

# How democratic norms are used

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**Democracy has become a key element of government legitimacy throughout the world. A new book's comparative approach sheds light on the ambivalence of democratic norms, and the paradox of their strategic appropriation by authoritarian regimes like Russia and Turkey.**

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About: Pascal Bonnard, Dorota Dakowska, Boris Gobille (dir.), *Faire, défaire la démocratie. De Moscou, Bogota et Téhéran au Conseil de l'Europe* (Making and Unmaking Democracy: From Moscow, Bogota, and Tehran to the Council of Europe), Karthala, « Questions transnationales », 2021, 276 p., 25 €.

How has a distinct standard of liberal democracy become a reference point for most contemporary political regimes? Why are these standard democratic norms occasionally appropriated by very authoritarian regimes? The enigma that is the hegemony of contemporary democratic norms is the primary topic of the volume edited by the political scientists Pascal Bonnard, Dorota Dakowska, and Boris Gobille, which appeared in 2021 under the title *Faire, défaire la démocratie. De Moscou, Bogota et Téhéran au Conseil de l'Europe* (Making and Unmaking Democracy: From Moscow, Bogota, and Tehran to the Council of Europe). The book asks us to grapple with the following paradox:

[W]hile authoritarian regimes and tendencies are becoming even more pronounced ... democratic formalism (that is, embracing the principle of elections, holding apparently free elections, allowing technology that makes rule-based elections possible, and encouraging civic participation) is very extensively invoked as a basis for domestic and international legitimacy (p. 7).

This question has become all the more important in the wake of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which resulted in Russia's exit from the Council of Europe the following month. Yet from the war's outset to the annexation by way of a referendum that was not internationally recognized of four Ukrainian regions in September 2022, the Russian regime has never ceased to invoke democratic principles, such as the right of peoples to determine their fate and electoral legitimacy. Six of the book's ten essays deal with Russia and other post-Soviet states.

The book is an intervention in the vast political science literature (presented pp. 6 through 26) that, since the 2000s, has documented the various uses authoritarian regimes have made of practices associated with established democracies. The book's originality lies in the fact that it does not confine itself to a classificatory or normative agenda. Through its close examination of contemporary democratic performances on the part of governments and non-governmental organizations in various national contexts, the book examines the way in which "democratic norms" have become, at present, an essential category of political legitimacy.

Using a variety of research methods (participant observations, multi-situated interviews, archival and "gray literature" work) that belong explicitly to international political sociology, the various contributions break with an excessively classificatory approach that contrasts "genuine" democracies and "artificial" ones created by authoritarian states. The point is not to downplay the way in which certain regimes exercise power in a manner that is decidedly authoritarian. Rather, the volume studies the way in which, in the contemporary world-system, acting in democracy's name--even when this means proposing alternative definitions of democracy--has become an issue that is increasingly important to domestic as well as international legitimacy.

## **Negotiating democracy at an international level**

The volume is organized into three parts: "International Organizations and the Ambivalent Democracy Promotion", "Democratic Repertoires and Authoritarian Legitimacy"<sup>1</sup>, and "Democratization and Democracy in the Gray Zone". The book concludes with a stimulating interview with the scholar Vanessa Codaccioni on

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<sup>1</sup> With reference to the concept of "repertoire of collective action" coined by the American historian Charles Tilly.

"democratic" justifications of practices that violate liberties on the part of authorities in "consolidated" democracies like France.

One of the book's main contributions is the way it calls attention to the various international arenas in which the criteria for measuring the degree to which states are democratic is produced and negotiated. This question is central to part one. Its essays describe intergovernmental and non-governmental spaces in which these criteria are produced. This is the case, for example, of the Council of Europe, which is examined by Yauheny Kryzhanouski and Maria Bigday. The authors describe the daily work of national elected officials as well as the "experts" employed by the Council of Europe which, since the 1990s, has worked regularly, by producing periodic reports and emphasizing specific themes, on classifying member and associate states in terms of their more or less democratic character. Kryzhanouski and Bigday explain the political nature of this evaluative work, notably the way in which classificatory operations trigger various forms of lobbying. While international organizations sometimes have a constraining power of evaluation over their member and associated states, this normative power can be manipulated by governments. This is notably the case of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.<sup>2</sup> Geneviève Lessard describes how this court was the target of legal and diplomatic counteroffensives by Presidents Uribe (2002-2010) and Santos (2010-2018) in their efforts to defend the Colombian state against criticism by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In his chapter, Quentin Deforge analyzes the failure of a project to evaluate the "democratic performance" of national legislatures. The mobilization of elected members from southern countries belonging to the Inter-Parliamentary Union helped them block this initiative, which was supported by the National Democratic Institute, an American foundation.

Governments currently use several instruments to measure "democratic performance." On this point, Anaïs Marin makes a valuable contribution. She draws on her experience as an election observer for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a post-Cold War organization charged with rebuilding democracy, of which Russia has been a member since its founding in 1991. Marin describes the Putin regime's strategies for derailing the OSCE's election observation missions in its zone of influence. First, these missions are often undermined by people beholden to the Russian government who are either sent in with election observer

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<sup>2</sup> The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, a court with jurisdiction over human rights for the Organization of American States, is regularly appealed to by victims of rights violations in Latin America.

teams or impersonate the OSCE on the ground (p. 150). Second, Marin emphasizes the Kremlin's logistical and doctrinal efforts to oppose "Western" democratic norms when they undermine Russia's regional allies. An alternative legal doctrine, known as "sovereign democracy," which claims to adhere to regional cultural specificities, is now promoted by pro-Russian institutions. This doctrine follows more accommodating standards of "good elections" than the "international" principles used by the OSCE (pp. 138-141).

