

Legitimacy in the Era of Uncertainty

Fyodor A. Lukyanov

Fyodor A. Lukyanov

Russia in Global Affairs

Editor-in-Chief;

National Research University—Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs

Research Professor

SPIN-RSCI: 4139-3941

ORCID: 0000-0003-1364-4094

ResearcherID: N-3527-2016

Scopus AuthorID: 24481505000

E-mail: editor@globalaffairs.ru

Tel.: (+7) 495 9807353

Address: Office 112, 29 Malaya Ordynka Str., Moscow 115184, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-1-5-6

A year of high-stakes elections amid momentous international transformations promises a thrilling play. Domestic political processes have long been inextricably intertwined with foreign policy ones; after all this is what globalization was called upon—to erase borders. Now, however, the question is what plays a bigger role—the internal dynamics in major countries that impacts world affairs or vice versa. It can be either way. One thing is certain, though: international relations theory is now helpless without sociological perspective. There's no chance to predict the state of the “grand

chessboard” without understanding public sentiments in each square.

The resilience of national systems is becoming critical amid global instability. It depends on the authorities' ability to win the public's recognition of their right to govern, that is, secure their legitimacy. Historically, this happened in different ways: by force, estate hierarchy, dynastic tradition, and finally elections, which gradually involved more and more people. By the end of the 20th century, the liberal democratic system with competitive elections had become the norm, displacing Soviet-type “popular democracy” from the

political arena. Dictatorships of different degrees of rigidity, which did not surprise anyone in the last century, have turned into an indecent anachronism. Creating, or at a minimum imitating, democratic institutions has become a proper thing to do.

One can hardly say that this time is over: democratic rights gained by the masses cannot be taken away. But is democracy still the most efficient political form of government to ensure prosperity and stability? Countries that have neither aspired democratic changes nor introduced any pluralism—China and the Gulf monarchies—are now considered most promising and influential states. A series of military coups in Africa does not cause a noticeable increase in public tensions. The obvious reason is disappointment in the institutions of democracy that have failed to make things better.

In countries that adhere to formal democratic procedures but rely on authoritarian power to maintain governability, elections often turn into a sophisticated operation to consolidate the status quo. Undisguised falsification is impossible as everything is too transparent, and voters, even the least advantaged, have all communication tools to use. So, the authorities have to find ways to interest and captivate people while keeping the line. Naturally, citizens are more concerned about what affects them directly, but foreign policy issues come in handy here: regimes hurry to capitalize on external achievements, using the “moment of success” as the basis for legitimacy.

The situation is even more complicated in countries with an established democratic tradition. The multiparty system still exists, so there should be no problems with legitimacy after all. Really? Classical parties are experiencing a voter confidence crisis, and their opponents calling for change are frighteningly extravagant and often completely lack governing experience. Until recently, Donald Trump was the embodiment of such non-systemic forces, but now the fiery Argentine Javier Milei has outdone him.

In this situation, democratic elections assume an additional implication. The establishment presents each voting as a battle for democracy, by which it means the victory of the forces that do not alter the course but ensure continuity. Accordingly, their rivals are presented as a threat to democracy, even if they rely on the majority. Modern liberalism is generally distrustful of the majority as the emphasis is placed on protecting the rights of the individual and minority.

In holding elections, different state systems have one thing in common—they are highly manipulative in the legal, administrative, and media spheres. All these elements are necessary to feel confident. The reason is quite clear: amid increasing international unpredictability, the stakes are high and internal shocks become all the more dangerous. Hence the desire to secure oneself as much as possible. True, this is a far cry from the original democratic ideals, but after all they have always been a tool, not an end in themselves.