

International Politics and National Political Regimes

Promoting Democracy – Promoting Autocracy

Edited by
Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger



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International Politics and National Political Regimes

There is much speculation about whether democracy is still advancing around the world and the influence that leading authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes such as Russia are starting to have on the trends.

This collection assesses global trends in democratization, reviews the condition of international democracy promotion and enquires into whether serious competition in the form of autocracy promotion is now a major possibility. The influence of international politics on national political regimes is explored in more detail for Russia's resistance to democracy promotion and Russian influence on regimes in Central Asia in particular, along with an Indian perspective on India's reluctance to push for democracy abroad and concerns that democracy promotion itself should be considered more critically if it undermines democratization in foreign aid-dependent states. The book concludes by briefly addressing the potential significance of the 2011 'Arab spring' for these themes.

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Promoting democracy – promoting autocracy? International politics and national political regimes

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Has the last tide of democratization been replaced by a new wave of democratic reversal? Do two decades of international democracy promotion now have to compete with the promotion of authoritarian rule by powers that have resisted democratization internally? Are there more pressing grounds than ever to investigate international political influences on the prospects not just for transition to and consolidation of democracy but the persistence, resurgence and spread of more authoritarian regimes? These are among the big issues raised in this introduction to the special issue. It does not pretend to provide definitive responses, but rather makes a start on how to look for some answers. The introduction spells out an agenda that should take a central place in future research into the influence of international politics on national political regimes. It gives a window onto how the multinational contributions in this issue add to our knowledge and take that agenda further forwards.

Democracy is in danger!

Two years ago, Freedom House's annual survey gave rise to concerns that democracy, seen on a global scale, was in danger, and Puddington (2008) then asked: 'Is the tide turning?' In early 2009, the warning was reiterated as the organization had found that, for the third year in a row, the number of democracies worldwide had decreased (Puddington 2009). By then, this claim had been picked up by prominent scholars who claimed that democracies were 'on the retreat' and that we faced not only a 'democratic rollback', but also a 'resurgence of the predatory state' (Diamond 2008b). This matches neatly with the claim put forth earlier by Huntington (1991) that global waves of democratization have been followed by reverse waves ever since democracies came into being.

The worrisome picture painted in these contributions deserves an explanation that goes beyond contending with the existence of 'reverse waves' in a general manner and that looks at more recent global political regime dynamics in greater detail. And indeed, several prominent political developments can be listed that presumably impact on the global state of democracy and autocracy now and might bear some explanatory power for the findings sketched out above.

Arguably, the most remarkable feature in recent international politics is China's rapid rise. This includes China's opening towards and (re-)assertion in world politics, with all that this involves for global demography, world energy markets, world trade relations, questions of global environmental governance and responses to climate change. In addition there are

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implications for international development, and not least for security-related questions in bi- and multi-lateral relations of other great and former super powers with the new Asian giant. On the political front, to many developing countries China's rise represents a persuasive alternative to Western democracy – all the more so since democracy promotion – and, perhaps, democracy (or western forms of democracy) too – lost in international legitimacy in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq by the USA and Britain, the legally questionable practices (to say the least) in the treatment of prisoners held in places from Guantanamo Bay to Abu Ghraib, and efforts of political regime export and a style of democracy promotion that were, outside the USA, often perceived as aggressive, paternalistic, neo-imperialist, or a combination of the three. China's foreign policy principles with their emphasis on national sovereignty and non-interference contrast starkly with these Western practices – if maybe more in rhetoric than in actual practice.

A second phenomenon that might be read as having a long-term impact on the global political landscape is Russia's political consolidation after domestically turbulent times during the 1990s, as well as its subsequent rise out of the economic recession that handicapped it only a decade ago. While this in itself is remarkable, Vladimir Putin managed to install, within a comparatively short span of time, a remarkably sophisticated system of personalized autocratic rule in which it seems to matter little who the incumbent president under his rule may be (cf. e.g. Hassner 2008).

Third, the twenty-something Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa not only have gained renewed importance and attention as world prices for mineral resources reached another all-time high in mid-2008s (the region commands almost two-thirds of proven world oil reserves) but together with Iran some of these regimes are also at the forefront of the US-initiated global fight against terrorism. However, perhaps the most remarkable feature of this world region, despite regional instability and numerous violent conflicts, is the astonishing durability of its authoritarian modes of governance. In fact, the Middle East is the only world region that has not, over the past four decades, experienced a single successful case of democratic transition and therefore represents the largest block of countries under firmly and decidedly authoritarian rule, despite intra-regional differences with regard to the face that individual cases of this group of autocracies display.

