

Do elite splits stabilise autocratic regimes? Case studies of Serbia and Montenegro

There is a shared understanding among scholars of autocratic regimes that elite cohesion is a necessary precondition for stable autocratic rule. There is also a consensus that elite splits, commonly attributed to exogenous and unforeseen triggers, pose the greatest threat to the survival of authoritarian regimes. However, empirical evidence also provides examples of regimes where elite splits did not engender decline, but which instead remained stable despite significant rifts. This observation begs the question: Do elite splits stabilise autocratic regimes under certain conditions?

This dissertation posits that indeed autocrats may, under certain circumstances, have an incentive and even gain an advantage in stipulating elite splits. I put forward the concept of *strategic coalition realignments*, that is mindful to both inclusion and exclusion as functions of co-optation. Firstly, I illustrate that elite splits can be a deliberate mechanisms for settling internal power struggles and for excluding elites that have become more costly than beneficial to maintain. Secondly, I elaborate on the limits of established notions of co-optation. I propose that elite splits can be a means to readjust the regime's co-optation strategy. By excluding certain actors or factions regimes may free up resources, both material and immaterial, that they can reinvest into co-opting more valuable stakeholders. These *strategic coalition realignments* render autocrats more flexible to accommodate changes in their environment and prepare the basis for programmatic turnarounds. The thesis differentiate between *dynamic* and *rigid* modes of co-optation, defining the former as the strategic inclusion and exclusion of elites whereas the latter denotes the tenacious reliance on a fixed set of affiliated stakeholders.

The empirical analysis rests on the comparison of Serbia (1987-2000) and Montenegro (1989-2020). The two cases are similar on most relevant dimensions. Yet, whereas the Serbian regime succumbed in 2000, Montenegro's dominant party stayed in power until 2020. The dependent phenomenon this study seeks to explain is the difference in regime durability (ten versus thirty years). The independent variable, that accounts for the difference in outcome, is the mode of co-optation (dynamic versus rigid). Finally, the dissertation highlights the role of institutions in preparing *strategic coalition realignments*, co-opting new stakeholders, and 'un-co-opting' outgoing elites.