## **The hegemony of "democratic norms"**

The contemporary transnational "democratic norms", characterized by North-South domination, as Quentin Deforge notes (p. 79-80), can be appropriated to varying degrees. These appropriations are often, in the first place, strategic: several essays show how recourse to "imported" democratic repertoires serves the diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical ends for the dominated states of the world system. Adherence to the Council of Europe's standards is thus a precondition for membership in or a partnership with the European Union. It is in this vein that one must interpret the liberalization, during the 1990s, of legislation relating to associations in Turkey, as described by Françoise Daucé, Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, and Élise Massicard. By contrast, with the anti-Western turn in Russia and Turkey in the late 2000s, the three authors explain, governments again placed associations under state control. The Putin and Erdogan regimes began to prioritize pro-government associations, deemed "socially useful", allowing a controlled distribution of the state's social prerogatives while marginalizing "bad" civil society, which was deemed to close to opposition circles. In this way, the book asks us to consider the arbitration at play in the way authoritarian regimes use processes inspired by liberal democracy. The case of participatory frameworks implemented by Tehran's city government, described by Sahar Saeidnia, is an excellent example. When the World Bank got its loans back from the Islamic Republic after the Iran-Iraq war, "[the regime's] cooperation with international agencies, its endorsement of the Millenium goals, and the sending of Iranian delegations to international conferences like the World Urban Forum contributed to the diffusion of such notions as "participation", "civil society," "responsibility", and "efficacy" in Iran's public debates" (p. 255). Participatory processes, confined to infrastructure issues, became a low-cost way for Tehran's central municipal government to achieve legitimacy.

The book shows how "democratic norms" are not just strategically appropriated, but also shape, in various ways, the language of legitimacy of national powers, even in authoritarian configurations. Political crises provide privileged insight into these trends. Examining two very different contexts, Myriam Aït-Aoudia, by investigating public debate over the political integration of the Islamic Salvation Front in pre-civil war Algeria, and Frédéric Zalewski, by studying the crisis of the Polish Diet from December to January 2017, describe political crises in which competing antagonists claim to be defending democracy against their opponents. In both cases, the resolution of the crisis resulted in the regimes taking an authoritarian turn--*in the name of democracy*. Crises aside, the *consolidation* of authoritarian governments can also occur by way of the "domestication of concepts and action repertoires that are characteristic of liberal democracies" (p. 241). Tatyana Shukan shows how, for two youth organizations in Russia, defending democracy means calling for a "strong" state and the modernization of the country under Putin's rule. These young people demand an "active civil society," mobilized against social problems, but that differs from the "blathering of contemporary liberals" (p. 231). Adopting a sociological perspective on pro-Putin activism, Shukan shows how they appropriated the methods of the color revolutions<sup>3</sup>--how to occupy the street when confronted by opponents, how to monitor elections--*in order to serve the government*.

Yet the "democratic" repertoires presented in the book do not have a one-way effect on the contexts examined. "Democratic norms" can also create spaces of resistance. Sahar Saeidnia explains how the implementation of participatory processes in Tehran allowed for unexpected appropriations. As a result of these processes, there emerged forms of politicization that Saeidnia describes as "low decibel" or "outside the political game" (p. 260)--involving, that is, actors excluded from institutional politics. Similarly, legacies of the "democratization" that occurred during the Yeltsin era can, in contemporary Russia, prove ambivalent. Clémentine Fauconnier studies the *polittekhnologues*, Russian election strategy experts, who, after 1991, drew inspiration from American spin doctors. They played a major role in the competitive elections of the 1990s, when they engaged in fairly undemocratic electoral tactics (such as vote-buying, or *kompromaty*). This profession did not, however, benefit from the recentralization of political power under Putin. True, a *polittekhologue* like Gleb Pavlovsky, the founder in 2005 of the "Social Chamber," a state organization charged

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<sup>3</sup> The color revolutions, which resulted in the fall of pro-Russian governments in the wake of claims of electoral fraud in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004), seem to have contributed to the repertory of activists, *as well as to those of repressive regimes*, in several post-Soviet contexts. These revolutions employed techniques of large-scale non-violent protest in major urban centers.

with controlling civil society (p. 202), and the organizer of training seminars on the methods of the color revolutions (p. 237), is a key figure in Putin's regime. But he is not representative of the entire profession, which the regime often discreetly criticizes.

This edited volume shows, through the consideration of many cases, how a genuine democratic *normativity* prevails over most states. A particular model of liberal democracy, inspired by Western countries, has produced lasting effects on activist repertoires (based on C. Tilly's concept) but *also state repertoires*, in the case of many so-called "authoritarian" regimes. It is, however, regrettable that there are no contributions that address Asian and African contexts. The book would have benefited, for instance, from considering the recourse to "democratic norms" in post-Arab Spring authoritarian restorations.

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