Fourth, from among the many cases of 'defective democracies', 'hybrid regimes' or whatever we may call the 'grey-zone' regimes that fall somewhere between the fully democratic and fully autocratic countries in most developing areas, many have turned out to consolidate or re-consolidate in a clearly non-democratic fashion. Belarus or Moldova, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) plus Azerbaijan, not to speak of Russia itself, have, despite their systemic political transition away from Soviet rule, re-consolidated in a clearly authoritarian manner. And despite the 2006 riots in Kyrgyzstan which resulted in the president fleeing the country, democratization still seems off the agenda in 2010. Likewise, there are several countries in sub-Saharan Africa where in the 1990s and 2000s changes took place that, as it turned out later, had all too readily been seen as instances of the global wave of democratic transitions. Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Chad and others bear witness of this reverse trend that resulted either in failing states or, in an equally important number of cases, in a renewed closure of political systems that brings those countries closer to authoritarian than to democratic rule.

Thus, an overall picture of global development of political regimes can be presented that at first sight seems to confirm the view of those scholars who diagnose a democratic retreat and authoritarian backlash. Even though there is a set of countries on the European Union's (EU) Eastern and South Eastern brim that might still be strongly influenced by the possibility of gaining EU membership, although perhaps not as much as some previous new entrants who

witnessed an astonishingly quick democratic consolidation, this set is comparatively small and – globally speaking – rather marginal. In what seems to shape the general picture of today's global political landscape, this set can be interpreted as an exception rather than the global rule. Rather, the global rule seems to be a remarkable resilience of non-democratic rule, and a new trend towards the (re-)authoritarianization of political regimes.

Or maybe not?

In the face of these 'threats' to global democracy, it is not surprising that a new sobriety has taken hold among scholars. The earlier euphoria that lead prominent authors to proclaim a global victory of democratic rule and to prematurely pronounce the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992) has vanished, as has the belief that the third wave of democratic transitions that hit the shores of Southern Europe in the 1970s, of Latin America in the 1980s, and of Central Eastern Europe as well as parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s would continue infinitely.

Yet, this new sobriety is not as new as the most recent warnings by Freedom House, Diamond and others might suggest. Starting with the second half of the 1990s, researchers began to realize that democratization theory (or transitology) had become stuck in a dead end: Not only was Fukuyama's hypothesis proved wrong, but a 'grey zone' of political regimes came to the attention of scholars – a large group of cases that had initially been taken as cases of ongoing democratization, but where 'protracted' or 'stalled' processes of political change had resulted in political regimes that clearly fell short of liberal democracy. Such 'neither-nor' cases were located somewhere between autocracy and democracy, which led to some confusion on a theoretical level. Myriads of sometimes more, but more often less elaborated concepts were suggested to analytically deal with the phenomenon, and a wide range of often *ad hoc* invented regime (sub-)types flooded the literature.¹ Yet other authors held that such new political orders could neither be captured as democracies nor classified as authoritarian, but suggested that 'hybrid regimes' (Karl 1995, Diamond 2002, Rüb 2002) constituted a fourth basic regime type alongside with democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Whatever position one chooses between those two – methodologically and fundamentally different – options, becoming aware of this grey zone comprising cases that do not follow a steady path of democratization has contributed to the sobriety mentioned. More importantly, it can be seen as an indicator for a largely preconceived euphoria of wishful thinking (or thoughtful wishing) that had preoccupied the minds of many observers – something that is understandable in retrospect, given the exceptional advance of democracy in very diverse world regions, but which nevertheless was probably bound to be disappointed at some point from the very beginning.

The renewed and ongoing theoretical debates about regime types can thus be seen as an indicator – an indicator that not all phenomena perceived by social scientists as new might reflect actual changes in real world phenotypes, but may just as well reflect trends in the ways we perceive the world around us, i.e. there is a very pertinent question of perception involved in our statements and 'findings' of developments in political regimes between autocracy and democracy. Might it not be, then, that the degree of democratization euphoria the community witnessed in the early 1990s is now paralleled by a similar degree of exaggerated fears about a maybe not so real decline of democratic governance and an equally questionable authoritarian backlash? At least some recent commentary would suggest that the answer is yes (see Burnell and Youngs (2009), especially the concluding chapter).

Then again, there are the real facts mentioned in the first section that are not a matter of perception, but undeniable empirical realities – most notably Russia's and China's renewed rise to global power. Thus, what is needed as a first step with regard to this question is a realistic

assessment of the current global state of democracy and autocracy around the world – and the article immediately after this introduction will provide exactly this.

