1

Introduction

We often picture dictators as unwilling to share power with anyone who might outshine them. Politics in these regimes is an inherently dangerous game. Yesterday's trusted confidant can become tomorrow's coup leader. Better to keep your cabinet full of sycophants, people who nod on cue, take their cut, but never dream of vying for the throne. When things go south, the most inept officials can then be cast aside, blamed for failing to carry out the orders of the wise ruler. As Gordon Tullock notes in his classic *Autocracy*, "Dictators... although they may not be nice people, are pretty invariably talented. They tend to be intelligent, tough, and aggressive."[1] In a true cult of personality, there is little room for outside talent.

History is full of examples of autocrats sharing power with the loyal but unqualified. In 20th century China, Mao was so wary of potential rivals that he assembled a "coalition of the weak", a group of isolated, politically tainted novices completely dependent on his favor.[2] In his famous work on Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie (in power from 1930-1974), Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński recounts:

> The King of Kings preferred bad ministers. And the King of Kings preferred them because he liked to appear in a favorable light by contrast. How could he show himself favorably if he were surrounded by good ministers? The people would be disoriented. Where would they look for help? On whose wisdom and kindness would they depend? ... Instead of one sun, fifty would be shining, and every one would pay homage to a privately chosen planet. No, my dear friend, you cannot expose the people to such disastrous freedom. There can be only one sun.

[1] Tullock (2012)
[2] Bai and Zhou (2019); Shih (2022)

The fear of being overthrown motivates many leaders to lean on family members for help. Saddam Hussein entrusted his sons Qusay and Uday, along with his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, with the Iraqi terror apparatus, where they tortured and killed on behalf of the regime. Kim Il Sun ran the North Korean state like a family business, giving top positions to his wife, siblings, children, and cousins.[3] We see the same reliance on a tight inner circle in cultural representations of dictators too. Gabriel García Márquez offers a decaying, fawning court in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, while Armando Iannucci deftly satirizes a cast of bickering schemers in his film *The Death of Stalin.*

Scholars have long held that nepotism and cronyism can work to a dictator's advantage. High-performing officials are simply too risky to grant top jobs. Their intelligence and governing ability can earn them public recognition and support from rival elites eager to challenge the regime.[4] And the dirty, criminal work of keeping dictators in power attracts low-skilled but zealous loyalists.[5] That reliance on the relatively less educated is viewed as holding back dictatorships' economic performance. [6] As Alastair Smith and Alejandro Quiroz Flores succinctly put it, "autocratic governments are led by paranoid leaders and their incompetent, but loyal, ministers".[7]

I argue that this popular image of dictators is quickly becoming outdated. As of 2020, nearly one in four cabinet ministers across all authoritarian regimes had finished a graduate degree at a Western university, a nearly threefold increase over the past fifty years.[8] What were once notable outliers in Chile (the Chicago Boys) and Indonesia (the Berkeley Mafia) have become the norm: 93% of autocracies now feature at least one such "technocrat" in their cabinets. Dictatorships are increasingly relying on some of the best and brightest to uphold their rule.

Take the example of modern-day Russia, the main case examined in this book. In the wake of its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the country found itself cut off by the West from global financial markets, abandoned by many of its energy partners, and severed from key supply chains. The expectation in many Western capitals was that this isolation would trigger economic and social unrest, and ultimately a change in Russia's foreign policy. A central challenge for both policymakers and academics is understanding why these international sanctions have failed to deliver a crippling blow to the Russian economy, much less severely threaten Putin's hold on power.

[3] These included both blood relatives and those marrying into the family.

[4] Egorov and Sonin (2011); Zakharov (2016)

[5] Gläßel and Scharpf (2025)

[6] Besley and Reynal-Querol (2011); Besley, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol (2011)

[7] Quiroz Flores and Smith (2011)

[8] Data comes from the Paths to Power dataset, which is explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

A large part of the answer lies in the Putin regime's reliance on technocrats. As of 2024, roughly one in six high-ranking Russian officials had studied at a Western university, worked for a multinational firm (such as Morgan Stanley or KPMG), or affiliated with a technocratic think tank. Despite denunciations from Russia's security services, which brand Western-educated citizens as "fifth columns" and elite universities like Yale as "undesirable organizations", fluent English speakers with foreign degrees continue to run key ministries and agencies, and directly advise the president.[9] Celebrated in the international press, technocrats have remained not only steadfastly loyal to the Putin regime, but have stabilized policymaking under the weight of increasingly punishing sanctions.[10]

