

of offering a partial explanation. Her analysis is sensitive and often compelling, drawing occasional gasps of intuitive recognition and heartfelt agreement from this reviewer. Yet the primary sources she chooses to analyze are all too often the products of elite rather than popular culture: films, novels, television shows, video games, and nostalgia restaurants. That many of them were broadly consumed does not mean that they entirely reflected popular sentiments. While she also draws on journalism (a complex and problematic historical source as journalists, too, are selective), primarily for historical context, it is noteworthy that she does not touch the work of journalist Svetlana Aleksievich. Her wide-ranging, probing interviews offer profound and essential insights into the complexity of post-Soviet popular malaise. Also missing is any reflection on the journalistic work of Peter Pomerantsev, whose book *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* offers a specific glimpse into how Putin's populist propaganda state launched itself as an answer to that malaise through a world of fantasy capitalism deeply rooted in Russian imperial and Soviet cultural history. Both of these authors greatly enrich our understanding of the rising populist authoritarianism in this region in the post-Cold War era. Washington Post journalist Catherine Belton in her book *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and then Took on the West* offers a very concrete analysis of KGB/FSB networks and finances in the 1980s and 1990s that is essential to our grasp of indigenous economic developments that led to Putin's rise.

Like an early swallow, Dr. von Eschen offers us one overview of an existential historical problem. Now let's follow in her wake, and start digging deeper.

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***Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism.*** By Aleksandar Matovski. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xvi, 316 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Figures. Tables. \$39.99, hard bound.

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Electoral authoritarian regimes (EARs)—autocracies that imitate democratic elections—are the most widespread type of contemporary non-democracies. Among the many puzzles surrounding the proliferation of these regimes in countries as different as Turkey, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Russia, the core puzzle lies in the genuine popular support that these regimes seem to enjoy. While some scholars emphasize the fruitlessness of studying sincere public opinion in countries with limited space for expressing dissent, others believe that autocrats in hybrid regimes are backed up by widespread approval.

In *Popular Dictatorships*, Aleksandar Matovski (Naval Postgraduate School) advances the latter view by suggesting that the principal catalysts behind the genuine popularity of EARs are poorly managed political crises. Traumatized societies prefer EARs to military rule and liberal democracies because EARs “combine the best and avoid the worst of both democracy and authoritarianism” (4): they use democratic elections to project mass support, and secure authoritarian control by framing their leaders as emergency-managing, strong-armed rulers.

The opening chapters introduce the crisis origins of EARs. A crisis can give rise to a strongman offering a solution to the collective trauma behind it. To rationalize a popularly mandated emergency rule, autocrats use a universal rhetorical narrative

that emphasizes the democratic nature of their rule; satisfies the need for collective self-preservation under threat; and dismisses opponents as incompetent and weak. When voters no longer need authoritarian crisis management, they shift back to the anti-authoritarian side of the regime cleavage. This dependence on popular demand incentivizes EARs to provide economic growth and order while “maintaining a sense of a genuine existential threat to justify their reign” (71).

The following chapters test this theory with rich macro- and micro-level data. Through cross-national analyses of regime transition, Matovski demonstrates that EARs emerge in response to acute economic or security crises (Chap. 3). Chap. 4 successfully detects the universal rhetoric of EARs using 3,030 electoral manifestos from 54 countries and a study of the electoral appeals of Mexico’s PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Both analyses confirm the fixation of EARs on the threats to national identity and intense attacks on opponents’ incompetence. Chap. 5 illustrates how these patterns played out in Russia, where the trauma of the Soviet collapse and subsequent economic downfall made Vladimir Putin an appealing alternative to other political candidates. In the final chapter, Matovski leverages the World Values Survey data to confirm that EARs emerge in societies that prioritize survival values over self-expression.

Matovski’s empirical approach diligently replicates his central thesis of the crisis origins of EARs at several levels of analysis, descending from the bird’s-eye, macro-level study of regime transitions to a fine-grained investigation of individual survival values. Although appropriate and well-executed, this approach comes with the cost of sacrificing depth for breadth. Reiterating the importance of deep crises, a traumatized audience, and rhetoric that “translates popular anxieties into a persistent electoral advantage” (168–69), Matovski leaves us longing for a more detailed analysis of each parameter. Where do crises come from? Why does protracted violent conflict predict a transition to EAR for democracies, but not for military dictatorships? Why do crises make closed dictatorships transition to democracy if they activate survival values and strengthen the rally-around-the-strongman? The second part of the equation—the traumatized audience—assumes that crises directly translate to traumas, which is not always true. When do EARs fail to capitalize on widespread traumas? Explaining the dissolution of EARs despite their continuous efforts to exploit the state of emergency would test the theory’s limits. The analysis of successful opposition rhetoric would be rewarding. Finally, countries are unequally exposed to survival-threatening challenges. Would this susceptibility predict the orientation to survival values and the likelihood of EAR transition? Moreover, few countries reoriented from pure self-expression to pure survival values in the past twenty years, but we witnessed many more transitions to EARs. Explaining these patterns would enrich this research.

These limitations should not overshadow the excellent contributions of the book. Matovski provides a full-fledged and thoroughly tested theory that is sensitive to lived experiences and acknowledges that societies might reluctantly prioritize EARs amidst violent conflicts. A refreshing step forward from the institutional narrative that dominates the research on EARs, Matovski’s theory incorporates the long-term legacies of collective hardship. This move pays off: the EAR rhetoric alone predicts whether a country is an electoral autocracy better than structural correlates of electoral authoritarianism (such as resource dependence and coercive potential of the state)—a thought-provoking-finding that underscores the oft-neglected power of narratives in regime transitions.

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