

RESEARCH BRIEF • APRIL 2023

Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine? A Theory of Degenerate Autocracy

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2023-52, [“Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine? A Theory of Degenerate Autocracy,”](#)
by George Egorov, Northwestern University; and Konstantin Sonin, University of Chicago

In the face of rising opposition, dictators appoint incompetent advisers who are unable to perceive the heightening threat against them. This cycle often results in disastrous policy outcomes.

Dictators often pursue policies that result in their own demise. History abounds with disasters that not only could have been avoided, but many leaders appear to opt into failures that a rational actor would have avoided. What’s more puzzling is that such leaders often operate within complex institutional frameworks where they are supported by teams of expert advisers. Examples include Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union, Hirohito’s government launching a war against the United States, and Putin’s invasion of Ukraine last year.

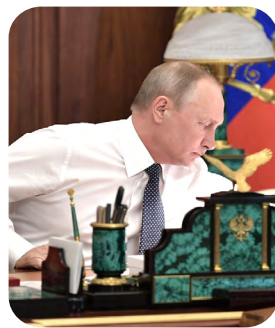
This paper explains this contradiction, using game theory to propose a cycle through which the need for regime security dictates the replacement of technocrats by incompetent loyalists and ultimately leads to disastrous decisions. The authors’ theory proceeds as follows:

- Leaders appoint advisers upon whose expertise they rely for policymaking. Appointment decisions are based on the competency of the advisers, and advisers’ policy advice depends on two factors: the level of vulnerability of the incumbent, and advisers’

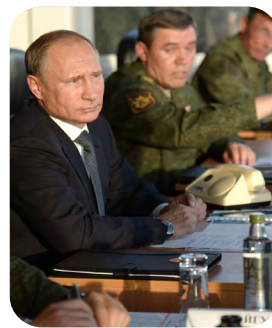
Figure 1 • The Process of Degenerate Autocracy



Rise to Power



Repress Opposition



Replace Advisors
with Loyalists



Pursue Disastrous
Decisions

own prospects under the new regime if the incumbent fails. Since advisers are better-informed, they can misguide leaders. The wrong policy choice by a vulnerable leader will result in a change at the top.

- The shift into autocracy begins with a leader's decision to repress their opposition. By doing so, they lessen their present odds of being challenged but raise the future stakes of power struggles. Faced with the fear of being tried and executed, the repressive leader appoints less competent advisers who are less likely to identify their vulnerability and therefore remain loyal. Less competent advisers give poorer policy advice.

This paper resolves the paradox of the dictator who plots a path to their own downfall. The authors warn that dictators who combine emphasis on loyalty with repression of opposition may create degenerate democracy. The framework provided here is useful for making sense of historical moments that previously lacked explanation, such as Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as well as for predicting future dynamics.

READ THE WORKING PAPER

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