We cannot understand the resilience of modern authoritarian regimes without unpacking the black box of who chooses to work for them. As Stalin famously quipped, "cadres decide everything."[11] This book argues that the challenges of maintaining economic and social stability in a competitive world compel dictators to increasingly look to the well-educated and richly experienced to guide their governments. Technocrats offer the expertise necessary to solve real problems within society that arise from growing wealth and societal expectations. In sum, autocrats are replacing the loyal with the competent because regime survival depends on performance in office.

This reliance on technocrats, however, comes with risk: the most capable individuals are not only wary of joining corrupt and violent regimes, but they disrupt elite coalitions and pose new threats from within the state. How do authoritarian regimes recruit and entrust technocrats with meaningful authority without jeopardizing political stability? Combining an in-depth study of Russia (with brand-new data on over 1,500 top officials under Putin) with analysis of high-ranking officials across 103 other authoritarian regimes, this book shows how dictators have developed sophisticated strategies to reward, monitor, and ensure the continued loyalty of the technocrats they require.

In short, competent loyalists, rather than cronies or relatives, have become a defining characteristic of 21st century dictatorships. As these regimes grow wealthier and more powerful, they are better positioned to attract and retain top talent. And by ensuring social stability and modernizing the state, technocrats help dictatorships last longer. Before exploring how this transformation

[9] Kanev, Sergey. "The Kremlin's fifth column. Russia declares war on U.S. exchange programs despite its own officials' past participation." The Insider, February 23, 2024. "Russia Blacklists Yale University as 'Undesirable' Organization." Moscow Times, July 8, 2025.

[10] Matveev (2024), See also Prokopenko, Aleksandra. "Moralnaya kar'era tekhnokratov. Pochemu rossiyskiy gosapparat tak legko prinyal voyenu." Carnegie Politika, October 4, 2022.

[11] Stalin, Joseph. Address Delivered in the Kremlin Palace to the Graduates of the Red Army Academies, May 4, 1935

has come about, it is worth first clarifying what I mean by technocratic expertise.

Defining Technocrats

The idea that experts are best suited to rule has a long historical lineage. For centuries, scholars have argued that politics can be treated as a science, something that once properly studied can be harnessed to improve lives and material welfare. Francis Bacon's New Atlantis envisioned a society in which a college of scientists would advance knowledge for the public good.[12] In his vision, a technical elite who had mastered such empirically grounded expertise would steer the state, replacing Plato's "Philosopher Kings" who were too idealistic and removed from real-world affairs. Later amidst the ferment of post-revolutionary France, Henri de Saint-Simon championed a model where industrialists, scientists, and engineers would supplant the traditional aristocracy.[13] Similarly, Auguste Comte argued that society operated under discoverable laws, much like the natural world. Treating the state as a grand, rationally planned workshop for the common good would unify the population around capable leaders, and mollify the divisive class politics tearing at the seams.

It wasn't until the industrial age that the term "technocracy", or rule by technical experts, entered the popular lexicon. Coined by William Henry Smyth in 1919, this concept gained traction over the following decade as a new way to reorganize industrial democracy under the leadership of scientists and engineers.[14] For people like Thorstein Veblen, titans of industry might be able to generate profits, but were sorely out of touch with the demands of rapidly advancing technology and the damage that capitalism was wreaking on society.[15] Highly trained experts were needed to correct course. Though the movement faded by World War II, partly supplanted by the New Deal and its slightly different model of expert-led governance, technocracy continued to resonate among those disillusioned with the problems of democratic governance and the allure of rational, centralized administration. In recent years, this technocratic impulse has resurfaced in a variety of forms, from crisis managers given rein over European institutions in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis to Silicon Valley entrepreneurs advocating digital solutions that elide contentious political cleavages.

