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Myths and realities about elite defection from authoritarian ruling coalitions. A descriptive analysis of post-Soviet electoral autocracies

Leaders in electoral authoritarian countries of the former USSR confront several threats to political stability and regime cohesion. In these regimes, withdrawals of key political actors from the ruling coalition are often associated with periods of political and economic instability, at times leading the regime to collapse. Nevertheless, theories on the causes and far-reaching consequences of these elite defections in regime change offer a partial picture of this phenomenon. The reason is that previous conceptualizations and evidence does not acknowledge that 'elite defection' has a multifaceted character. As such, this paper offers new analytical dimensions around the concept of elite defection in terms of its magnitude, actors involved, timing and the manner in which political elites withdraw from their support to the ruler. This theoretical contribution is illustrated through a novel dataset on the political careers of legislative deputies and executive ministers in Russia, Georgia, Belarus and Kazakhstan since the breakdown of the USSR until 2015. Additional data on other countries with similar regime configuration in Africa, Latin America and Asia serves to improve and supplement the descriptive analysis. Thus, findings contribute to the debate on authoritarian politics and democratization by introducing new theoretical dimensions and corresponding data to study the causes and consequence of 'elite defection'