Central research questions (guiding this issue)

Against the backdrop of this ambiguous phenomenological picture of real-world politics, what we would like to know more about are, in essence, two things:

- (1) Why has democracy promotion not triggered greater success after decades of practice and after a considerable time-span during which the 'learning curve' (Carothers 1999) among agents of democracy assistance has presumably moved on an upward slope?
- (2) If there are international factors that work toward the expansion of democratic rule, are these actually the only forces within the international system that impact on political regime development – or might other factors exist that work in the opposite direction, namely towards the spread and/or persistence of authoritarian rule?

These are the key questions into which the contributions to the present issue try to critically dig into. What has become clear in the previous paragraphs is that there are both factors that hint that democracy might actually be less on the retreat than the voices quoted above have assumed, and hints that an underlying reason for our changing assumptions about the state of global democracy might be related more to changes in the scholarly perception of the state of affairs that lie in real world changes. But there is also strong empirical counter-evidence against any hypothesis that would take authoritarian rule as some extinct dinosaurs in a global political evolution. Instead, autocracies may possess much greater staying power than has hitherto been assumed by a large number of scholars who had been influenced strongly by the transitology literature of the 1980s and 1990s. It seems necessary, however, to embed out research questions in the existing literature by briefly reviewing different current strands, which will enable us to be more aware of what is known, what not, and what should be on the agenda of future research on international determinants of national political regime developments. For that is precisely where the special issue aims to point the way.

Of course, we are in the very early stages of this process, but through our double focus on both democratic and autocratic regime outcomes, we hope to re-frame the debate in a more analytical (as opposed to normative) way. So, previously unnoticed trends may become more easily visible, which in turn should have an impact on future research agendas with regard to the question of political regime development and the important international dimensions to this topic.

Locating our research in current literature(s) on international factors impacting on political regime development

Three core strands of literature need to be taken into account when reflecting on the ambiguous picture of the state of democracy and autocracy in today's world:

- (a) A more general literature on international factors in democratization
- (b) A more specific literature on the international promotion of democracy
- (c) A new literature on authoritarian regimes

(a) The late attention to international variables in democratization

Even after democratization studies had become one of the most prominent issues in comparative politics, international factors received only scant attention in the study of such processes for a

relatively long time (Whitehead 1996). Today, the core of the literature dealing with international factors that impact on the state of democracy and on processes of democratization can roughly be differentiated between two different approaches, if we exclude studies on external democracy promotion policies as a topic in its own right: First, contributions that examine democratization by unintended 'contagion' (Whitehead 2001) or 'diffusion' (Brinks and Coppedge 2006); second, the concept of 'linkage and leverage' introduced by Levitsky and Way (2005) within which intent plays a much more prominent role. The largest part of applications of this second current has emerged in the context of studies on the EU's foreign policies in the course of its latest accession round, as well as with regard to its recently developed *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP), so that it makes sense to briefly revisit this strand of literature as well (for an up-to-date statement of the European Council's position on democracy support and EU external relations see Council of European Union 2009).

Diffusion in a general sense is defined by Rogers (2003, p. 5) as 'the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time'. In contrast to democracy promotion or democracy assistance to governmental diplomacy or non-governmental advocacy activities that transgress the boundaries of nation states, and to incentive-setting or to demanding certain conditionalities and outright military imposition, political processes of diffusion are characterized by the fact that they are unintended. In this argument, geographical proximity supposedly facilitates higher levels of transnational interaction – be it through means of mass communication and media that can be received on either side of mutual borders, through migration, repatriated elites after having received foreign education, academic exchange, social networks and transnational social movements or other factors.

Studies on the international diffusion of norms, values and in final consequence, political regime type have been carried out predominantly by using macro-quantitative data. Starr and Lindborg (2003, p. 516f.), for instance, find significant diffusion effects among neighbouring countries: a higher number of transitions at the borders of one state increases that latter's likelihood of undergoing a transition of similar direction. 'Positive border government transitions [...] tend to generate positive transitions in the countries that they border; negative transitions [...] tend to generate negative transitions in the countries that they border.' Moreover, another finding by these same authors is that a predominantly democratic neighbourhood increases the likelihood that countries classified as 'partially free' (according to the ratings by Freedom House) will experience democratic transitions and reduces the probability of them undergoing a transition to a fully fledged autocracy. In a similar vein, Brinks and Coppedge (2006) confirm, in their findings, that 'diffusion is no illusion', and that, among other findings, regimes in one country tend to assimilate their regimes to match the average 'degree' of (non-)democracy among neighbouring states. However, much remains vague in these studies. While levels of significance in such correlations are found to be high, concrete causal mechanisms (if indeed they do exist) remain largely opaque. Therefore, 'diffusion processes are notoriously difficult to pin down because it is hard to distinguish true diffusion from illusions of diffusion created by global trends, correlated disturbances or the regional clustering of domestic factors' (Brinks and Coppedge 2006, p. 464).