This book asks a different question: when and why do authoritarian regimes empower technocrats to help govern? I follow Bell (1973) in defining a technocrat as an individual who "exercises authority by virtue of his technical compe-

[12] Bacon (1900)
[13] Esmark (2020); Burris (1993)
[14] Sleepers Jones (1995)
[15] Veblen (1921)

tence." The operative principle here is competence, which I argue derives primarily from a technocrat's relative expertise. As opposed to climbing the political ladder through personal connections or party service, technocrats stake their claims to authority based on scientific or technical knowledge derived from their education and work in the professional world.[16] That expertise sets them apart from the typical cast of characters we might expect to see working in authoritarian governments: the friends and relatives, the party loyalists, the army and security officers, and so on.

Expertise comes in several forms. As Collier and Cardoso (1979) argue, technocrats possess "a high level of specialized academic training," covering a broad range of disciplines and conferring exceptional expertise applicable to policymaking. The quality of education is crucial. Elite education cultivates habits of systematic inquiry and evidence-based reasoning that are directly applicable to policymaking. Whether in economics, engineering, law, or the social sciences, students are taught to decompose complex problems, weigh trade-offs, and design solutions. They are also trained to communicate persuasively, an invaluable skill within the bureaucracy. In this sense, the value of elite education lies less in any single discipline than in flexible, critical thinking. As Lee and Schuler (2020) write, this technical competence improves officials' abilities to "identify the correct policies within a specific policy domain". By leaning on a scientific evidence base to inform policymaking, technocrats can help build general confidence among the public in a regime's leadership.[17] When analyzing global trends in the book, I identify politicians with this advanced expertise based on whether they have completed graduate degrees in the West, a visible and comparatively standardized indicator of technical competence across diverse national contexts.[18]

But other technocrats may draw on experience from top positions in the private sector. They may excel at allocating resources or finding ways to manage and monitor their employees. Some have experience developing long-term plans for their organizations, or even just day-to-day knowledge of balancing budgets. This balance between domain expertise and managerial skill varies across contexts, but what sets technocrats apart is their ability to raise the quality of policy decisions and improve government performance. Technocrats are called upon to lead specific reform initiatives or simply reassure the public that the state is responding to pressing challenges.[19]

[16] Miller and Whitford (2016); Gailmard and Patty (2007)

[17] Shen, Ieong, and Zhu (2022)

[18] As further evidence of their relative competence, Chapter 7 shows how technocrats deliver superior economic outcomes while Chapter 8 shows how they drive digitalization and modernization processes within the state.

[19] Capturing this on-the-job ability across so many countries and time periods is challenging.

As this book will show, technocrats do not approach the government through a single ideological lens.[20] Some, of course, fit the conventional stereotype of neoliberal economists pushing for market-based solutions. Because technocrats played central roles in dictatorships in countries such as Chile and Brazil, some readers may see the rise of technocratic expertise as little more than the triumph of the Washington Consensus, the formula of liberalization, privatization, and fiscal discipline championed by international financial institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, as we'll see in Chapter 2, highly educated technocrats working in *democratic* cabinets are often recruited precisely to handle engagements with bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

This narrow preference for neoliberal economists is not characteristic of modern dictatorships. In these regimes, ministers with Western graduate degrees come from strikingly varied backgrounds. Only about a quarter trained in economics, finance, or management. Some of the most high-profile central bankers and finance ministers working for dictators come equipped with exactly these pedigrees. But the vast majority of technocrats analyzed in this book pursued advanced study across a broad spectrum of fields: law, engineering, philosophy, political science, and beyond. Their ascent demonstrates that authoritarian leaders value not only orthodox economic expertise but also a diversity of training and perspectives.

In fact, the spread of the Washington Consensus explains little of the turn toward technocrats in authoritarian regimes. For example, some technocrats have found much to like in the developmental state, viewing the government as a driver of economic growth. The Father of Egyptian Industry Aziz Sedky was a member of the Socialist Vanguard, a secret unit of the Arab Socialist Union, notwithstanding his PhD in Economic Planning from Harvard. Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin is an engineer and IT specialist, as is Digital Development Minister Maksut Shadaev. Both have pursued statist reforms that have expanded the role of the government in the economy. Saudi Arabia's Fahd bin Abdul Rahman Balghunaim earned a PhD in Transportation Engineering at the University of Michigan before taking over the Ministry of Agriculture. His work has focused on diversifying Saudi Arabia's crop base and investing government resources in foreign farmland. What unites these figures is not a shared ideology or discipline, but a higher degree of expertise relative to other elites in these regimes.

