

The Illiberal Regime Versus Liberal “Propaganda”: Beyond an Instrumentalist Explanation

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Introduction

The decision by the Georgian Dream to introduce legislative restrictions against "pseudo-liberal propaganda,"² with a focus on gender and sexual identity issues, nearly one year after reluctantly withdrawing a draft law on "foreign agents," has once again alarmed civil society, a longstanding target of the regime.

For the regime's opponents, this move was largely anticipated and not particularly shocking or unexpected. However, it is possible that the basis for this expectation lies in the nature of the regime and the various opinions regarding its dynamics. Specifically, among the societal or political adversaries of the regime, the dominant paradigm used to explain the regime's actions is instrumentalist, which is also based on the dominant explanatory-theoretical perspective³ in the specialized academic literature of social and political sciences.

In this paradigm, the regime is correctly identified as a personalist power based on plebiscite legitimacy, whose central aim is to retain power indefinitely. This instrumentalist explanation, which is the dominant paradigm for assessing the regime's actions and dynamics, stems from the belief that everything the regime does is geared toward maintaining power indefinitely.

The instrumentalist paradigm is also predominant among scholars of authoritarian regimes, who view all actions of such regimes through the lens of ensuring their survival.⁴

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² Mdinardze: „We will prepare a draft law that will safeguard the public from pseudo-liberal ideology“ - February, 2024, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32842750.html>

³ Peters, B. Guy. Institutional theory in political science: The new institutionalism. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019. Lane, Ruth. “Structural-functionalism reconsidered: A proposed research model.” Comparative Politics (1994): 461-477.

⁴ Schedler, Andreas. “The new institutionalism in the study of authoritarian regimes.” Totalitarismus und Demokratie 6, no. 2 (2009): 323-340.

The instrumentalist explanation plays a significant role in studying this type of regime, although its application as a dominant perspective poses significant challenges, not only academically but also in terms of practical political aspects, such as organizing effective resistance against such regimes.

In the subsequent parts, we are going to discuss essential elements of plebiscite illiberal regime and dynamic of such regimes which will seek to explain characteristic to such regime's essential illiberalism beyond the instrumentalist logic of remaining in power indefinitely.

Systemic Sources of Liberalism in Plebiscite Regimes

Illiberal regimes operating within the framework of plebiscite ruler's democracy framework systematically employ illiberal discourse and policies for electoral mobilization. This further solidifies the convictions of followers of the instrumentalist paradigm in their own assessments.

Hence, illiberal ideas and policies, rooted in such discourse, are considered as instruments by the regime to attain and sustain plebiscite legitimacy. While this perspective holds some truth, the instrumentalist explanation is reductionist, simplifying a phenomenon that is influenced by complex factors into a mere pursuit of power acquisition or retention.

Some of these factors are systemic and stem from the internal characteristics and dynamics of illiberal plebiscite regimes. Specifically, such regimes are characterized by anti-pluralism and tend toward societal homogenization through totalitarian forms of organization, often utilizing identity⁵ for these purposes. Identity serves both instrumental and essential functions for illiberal regimes.

The instrumentalist paradigm either disregards the essential role of identity within illiberal regimes or assigns it a secondary role. As mentioned earlier, the instrumentalist perspective is also supported by solid empirical evidence, making it difficult to challenge its dominant influence.

In particular, charismatic leaders in illiberal regimes who manipulate identity to gain and maintain power are perceived by unbiased observers as two-faced, inconsistent, and unprincipled demagogues.

Therefore, it is challenging to accept the validity of the hypothesis that suggests illiberal elements in the leaders' political actions, apart from instrumentalist purposes, also have authentic roots. From an

⁵ Smilova, Ruzha. "The ideational core of democratic illiberalism." In *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, pp. 177-202. Routledge, 2021.

unbiased perspective, the leader's and their entourage's stance on illiberal content they endorse publicly is largely perceived through the lens of duplicity and cynical internal detachment.

However, despite the subjective attitudes of the regime's leaders toward illiberal content being characterized by duplicity and cynical detachment, it does not necessarily mean that illiberal content serves only the instrumentalist function of retaining power for such leaders.

In stabilized illiberal plebiscite regimes, retaining power is not always the primary objective. While some illiberal policies may be instrumentally advantageous for electoral mobilization, instrumental mobilization cannot be the sole or dominant factor.

For instance, the decision to fully ban "LGBTQI propaganda" in Russia was made during a non-election period,⁶ just a few months after the invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the preceding law, which prohibited such "propaganda" only with regard to minors, was also enacted during a non-election period.⁷

In contrast to the "Law on Foreign Agents," the "LGBTQI propaganda" laws in Russia held little practical-instrumentalist value in consolidating the closed authoritarian regime. Instead, they largely served symbolic and ideological purposes, unmistakably branding Putin's regime as fundamentally illiberal.

It is obvious that beyond instrumentalist needs to obtain/cement power, illiberal regime's internal logic and dynamic is inclined to curb and restrain pluralism, seeks increased homogenization of society and instill such forms of totalitarian organization which would erase boundaries and differences between people and between people and power. In order to achieve such results, in the first place, it will destroy those institutions that serve the objectives to retain difference and diversity of the people and is equipped with mediating function between an individual and power.