'Linkage' and 'leverage' as a more actor-centred model was introduced by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in their examination of the conditions that make for the success of one country in influencing another country's system of political rule. Linkage, the way Levitsky and Way use it, is a rather structural property that can exist to various degrees. As an analytical category, it is almost synonymous to the above-mentioned factors that may account for democratic diffusion: Since there is no (political) intent, it requires no agency in itself as it simply describes the density of international interactions that may take place on all sorts of social and economic levels and in various arenas: Apart from transnational media, students' exchange programmes, and

other above-mentioned factors, transnational–economic interactions count as inter-linking factors much in the sense Cooper (1968) outlined 40 years ago when writing about economic interdependence more generally, who was followed later by Keohane and Nye's seminal *Power and Interdependence* (Keohane and Nye 1977). If linkage, thus, is a predominantly trans-societal category, then 'leverage' as its counterpart can be dubbed a trans-governmental or intergovernmental category. The degree of leverage one state has over another, according to Levitsky and Way, is high if and when three conditions are met: (1) The addressed state is economically and militarily weak and dependent; (2) the 'levering' state has no significant other (potentially conflicting) policy goals or interests apart from achieving political change in the addressed country; and (3) other regional powers do not play a major role in the political game between the two countries concerned.

Democratization, then, is a likely outcome if both linkage and leverage are high (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe; Latin America). It is obviously not an outcome if both are low; rather, in this case authoritarian rule can consolidate (Middle East, parts of the former Soviet Union, parts of East Asia). Finally, the result Levitsky and Way expect if the one (leverage) is high and the other (linkage) low, the default outcome, according to Levitsky and Way, is some form of 'competitive authoritarianism', i.e. regimes that display elements of both autocracies and democracies, and which other scholars have previously called 'hybrid regimes' (Karl 1995, Rüb 2002).² However, this remains a very crude model (if the term is applicable at all), and much refinement is needed through further studies if the linkage-leverage concept is to be applicable on a global scale.

Probably the most prominent field in which questions of leverage and/or linkage have been examined is that of the EU and its external relations. There are two groups of neighbouring countries that have been in the focus of scholarly attention here: First, the group of countries that are today members of the Union, but as candidates up to 2004 (or, in the cases of Romania and Bulgaria 2007, respectively) had to meet the EU's famous Copenhagen Criteria prior to accession. Here, the question was how the EU managed to make those candidates comply with its own democracy and human rights standards (cf. e.g. Smith 2003, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, Vachudova 2005). Later, when in 2004 the EU launched the ENP, the question became whether and how these mechanisms of achieving compliance by countries outside the EU could be achieved even when full membership was not on offer.

Recent studies on the issue adopt a rather sceptical view about the EU's capacities to engage in successful 'norm promotion' when only 'silver carrots' are offered and membership is not in question (Smith 2005, Schimmelfennig 2007, Youngs 2009; cf. also Schimmelfennig and Maier 2007). It seems that what Youngs said several years ago is still correct: 'the EU did not push hard to gain access for political aid work [and was] unwilling to risk tension with recipient governments' (Youngs 2001, p. 193). Thus, not surprisingly, the degree of compliance the EU achieved in its interactions with their new member states in the course of the latest enlargement round was significantly higher than the degree that the beneficiary countries of the ENP currently display with regard to European standards in governance and human rights issues. The important issue here is that political conditionality can be assumed to be effective only under certain circumstances. Schimmelfennig *et al.* (2006, p. 52ff.) find three such key conditions: (1) the incentives for compliance must be high for the country upon which conditionalities are placed (in fact, only membership in either EU or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is seen as high enough an incentive for compliance), (2) the costs of adjustment towards compliance with EU norms must be low or at least acceptable to the political regime in question, but at any rate compliance must not endanger power maintenance, and finally, (3) the credibility of the prospective gains must be high, i.e. the likelihood that the incentives offered for compliance will actually materialize once norm-compliant behaviour is installed.

As can easily be seen, these criteria for the political conditionality to be effective are closely related to the above-mentioned three criteria Levitsky and Way pin down for leverage to be effective. In fact, the imposition of political conditionality is one of several possible policy instruments that can be applied in order to make leverage over another country work.³ What both Levitsky and Way as well as Schimmelfennig miss out on, however, might be the question that ‘adjustment costs’ or ‘compliance costs’, in the calculations of the political regime facing such costs may not only be weighed against the yardstick of potential *benefits* it may or may not gain in return, but also weighed against the perceived costs of *non-compliance*.⁴ That the latter (costs of non-compliance) may be characterized by greater uncertainty than the promised benefits of compliance only adds spice to attempts at comparison. All this is a hitherto neglected issue that seems to deserve some deeper analysis – as do general questions of inter-governmental leverage and conditionality as its prime instrument on the one hand, and trans-societal linkages on the other, in contexts that differ from the specific foreign policy framework of the EU.