Technocracy has also proven surprisingly compatible with populism, a politi-

This means the cross-national results capture one specific form of technocratic expertise (Western academic training) rather than the full range of competencies the concept encompasses. The Russia chapters use a broader operationalization, more tailored to the local context and made feasible by the richer micro-level data.

[20] Dargent Bocanegra and Lotta (2025); Reiser and Hebenstreit (2020)

cal style that claims the popular will has been betrayed by corrupt or self-serving elites. Despite their apparent differences, technocracy and populism share a common distrust of traditional institutions, especially party-based democracy, which they often view as obstacles to effective governance.[21] In practice, populist leaders frequently enlist technocrats to implement their agendas, using them to project an image of pragmatic, evidence-based governance.[22] For example, Rafael Correa earned a PhD in economics at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, but rejected much of economic orthodoxy. His pursuit of "21st-century socialism" in Ecuador was aided by an esteemed team of economists, including Pedro Páez (PhD, University of Texas-Austin) who shared his vision of macroeconomic stability combined with redistribution.[23]

Importantly technocrats are more than just engineers, economists, specialists and lawyers: they are also political actors who exert influence on policymaking. This book investigates why highly skilled experts are able to ascend to leading positions within government, including as prime ministers, cabinet ministers, agency heads, and trusted presidential advisors. These are no small feats. Indeed, the word technocrat implies not just technical expertise (techno) but also political authority (crat).[24] As Magali-Sarfatti-Larson observes, "the experts' role becomes technocratic only when it is inserted at high levels of responsibility in a public or private apparatus of power."[25] According to one interviewee, it is impossible to become a cabinet minister in Russia without being able to shout down others in a meeting.[26] These elites must possess political instincts and some degree of strategic judgment to rise so far through the ranks.[27]

[21] Reiser and Hebenstreit (2020); Bickerton and Accetti (2017); Caramani (2017)

[22] This is also true for would-be authoritarian leaders who have ridden populist streaks, such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Viktor Orban in Hungary.

[23] Black, Bill. "Why is the Failed Monti a 'Technocrat' and the Successful Correa a 'Left-Leaning Economist'?" Truthout, December 13, 2012. See also De la Torre (2020).

[24] Meynaud (1970) makes this distinction as well, differentiating between those technicians that simply execute policy within the bureaucracy and technocrats who shape, justify, and direct that policy from positions of strategic influence. Mexico shows a comparable divide, with the political elite occupying a separate tier from the technicos who carry out the technical and data-driven work (Centeno, 1993). Other scholars use the term "technopol" to distinguish those that have taken political positions, even sometimes connoting an effectiveness in doing so (Joignant, 2011; Alexiadou, Spaniel, and Gunaydin, 2022). The present study encompasses both types under the broader category of technocrat, since all cabinet ministers exercise some political authority by definition.

[25] Magali Sarfatti-Larson, "Notes on Technocracy," Berkeley Journal of Sociology XVII (1972–73): 5.

[26] Interview with former Russian official, April 2025.

[27] Dargent Bocanegra and Lotta (2025)

Technocrats in Autocracies Worldwide

Trained experts have long played critical roles in authoritarian regimes. Courtiers and advisers stood beside monarchs for millennia.[28] But in terms of governing, many readers' first association with technocrats is likely the "Chicago Boys", the group of U.S.-trained economists elevated to power by General Augusto Pinochet in 1970s Chile.[29] Their radical neoliberal proposals for reforming the ailing Chilean economy received a warm reception, while their Western academic pedigrees helped launder the image of an otherwise brutal dictatorship.[30] Over the last century, technocrats have wielded great influence across Central and South America during periods of authoritarian rule in Mexico, Brazil, and Peru.[31]

The appeal of technocrats extends well beyond Latin America. Nearly every authoritarian regime in East Asia has, at one time or another, embraced technocrats, with scholars highlighting their influence in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and especially Singapore.[32] Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese government began sending thousands of officials to train at elite universities around the world, first at the Harvard Kennedy School and then later to Stanford University, Oxford University, and many others.[33] Officials studied the latest in management techniques and public relations, while taking field trips to local government offices and international financial institutions to see Western practices firsthand. So many Chinese Communist Party officials have studied at the Harvard Kennedy School in particular that it has become known as the "Party School".[34]

