and industrialization. In post-communist autocracies, significant chunks of the urban workforce remain corralled in state-owned or state-dependent enterprises—a legacy of state socialist planning. Economic dependencies and vulnerabilities also affect the conduct of public sector workforce employed in schools, medical facilities, tertiary institutions. Furthermore, historically “old” towns with a long history of pre-communist development ought to be distinguished from “new” monotowns built around one or a handful of industrial giants (Zubarevich 2011). In the latter-type of urban environment, a large proportion of citizens depend on one mega-employer. The social life of families and communities and services are also structured around employer-provided infrastructure and welfare. In such socialist-legacy industrial monotowns, dismissal from work is a harsh sentence, far more so than in historical towns with a much more plural, fluid and dynamic employment ecosystem. Even during nationally-prominent mobilizations challenging authoritarian rule, citizens in such towns may be less willing to join in the broad cross-territorial movement. This, in turn, consolidates the cleavage between

the “sophisticated urbanites” in large metropolises and the equivalent of the communist rust-belt of left-behind towns. Workforce dependencies dis-incentivize salaried employees from challenging autocrats at the ballot box or in the streets. They also encourage patterns of complicity in actively undermining street activism—again, using the toolkit of worker, student, peer dismissals, harassment and shaming (Frye et al. 2014; Lankina and Libman 2019).

History also matters from the point of view of types of modernization and the contexts in which it has been pursued. In classic modernization theorizing (Lipset 1959), educated, urban white-collar workforce is often associated with “progressive” causes and, in autocracies, lower tolerance for regimes that trample on citizen rights. Rare revolutionary events may of course feature cross-class participation of a motley assemblage of citizens of varied political orientations, demographic cohorts and socio-economic status (Beissinger 2013). Nevertheless, whether considering politicised acts of dissent or more routine forms of civic protest, urban discontent is often a middle-class phenomenon. Yet, as Bryn Rosenfeld demonstrates, the “middle class” itself needs to be urgently unpacked in contexts where a large share is “incubated” within the confines of the autocracy’s public sector (Rosenfeld 2017). Rosenfeld’s work dovetails with earlier and more recent contributions problematizing the “bourgeoisie” or the middle class in iconic works on democratic origin and resilience. Not only may the middle class espouse economic or other incentives to support autocratic rule (Foa 2018; O’Donnell 1973; Slater 2010; Greene and Robertson 2019), but it may choose to “deliberately disengage” in the face of authoritarian manipulations and crackdowns (Croke et al. 2016).

The bigger question however - which has not been addressed prominently in recent studies of urban mobilization in autocracies - is the historical conditioning of the types of dependencies that Rosenfeld writes about. Neglect of this question risks skewing the explanatory framework towards the policies, employment and economic structures of present-day autocracies. In fact, as my analysis shows, these patterns may be rooted in developmental policies of a distinct, prior, regime type, or even several regimes. There is also the question of the likelihood of cross-class mobilization transcending social cleavages *within* the urban middle class. For toppling or effectively challenging autocrats may require wider alliances *between* the large metropolitan centres where much of the activism occurs and smaller towns or rural areas. The latter types of settlement however are often not only dormant when it comes to protest but constitute the backbone of authoritarian resilience building. Put simply, just as urgently as understanding incentives to join in, derived from immediate status in the employment arenas of an autocracy, we ought to unpack the *longue durée* aspects of the construction of the stratum broadly bracketed under the “bourgeoisie” or “middle class” umbrella.

Several decades ago, the Chicago economist Bert Hoselitz argued that an ideal-type of “autonomous” development is one where “all decisions affecting economic growth are made by individuals other than those holding political power” (1965: 97). Hoselitz contrasted those patterns with settings where “all economic growth... would be strictly induced, that is, provided for and planned by a central authority” (1965: 98). Following Hoselitz, Robert Dahl linked the more autonomous developmental patterns to processes of the maturation of a pro-democratic

constituency, as distinct from the more hegemonic/induced policies of an autocracy like the Soviet Union or China that fabricate the middle class as part of state-led industrialisation (Dahl 1971). These insights acquire added salience in the present time. Increasingly, scholars are turning toward explaining current global political regime trends with reference to legacies that may have survived over long periods of time and across distinct regime types (Simpser et al. 2018; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017; Lussier and LaPorte 2017).