On the whole, however, and despite the important insights with which this literature has provided us, we have surprisingly little ‘hard’ evidence on what international factors contribute to democratization apart from the field of European affairs and its neighbourhood.

(b) The even later discovery of democracy promotion⁵ as a topic for scholarly research

Independently of the above discussed debates which took place mainly within the International Relations community proper, a significant body of literature on the deliberate promotion of democracy by democracies and others (most notably the United Nations – see United Nations 2009 for recent ‘guidance’ on UN democracy assistance by the UN Secretary-General) as part of their foreign policies has emerged that today stands as a literature in its own right. While the policies of providing assistance to democracy and democratization promotion have a history of well over two decades, the discovery of democracy assistance as a topic for academic research is a relatively recent phenomenon. Apart from a few policy papers and a handful of articles, this topic can be said to have emerged in the scholarly debate around the turn of the millennium such as the contributions by Carothers (1999) and the international collective volume edited by Burnell (2000). Since then the literature has expanded dramatically, to include important new books by Carothers and others (e.g. Magen and Morlino 2009, Risse *et al.* 2009) as well as many articles, briefing papers and reports.

So, even though democracy assistance as a topic in academia is *relatively* new, we can today nevertheless look back on more than a decade of research. Surprisingly, however, the current state of our overall knowledge seems sobering. Burnell asked, in a 2007 paper, ‘does democracy promotion work?’, and gave a clear answer that still holds true today: ‘Yes. No. We really don’t know’ (Burnell 2007). This may sound somewhat frustrating, all the more so, since it reiterates earlier complaints about the unsatisfactory state of the art in the field. However, the reason for this scholarly uncertainty about whether (and if so: how and under what conditions) democracy assistance policies actually work might be related to the fact that we do not know an awful lot about the rules of democratization in the first place (cf. Grävingholt *et al.* 2009): Processes of democratization are sometimes highly volatile and hard to predict; as Carothers (2002, p. 15) aptly formulated: ‘They can go backwards and sideways as much as forward, and do not do so in any regular manner’.

Therefore, while it is still true that ‘we understand more about how not to go about that challenge than we confidently know how to do it’ (Burnell 2004, p. 100), it is also true that we do know something about some issues in democracy assistance. For instance, there are certain conditions that need to be present as necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) conditions for democracy promotion to be successful. In this context, Grävingholt *et al.* (2009)

carve out 'three Cs of democracy promotion' that need to be observed in order for democracy promotion to stand a chance of succeeding: context, consistency, and credibility. Context refers to the fact that, as Burnell (2004, p. 101) put it once, 'the question how to democratize a deeply institutionalized one-party communist state might not pose quite the same puzzle, or address identical problems, to questions about how to democratize a personalist dictatorship'. In a very rough scheme, Grävingholt *et al.* (2009, p. 3) identify four fundamentally different settings in which democracy promoters tend to intervene, but where different strategies are needed: countries in transition; young democracies; stable authoritarianism; and failed or failing states. Consistency is related to strategy: Since democratization is a 'long-term, macro-systemic, and non-linear process', the need is evident that measures taken must be planned from the start with regard to their overall effects on the polity. Credibility, finally, refers to the fact that democratization is hardly ever the only foreign policy goal of those governments who provide democracy assistance. If the US has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on democracy and good governance in Egypt over the past decade, this sounds quite a lot, but an annual expenditure of more than one billion in military aid dwarfs the former sum and raises questions as to the prioritization of different or even contradictory foreign policy goals (for an excellent in-depth analysis of this very point see Bermeo 2009). Democracy promotion can therefore only succeed if it is embedded within the overall set of foreign policies of the promoting country and if the promoting country itself adheres to the rules, norms and values it claims to want to become more widespread.

Still, while we do know this and a few other things, much more research on democracy promotion is needed in two important respects: First, there are still unsolved puzzles even within those (sub-)fields where we think we have at least some idea of how democracy promotion works. Second, there is a range of empirical as well as conceptual issues within democracy promotion as a topic for academic inquiry which remain yet untouched by scholarly investigation. In this issue, we opt for the second category of research desiderates and try to ask fresh questions which may open up new subfields for future research in democracy promotion.

