

Studying Contestations to the Liberal Script in Authoritarian Contexts in Times of Crises: Methodological Challenges

Tobias Berger, Genia Kostka, Alexander Libman, Anja Osei

Location: Freie Universität Berlin, Ihnestraße 21, Hörsaal A.

Cluster of Excellence ‚Contestation of the Liberal Script‘ (SCRIPTS)

Motivation

Comparative perspective on studying contestations to the liberal script and their consequences is essential for the second phase of the SCRIPTS. A genuine comparative perspective inevitably requires extending the research agenda to ‘hard-to-study’ non-European cases, which is associated with a variety of conceptual and methodological challenges. The goal of the workshop is to discuss these challenges, concentrating in particular on the intersection of two scope conditions: **non-democratic external environment** and overall **societal instability and crises**. Both authoritarian systems and crises severely constrain possibilities for researchers but at the same time precisely these cases are particularly important for studying contestations to the liberal script. We intend to look at these issues for a variety of regional cases, compare possible constraints for research and best practices of dealing with them.

There are several challenges researchers have to overcome to study authoritarian countries. The first is the most basic one: our **assumptions** about how authoritarian societies work and how we should understand and interpret them are frequently **highly simplified**. Authoritarian regimes are extremely diverse, which makes it difficult for concepts to travel from one regime to another. In many cases, the research question formulated for one context would make little or no sense in another one. The motivation of the key actors and their perception of how their societies develop (including the perception of the liberal script, its alternatives and its contestations) differ as well, and this should be acknowledged while developing the research agenda covering these cases.

The second challenge is associated with **collecting and analyzing empirical data**. For qualitative researchers, studying authoritarian contexts is associated with severe limitations of access to the field. Quantitative scholars equally face difficulties with collecting data, but also with interpreting the available evidence: official statistics or surveys, even if available, cannot be understood without knowing the context. Intriguingly, even highly questionable data sources, if correctly analyzed, can be very helpful in understanding the political dynamics of authoritarian regimes: knowing how exactly the data is manipulated by bureaucrats or when do individuals misreport their preferences and behavior in surveys reveals a lot about how specific authoritarian regimes work.

Major societal crises make the challenges of data collection even more severe, because they impose further constraints on research (including limits to travel and threats of physical danger) and make the established research practices unsustainable. Russia and China constitute two very recent and important examples. COVID pandemic effectively severed access to the field for the China scholars, with current situation being uncertain. War in Ukraine makes research in Russia – in the past, an authoritarian regime with uniquely broad research opportunities – extremely difficult, old research paradigms and approaches have to be rethought and adjusted. Under these conditions, there is greater demand for creative and unusual research strategies, allowing to collect data even under the most adverse conditions. At the same time, these creative strategies do not necessarily meet the requirements of mainstream social sciences in terms of academic rigor.

The third challenge is associated with **communicating research** results on 'difficult-to-study' contexts. On the one hand, the way researchers write about their cases could affect their access to the field. The risks are even bigger for researchers, who originally come from authoritarian countries; finally, local partners face more substantial constraints and threats. How should researchers ensure their access to the field and cooperate with local partners, at the same time avoiding the trap of legitimizing authoritarian regimes? On the other hand, in the public discussion the statements of researchers today are increasingly evaluated against the backdrop of their fit into highly normative or even politically driven narratives; it makes it very difficult to provide a multi-faceted nuanced perspective on the topic. Major crises triggering increasing public attention to the cases researchers study make these problems more severe.

On top of that, **ethical issues** pose a serious challenge for researchers of authoritarian regimes. One needs to ensure protection of local partners and respondents, as well as researchers themselves. Achieving this task is difficult and requires a lot of sensitivity to local context. At the same time, researchers working on 'difficult-to-study' contexts have to deal with advanced ethical requirements of their home universities, scholarly associations and journals. Standards of IRBs, data transparency and reporting, are, however, often set without recognizing the specificity of authoritarian field, which leads to conflicts and substantial difficulties. It is important to address this topic and to discuss possible adjustment of standards of Western research institutions in this respect.

All these challenges are closely connected to each other and require detailed discussion, which the workshop aims to provide.

Program

Thursday October 12

12.00 -13.30 Welcome lunch

13.30-15.00 Concept travel and stretching

Martin Dimitrov, University of Tulane

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, King's College London

Matthew Nelson, School of Oriental and African Studies

George Bob-Milliar, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology

Chair / discussant: Tobias Berger, FU Berlin

15.00-15.30 Coffee Break

15.30 – 17.00 Quantitative methods

David Szakonyi, George Washington University

Adnan Naseemullah, King's College London

Clionadh Raleigh, University of Sussex

Chair / discussant: Alexander Libman, FU Berlin

18.00 Dinner

Friday October 13

9.00-11.00 Qualitative methods

Guzel Yusupova, FU Berlin

Anna Lora-Wainwright, University of Oxford

Juliette Genevaz, Lyon 3 University

Anuj Bhawania, FU Berlin

Ana Lúcia Sá, University Institute of Lisbon

Chair / discussant: Genia Kostka, FU Berlin

11.00-11.15 Coffee Break

11.15-12.45 Communication and ethics

Ekaterina Schulmann, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center / FU Berlin

Anupama Roy, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Anna Ahlers, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

Matthew Sabbi, FU Berlin

Chair / discussant: Anja Osei, FU Berlin

12.45-13.15 Conclusion Session

13.15 -14.00 Farewell Lunch