Present-day studies of protest could benefit from incorporating these insights into analyses of the incentives, possibilities, values of distinct sets of urban constituencies. These may be shaped by legacies that are perpetuated within urban communities. Post-communist contexts, in particular, constitute fertile terrain for dissecting variations within the broad “middle class” stratum. Here, we see how a more “organic” process of the genesis of an entrepreneurial, professional, educated citizenry prior to communist rule may coexist with a new state-dependent intelligentsia rapidly engineered in an “induced” way. In analysing class in communist societies, the Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi presciently distinguished between economic autonomy and political authority (Szelényi 1988). Experience of navigating the market and high, intergenerationally transmitted human capital endowments, enhance citizen autonomy. These endowments also structure possibilities to gravitate away from state-dependent arenas of employment as “cadre” / “apparatchik.” The latter status may bestow authority but not personal autonomy. In the post-communist period, inherited values and human capital may create broader possibilities for private entrepreneurship or high-status jobs less dependent on state

resources and sanction. Furthermore, broader historical cleavages among the distinct groups not only structure the types of activism they are willing to engage in, but cognitive orientations towards other groups (Smyth and Oates 2015; Greene and Robertson 2019).

The ongoing work of this author and collaborators illustrates the utility of going beyond conventional survey categories and incorporating those that are more attuned to the historical conditioning of values, structural opportunities, incentives. In a recent body of work, Lankina et al. sought to tease out the historical conditioning of attitudes towards protest among the middle class in Russia, a large post-communist autocracy, and in ways that transcended the conventional “urban-rural,” demographic (age) and occupational survey categories (Lankina 2019; Lankina et al. 2019). We approached middle class formation from the point of view of its origin under distinct political regimes—pre-communist and communist. We also assumed that there will be inter-generational dependencies in the pathways of the post-communist middle class from the point of view of employment and career trajectories. Our intention was to gauge how the genesis of the middle class under a more “organic” versus a more “induced” order shapes oppositional attitudes—specifically when it comes to protest. One conceptual innovation that we injected into debates about the genesis of middle class in communist societies is to draw attention to pre-communist structure of estates.

In Russia, we identify the urban estates of *meshchane* and merchants in particular, as indeed the nobility and clergy as the educated urban proto-bourgeoisie. Preliminary analysis of the survey that we commissioned from Russia’s leading polling agency, Levada, revealed in-

triguing awareness of pre-Revolutionary estate among respondents. We also found co-variance between self-reported ancestry of belongingness to the proto-bourgeoisie and proclivities to support protest. One possible interpretation of these patterns that we offer is that middle class values are transmitted across generations within communities, neighbourhoods and families—a transmission channel analysed in a number of studies of communist societies (Wittenberg 2006; Peisakhin 2013; Charnysh 2019). Another interpretation is that the high human capital pre-communist strata were able to transmit educational advantage, professional and market orientations to the next generation (Lankina et al. 2019). These endowments and value orientations in turn enhance employment possibilities beyond the public sector, engendering personal autonomy, institutional pluralism and diversity in economic landscapes (McMann 2006).

History matters also if we consider another important question animating recent research into protest in autocracies. Notably, it is relevant from the point of view of the cognitive aspects of exposure to events that may have public order connotations. Recent analyses of protest have moved beyond exploring the drivers of mobilization to more systematically analysing what it is that episodes of intense, national, rebellions against autocrats achieve when it comes to public opinion (Frye and Borisova 2019; Tertychnaya 2019; Greene and Robertson 2019). In these analyses, whether the ruler is dislodged or not becomes secondary to broader questions of how bystanders’ incentives to join, opinions towards oppositional activism and broader political orientations may be shaped in the process of, and consequential to, exposure to dramatic and rare protest events. The shift

towards the public opinion moulding propensities of protest in autocracies is non-trivial for two reasons. One reason is the capacity of rulers to deploy modern forms of communication to manipulate information on discontent in ways that would not have been possible during historical revolutionary episodes in the past (Huang and Huang 2019; King et al. 2013; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Lorentzen 2014; Treisman and Guriev 2015; Plantan 2020; Chen and Xu 2015).