On an empirical level, an important issue in democracies' efforts at exporting their regime type is how this is viewed in the 'recipient' country: Is assistance to democracy or democratization perceived as adequate and legitimate in 'assisted' countries? This question is not only relevant with regard to the opinions held by the political elites of so-called partner countries, but also at least as much with respect to the general population, because conventional wisdom tells us that 'change agents' are assumed to mainly come from within the civil societies of targeted countries. Only now are serious efforts under way to ascertain what people in 'recipient' countries think of the democracy support they have been offered. In 2009, the World Movement for Democracy launched a survey of democracy activists opinions of democracy assistance, in 14 countries. The findings should become available in 2010.

A second important question for empirical investigation emerges once we realize that the 'imagined community' of democracies is not a monolithic bloc. The rise of India as a global player in international politics in particular raises questions as to the extent to which democracies actually engage in efforts of exporting their regime type: While the USA have been perceived as at times trying to promote democracy in an overly aggressive style, several other democracies have shown much greater reluctance in making the promotion of their own regime type abroad an issue in their foreign policies.

On a conceptual level, one of the other important issues that have not been studied in any structured manner is that, in conventional studies of democracy promotion, scholars tend to assume that there are 'external' players (the democracy promoters and their personnel and implementing agencies) on the one hand, and 'internal' actors on the other (elites and civil societies of the assisted country). Yet, is this distinction really correct? Given the magnitude

that the still-growing global democracy promotion industry has acquired today, and given that a large number of their personnel is actually located within the political setting they intend to assist, this commonly held assumption may become questionable.

We will address, in the following contributions, these untouched issues and thereby hope to provide a new impetus to, and new inspiration for, the future study of international democracy promotion.

(c) *The new research on authoritarianism*

Independently of whether the 'democratic retreat' and 'authoritarian backlash' are real-world phenomena, or alternatively just a perceived change due to changing scholarly attention and the decline of illusions about global democratization which Carothers (2002) called the 'transition paradigm', this shift in perspective gives new prominence to yet another current of literature that has grown in the 2000s: a new research on non-democratic political regimes.

Having noted above that autocracies are not an endangered species, we concur with Paul Brooker who notes in his recently revised volume on *Non-Democratic Regimes* that the latter have a distinct 'capacity to spawn innovative mutations that fit the changing local environment—changing geographically from one country to another and changing historically through the effect of new global or regional trends'. Brooker adds that 'even the dinosaurs never really became extinct but instead evolved into birds, and that degree of evolutionary adaptation is a possible scenario for the future of non-democratic regimes' (Brooker 2009, p. 274).

In light of this, it is a welcome sign that a new literature is beginning to emerge from scholars who find that autocracies, contrary to popular views, were not *necessarily* inherently instable or less viable than democracies (although that view is still held by many despite the lack of logically sound explanations). They argue that autocracies are not necessarily some pre-modern forms of political order, but rather possess well-elaborated modes of adaptation, modernization and early-warning mechanisms that alert them to dysfunctional incentives and threats to regime maintenance by the incumbents (Schedler 2006, Brooker 2009). It is even being said now that autocracies do not necessarily lack all legitimacy in comparison to democracies, because competitive free and fair elections are one, but by far not the only possibility for political regimes to garner both support and legitimacy (cf. e.g. on China: Gilley and Holbig 2009; on the Middle East: Schlumberger 2010; and more generally Burnell 2006).

From this perspective, it seems almost natural that the said new research on authoritarian rule emerging in the 2000s is promoted essentially by comparativists who examine various world regions – most notably Central Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. These are the regions – sub-continent, even – where democratic transitions did not sweep all before it, contrary to appearances in Southern Europe in the 1970s, in Latin America in the 1980s, or in Central Eastern Europe in the early 1990s.

Their themes cover what is being perceived as the key features of authoritarian persistence, authoritarian consolidation, or even authoritarian expansion: the coercive apparatus and the nature and role of repression (e.g. Bellin 2004); the manipulation of electoral politics and the question of contestation, however limited or constrained, can be incorporated even in authoritarian regimes (Schedler 2006, Brownlee 2007); the 'management' of oppositional forces by incumbent regimes (Lust-Okar 2005); the creation of regime legitimacy (Gilley 2009) or autocracies' capacities to adapt to changing external environments even in the wake of increased pressure for democratic reform from actors at home and abroad (Heydemann 2007, Schlumberger 2007, Ambrosio 2009).

This development represents a significant change in the directions comparative politics has taken in recent years in that it signals the advent of a new (and maybe less teleological) era of

political regime studies than seen in previous decades. However, there is one important parallel to be stressed which this new research on authoritarianism has in common – with very few exceptions – with the earlier literature on democratization: there is a striking neglect of attention to international factors (whether deliberate and policy-driven or unintended) in the development of non-democratic regimes on a national level. This is all the more astonishing since, as has been sketched out above, the importance of international factors in national political regime development is by now well established with regard to democratization studies as well as in international relations.