Hence, within illiberal plebiscite regimes, systemic origins of anti-pluralist public policies against liberalism, aimed at shaping a homogeneous society, can be found beyond the instrumental objectives of maintaining power.

However, proponents of the instrumentalist paradigm may present a counter-argument here as well. Specifically, they may link the systemic inclinations of an illiberal regime to the leaders' aspirations for

⁶ Russia passes law banning 'LGBT propaganda' among adults - 24 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/24/russia-passes-law-banning-lgbt-propaganda-adults>

⁷ Russia passes anti-gay-law - 30 June 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/30/russia-passes-anti-gay-law>

personal power. According to this explanation, the illiberal essence of the regime is depicted solely as a means to retain power.

Subscribing to the radical version of the instrumentalist paradigm, however, contradicts the broader academic consensus among social and political sciences regarding the functions of institutions in political regimes and societies. Therefore, instrumentalist theories also largely acknowledge systemic origins of illiberalism, although they may assign them comparatively less importance.

Institutional Sources of Illiberalism in the Society

Beyond the internal systemic sources of a plebiscite political regime, the illiberal essence of such regimes stems from deep societal roots, some of which are strongly institutionalized. Scholars of Putin's regime have focused on the multi-pronged origins and institutionalized nature of the regime's illiberalism.⁸

It is particularly noteworthy in this regard that the instrumentalist paradigm fully dominates the explanation of Putin's regime's illiberalism. Although the instrumentalist explanation remains one of the most important perspectives, it cannot fully elucidate the regime's nature, behavior, and dynamics.

One of the scholars of Russia, the American political scientist Julian Waller, has developed a taxonomy⁹ of the institutionalized sources of the Russian regime's illiberalism. Waller identifies instrumental sources of illiberalism, which are mostly aimed at cementing or prolonging the regime's power, as well as the so-called "entrepreneurial" and internally illiberal institutional sources.

"Entrepreneurial" illiberalism is associated with the ambitions of mid and lower-level elites to ascend the hierarchical ladder of the patron-clientelist regime. The proponents of such illiberalism are primarily members of these elites who, by publicly supporting illiberal ideas, aim to garner the trust of the regime's highest echelons and advance their status within the client network.

"Internal" illiberalism is exemplified by institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Army, which wield significant societal authority and political influence. In the case of the Russian Orthodox Church, illiberalism is entrenched in the practices, doctrines, and traditions of the institution itself.

⁸ Laruelle, Marlene. "Making sense of Russia's illiberalism." *J. Democracy* 31 (2020): 115.

⁹ Waller, Julian G. "Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor: Regime Instrumentalism, Entrepreneurial Signaling, and Inherent Illiberalism." *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1-23.

The Russian Patriarchate stands out as an independent source of internal illiberalism, evident in its institutionalized ideology and practices, which do not require explanation from either an instrumentalist or "entrepreneurial" perspective.

A similar argument applies to Georgia, particularly concerning the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which shares doctrinal and institutional ties with the Russian Patriarchate. The Georgian Orthodox Church's patriarchate, too, embodies internal illiberalism, uniting under its institutional umbrella inherently illiberal ideologies such as ethnoreligious nationalism and its variations.

Additionally, other relatively weaker institutional carriers of ethnoreligious nationalism, closely linked with Russia's imperialist ideologies, manifest themselves in society through extremist groups and organizations (such as Alt-Info, the "Conservative Movement," and the "Alliance of Patriots"), along with their affiliated media outlets.

Therefore, the presence of internally illiberal institutions within society, and their relatively stable power positions, diminishes the exclusivity of an instrumentalist explanation for the illiberalism of a political regime.

Conclusion

Given the aforementioned discussion, it is expected that, in line with the prevailing approach, opponents will offer exclusively instrumentalist explanations for the Georgian Dream's illiberal initiative to combat "liberal propaganda" and link this decision to the regime's electoral mobilization and its objectives to maintain power through elections.

While this instrumentalist justification is well-founded, relying solely on this approach significantly impedes the understanding of the regime's nature and structure, as well as the accomplishment of resistance efforts.

Instrumentalist propaganda encourages a superficial perception of events and fosters futile hopes that the regime may deviate from its illiberal trajectory if the need to remain in power dictates otherwise. However, this assumption is internally contradictory on the surface, as the pursuit of indefinite power by any means portrays the regime and its leaders as inherently illiberal, rendering purely instrumentalist explanations irrelevant.

Conversely, it is not improbable that the regime of the Georgian Dream, its leader, entourage, and elites harbor illiberal ideas beyond the notion that the instrumentalization of these ideas aids them in obtaining and indefinitely maintaining power. Similarly, it is not implausible that Vladimir Putin and his authoritarian elites espouse an ideology based on homophobia, xenophobia, and intolerance rooted in religion and worldview, not solely for the purpose of retaining power.

Only by understanding the complex roots of the Georgian Dream's illiberalism can we avoid naïve hopes that if the regime enjoys high plebiscite support and requires minimal electoral manipulation, it will refrain from essentially illiberal behavior.

As long as illiberal political regimes and their formal and informal pillars, including institutionalized ones, remain in place, the regimes' illiberal behavior and policies will be considered normal, expected, and anticipated, irrespective of any electoral or other instrumental needs to maintain power.