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Executives in Post-Soviet Autocracies

The study of formal institutions has been an important component of the comparative authoritarianism research agenda. However, this work has largely focused on the role of legislatures, elections, and political parties. Comparatively less work has been done on authoritarian executives themselves. This paper addresses this gap by investigating variation in composition and functioning of authoritarian executives across post-Soviet Eurasia. The paper starts by assessing, first, what distinguishes executives in non-democracies from those in democracies; and second, how executives in non-democratic regimes vary from one another. I review existing typologies of non-democratic regimes and explore how they generate different perspectives on the nature of executive power. The paper then turns to variation in the nature of intra-executive dynamics, and illustrates how careful attention to the post-Soviet regimes can shed light on the consequences of this variation. Authoritarian executives are often assumed to be unitary actors, even interchangeable with the autocrat himself. Yet, this overlooks the ways that different actors within the executive interact. Relatedly, most work on authoritarian institutions is concerned explaining authoritarian regime durability. Yet, the post-Soviet cases suggest that a broader range of outcomes results from intra-executive dynamics. How does policy get made in authoritarian regimes? How much influence does the executive have over policymaking, and how does this vary across single party, military, and personalist regimes? By reviewing the existing literature and offering a preliminary assessment of these questions, this paper seeks to lay out a new research agenda for studying executive power in these regimes.