Bearing in mind, the course democratization studies has taken since the mid-1980s, then, it would be a good idea to begin examining relevant international factors as potentially crucial influences on the resilience and spread of non-democratic rule now. Arguably it makes sense to include such international variables early on when studying the persistence and possible expansion or spread of authoritarian rule. This must go well beyond investigating the policy-driven export of authoritarian models by the established authoritarian or semi-authoritarian powers, where hard evidence even from the main suspects such as Russia, China, Iran and Venezuela could yet prove surprisingly thin. It could extend to the diffusion of authoritarian values through processes and channels that mirror democracy diffusion, and any authoritarian manifestations of ‘linkage’; as well as attempts by authoritarian regimes to influence substantive policy (foreign or, even, domestic policies) in other states that have the effect of inducing authoritarian tendencies there, as an accidental consequence or by-product. A further mechanism could be where instability and insecurity in a country or region produce an authoritarian response in nearby societies who fear that unqualified liberal democracy in their country is not, or would be, strong enough to withstand the threats. In theory India might end up becoming a casualty in this regard, although there have been no great signs of this happening yet in response to the turmoil in Afghanistan and, increasingly, Pakistan. And yet another important set of forces, very different again, lie in the structures of the international political economy and such phenomena as international financial crises, which can produce serious political consequences within states (although the jury is still out on what the 2008/2009 global financial and economic malaise could yet mean for democratization and the alternatives around the world). Ideally the goal should be to study all these factors and more, in as comprehensive, systematic and integrated a way as possible.

As one of the first modest steps towards this goal, then, the articles in this special issue offer both theoretical and empirical accounts of international factors in the persistence and spread of authoritarian regimes, although of course there is no pretence to even begin to explore all the different international dimensions, let alone investigate any one of them at very great length.

Turning to the articles

Turning to the articles in this special issue, a premise underlying all of them is that even as more research into international democracy promotion is needed, so as to build on established foundations, it is not too soon to turn the spotlight on the countervailing influences and counter-currents, where authoritarian or semi-authoritarian tendencies at regional or national levels gain protection or encouragement from outside – whether directly or indirectly, by forms of authoritarian diffusion or through more deliberate external intention and design. In itself this does not prejudice the contentious issue of whether a general trend towards autocratic comeback is now well and truly under way, let alone the precise shape or contours of such a resurgence.

Indeed, Wolfgang Merkel in ‘Are dictatorships making a comeback? Revisiting the “democratic rollback” hypothesis’ shows how thoughts about the present state and future prospects for democracy’s progress are inescapably bound up with choices – and changing fashions – in the

theoretical lens through which analysts seek to make sense of political change (or its absence). Second, Merkel takes a close look at the figures, disaggregating by type or sub-type of regime, to reach findings that qualify the claim that on a global level there is a democratic roll-back and freedom is in retreat. However, this cannot reveal the full picture about conditions inside individual countries, where Russia figures very prominently both in the new literature on authoritarian revival and in the emerging discourse on external strategies for regime maintenance by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes (see e.g. Ambrosio 2009).

Thus, André Gerrits, in 'Exploring democracy in the Russian Federation: political regime, public opinion and international assistance', explains why outside attempts to transplant something like western liberal democracy in Russia have been unsuccessful and, moreover, may not achieve any greater success for the foreseeable future. He does this by painting a rather ambiguous picture of Russian public opinion that, while far from being satisfied with some aspects of the political situation is minded nevertheless to bestow legitimacy on a regime that operates a facade of democratic institutions. Also somewhat paradoxical, from a normative perspective, is that dissatisfaction with the regime's human rights performance does not seem to translate into a strong attachment to civil liberties. And, neither does principled support for the idea of democracy nor very low levels of political trust in the existing political institutions in Russia mean widespread acceptance by Russians that western democracy suits the country's needs and circumstance right now. The policy implications that Gerrits takes away from this could make uncomfortable reading for international democracy promoters – unless they are willing to adjust strategy, moderate their ambitions and change their ways.