Another dimension is repression and violence (Daxecker et al. 2019). Again, given the modern communications toolkit, both autocrats and ordinary citizens are quick to disseminate information on violence. Autocrats could always shift the blame on protesters for inciting bloodshed. Additionally, ordinary people may either feel outrage or shy away from involvement, whether or not blame for inciting clashes is attributed to the regime or protesters (Lankina et al. 2020; Lorentzen 2013). Carefully studying how violence shifts public opinion thus allows for a sober assessment of not only the “tipping point” aspects of incentives to join in (Kuran 1995; Lohmann 1994), but also the possibility of turning off bystanders from engagement in activism that may have unpleasant public order connotations.

In autocracies like Russia or China, many citizens have been previously exposed to trauma, violence and dispossession associated with the 20th century communist experiment. Here the “bourgeoisie” has been targeted on grounds of ideology—and even slated for extermination as a class. Some studies have revealed that experience of incarceration in the notorious Gulag labour camps may have had positive effect on democratic values. One plausible causal channel is exposure of citizens to the worst crimes

of an ostensibly benign regime (Lankina and Libman 2017; Kapelko and Markevich 2014). At the same time, individuals with personal or family experience of trauma and violence may be particularly careful in endorsing contentious politics. Modern-day autocrats are skilful at manipulating public information on discontent as when pro-democracy protests are portrayed in the media as leading to cataclysmic upheaval, bloodshed and social dislocation associated with a Bolshevik Revolution-type event (Lankina et al. 2020; Lankina and Watanabe 2017).

Our own survey revealed that self-reported descendants of pre-communist bourgeoisie may in fact eschew supporting protest if it has connotations of violence and public disorder (Lankina et al. 2019). Specifically, we observe that those who report pre-Revolutionary ancestry which we bracket under the rubric of the “educated bourgeoisie” are significantly more likely to articulate support for protests, both events that are sanctioned and unsanctioned. These constituencies also tend to eschew a preference of voting for Putin if there were a Presidential election coming up. The survey also reveals nevertheless that when asked about *participation in unsanctioned, or violent protests*, self-reported descendants of the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie are significantly less likely to report that they endorse street contention. We attribute these responses to the legacies of Soviet repression and harassment targeting “bourgeois elements,” “former people” and other “undesirables” in the context of post-Revolutionary witch-hunts. These legacies, we surmise, did not necessarily suppress latent pro-democracy attitudes. Rather, they engendered adaptation skills that may lead to a cautious attitude towards events that may be perceived as carrying safety risks.

Summary and agenda for future research

The tentative findings from recent research beg for a new, historically informed, agenda of study of the spatially and temporally heterogeneous social class dimension of urban protest attitudes, dynamics and outcomes in present-day autocracies. They warrant a shift in focus from the temporally-proximate interactive dynamics between autocrats and citizens as these respective sets of actors devise new toolkits to resist and subvert (Koesel and Bunce 2013; Ambrosio 2010). My research draws on innovations of other scholars. Following Rosenfeld (Rosenfeld 2020, 2017), my collaborators and I argue that our analysis ought to be sensitive to shades within the category that is most prominently associated with anti-authoritarian protest—namely, the urban middle class. Furthermore, as LARuPED (Lankina 2018) reveals, citizens across sub-national territories may engage in different types of protest.

Where I inject nuance into extant studies is to more forcefully bring into discussions the long historical process of socio-economic channeling of opportunities accounting for protest or non-protest depending on the legacies of industrial development, urbanization, central state planning. I also highlight the need to develop a better understanding of the historical-developmental underpinnings of citizen proclivities to engage in specific types of activism—from the more “bread and butter” type concerns that may vary between urban mono-towns versus economically more plural settings. Additionally, a more careful study of the historical conditioning of possibilities for cross-social, cross-class alliances among the various urban constituencies is warranted. The legacies of trauma, violence and repression against specific groups as inflicted by 20th century dictatorial regimes also matter. Finally, we need to better understand the historical conditioning of values, resources and opportunities of citizens conventionally bracketed under an “urban” or “middle class” umbrella. ●

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