A second great power in a newly multi-polarized global order, India, as the world's largest democracy, provides a stark contrast to authoritarian Russia even though it is located in a precarious regional environment. It is surrounded by states that either are not liberal democracies or are generally politically unstable or insecure; yet, India's own commitment to promoting democracy abroad seems pretty weak. In 'Democracy promotion circa 2010: an Indian perspective' Siddharth Mallavarapu sheds light on why this is and is likely to remain the case, employing realist, liberal and constructivist insights, while at the same time placing emphasis on how the changes under way in India's bilateral relationship with the USA could yet have a significant bearing. India's importance in this debate should not be under-estimated. There is a sense that if the legitimacy and the credibility of democracy promotion are to recover ground lost during the West's 'war on terror', and if, as Diamond (2008a, pp. 332–336) among others has argued, it is regional actors that must now serve as democracy's first line of promotion and defence, then the lead taken by India in South Asia and, indeed, much further abroad could be a key indicator of whether the further advance of democracy or conversely the spread of authoritarian rule becomes the more dominant direction among regimes that experience change.

On a theoretical level and completing the sample of articles that strive at moving into uncharted waters within the area of democracy promotion, 'Bringing the outside in' by Julia Leininger argues that limitations in the study of democracy promotion so far are due to inadequate conceptualization in this field of research. More specifically, her claim is that the interaction of endogenous and exogenous, domestic and foreign, national and international variables and democracy promotion in particular, has tended to be improperly theorized, as a result of conceiving the two sides as analytically separate and distinct. Instead, she argues, the national and the international are mutually constitutive and so best understood as 'two sides of one coin'. Her reasoning is elaborated with a recommendation to pay more attention to the regime effects of international development cooperation, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid, which are relationships whose distance from – and, sometimes, contradictions to – the objectives of shared democracy building have received far too little attention in the literature to date. Illustrative examples drawn from the contrasting cases of Mali and Haiti are used to

bear out the main arguments, before concluding with some weighty reflections on how attempts to examine democracy promotion could be improved in the future.

Turning towards the autocratic parts of the world, the largest players are Russia and China – both at the forefront of today's intense intellectual interest in authoritarian renewal and what it means for international politics. Are they now committed to the export of autocracy? Indeed, what exactly would that mean, and how would we know?

Here, the generally received view that coherent theoretical models of the international promotion of democracy are absent, or at best are still very thin on the ground, after two decades of democracy promotion practice, does not stop Julia Bader, Jörn Gravingholt and Antje Kästner from coming up with a theoretical perspective on the promotion of autocracy. By drawing on rational choice theory their article, titled 'Would autocracies promote autocracy? A political economy perspective on regime-type export in regional neighbourhoods' offers an innovative attempt to explain why, and more particularly where, when and in what direction powerful autocracies might seek to influence politics in countries in their neighbourhood. The logical inferences that flow from the assumptions that underpin their analysis point in the direction of not one single drive to promote autocratic trends abroad, but instead a more differentiated approach – one that takes account of the political circumstances prevailing inside nearby countries and their bearing on the interests of the region's dominant autocracy. Some examples from the foreign policy behaviour of China and Russia are provided to illustrate the general theoretical propositions.

Whether the article's framework should be tried out for past periods of bi- or multi-polarity in world politics rather than just the contemporary era that is seeing the rise, or re-emergence, of autocratic powers at the regional level, and furthermore its applicability to theorizing about international democracy promotion, both pose intriguing questions for readers. But, as with evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions to export autocracy – another research agenda that is waiting to happen – these do not form part of the remit of this article.

However, for the purpose of this special issue, the article by Nicole Jackson does offer a distinctive and substantial account of a notable case where (in this case) Russian influence is found to have significant political effects, in a part of what might be regarded as Russia's territorial sphere of interest, in 'The role of external factors in advancing non-liberal democratic forms of political rule: a case study of Russia's influence on Central Asian regimes'.

Jackson's study shows in detail and with reference to various modalities and channels of influence, including but not only economic ones, exactly how both deliberate and unintentional Russian influences help further non-democratic rule in former Soviet republics in Central Asia. But, in a striking echo of one of the main features of Leininger's argument regarding democracy promotion, Jackson is careful to note the contribution made by local 'receptivity' and the compatibility with vested elite interests in the republics. The analysis stands as a corrective among other things to excessive confidence in the power of an authoritarian regime to determine politics in other – even like-minded – regimes without reference to the mediating factors of domestic interests and the ambitions of the political leadership there. It not only offers a neat complementary study to the cautionary remarks that Merkel makes about not exaggerating the progress around the world of authoritarian rule. For it also feeds scope for comparison with the declining optimism in the power of international democracy promotion to achieve its ambitions unless the conduct of political actors and political developments inside the 'target' countries are propitious or, at the very least, taken into account. This brings us to the shortcomings in what political correctness now invites us to call 'shared democracy building', whose weakness at the present time has already been flagged up in a previous issue of this journal (see Burnell 2008).

Overall, then, the articles evince a degree of scepticism about the achievements of democracy promotion and also make us think more critically about the literature on democracy