Post-independence African states have seen technocrats rise to influential positions in Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria, and even in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where dictator Joseph Kabila invited well-educated members of the Congolese diaspora into his first government to stabilize the economic situation.[35] In the Middle East, technocratic governments have become a norm for autocratic regimes in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco.[36] The prime minister's office in Jordan is reserved for technocrats. Since 2010, eight men have held the post, each holding at least a master's degree from a top university

[28] Tullock (2012); De Mesquita and Smith (2011)
[29] Constable and Valenzuela (1993); Silva (1991, 2008)
[30] Clark (2017)
[31] Lindau (1996); Dargent (2015); Leahy and Schipani (2018)
[32] Ortmann and Thompson (2014); Chen (2023); Li (2001); Loh (2016); Tadem (2020)
[33] Dobson, William J. "The East Is Crimson." Slate, May 23, 2012.
[34] Wong, Chun Han. "Harvard Has Trained So Many Chinese Communist Officials, They Call It Their 'Party School'" Wall Street Journal, June 1, 2025.
[35] Thurston (2018); Chemouni (2019); Stearns (2012)
[36] Kenner (2010); Carboni (2023)

in the West. Six have completed PhDs abroad in subjects as diverse as strategic studies (King's College London), economics (University of Southern California), planning (Harvard University and Pantheon-Sorbonne University), engineering (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and political science (University of Geneva).

Though democracies have their share of technocrats, this book focuses instead on their role in authoritarian regimes. The reasons are manifold. We know much more about when and why democracies turn to technocrats, with electoral dynamics and the demands of coalition governance taking center stage. Democracies differ fundamentally from autocracies in how officials are selected. Cabinet positions in parliamentary democracies, for instance, are typically distributed predominantly based on party strength: parties that win more votes can lay claim to more ministerial posts.[37] Even in presidential systems, executives must select appointments that balance their policy priorities with the interests of political allies, unions, business groups, and the military.

In short, voters matter in democracies. Unpopular democratic governments frequently turn to technocrats during moments of crisis, as parties seek to dilute responsibility and protect themselves from electoral backlash.[38] Their perceived commitment to rational decision-making helps calm markets and preserve the credibility of elected politicians. In this sense, technocracy emerges as a symptom of partisan dysfunction.[39] Technocrats are a balm for the rifts of electoral competition, brought in to restore citizen confidence that leaders are pursuing policies in the country's best interests. They are often appointed precisely when cabinets are dissolved or post-election negotiations break down.

Much of the academic debate about technocracy centers on this tension between delegating power to elites and ensuring democratic access and accountability.[40] Writing in the 1970s, Jurgen Habermas (1971) lamented the technocratic model of governance, which he viewed as undemocratically removing the general population from the decision-making process. Approaching politics as a scientific discipline that can be rationalized leaves no room for public debate or even partisan politics. This deep vein of partisanship even affects how technocrats are defined in advanced democracies, which identifies technocrats not by their accumulated expertise, but rather their relative *lack* of political experience or strong pre-existing partisan affiliations.[41]

This stands in stark contrast to authoritarian regimes. In such countries, decision-making is heavily centralized and opaque. While dictators must manage internal elite coalitions, entrance is generally not dictated by electoral suc-

[37] Carroll and Cox (2007)
[38] Centeno (1993); Wratil and Pastorella (2018); Alexiadou and Gunaydin (2019); Improta (2021)
[39] Neto and Strøm (2006); Emanuele et al. (2023); Geddes (1994)
[40] Fischer (1990); Bickerton and Accetti (2017)
[41] Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán (2015); Alexiadou, Spaniel, and Gunaydin (2022)

cess. Rather members are selected based on how they might contribute to regime stability or their role in patronage networks. Through coercion and co-optation, dictators fend off challenges from within and beyond the regime. Voters and partisan politics play a secondary role: by definition, authoritarian states are less representative and responsive, with outsider experts being used towards different ends besides depoliticizing governance.[42]

Therefore, I argue that for dictatorships, technocrats are less temporary fixers but rather core parts of the system. Their responsibilities go well beyond crisis management: they serve for years, if not decades, implementing complex policy agendas and managing the state. I term this phenomenon "technocratic authoritarianism": non-democratic rule in which credentialed experts hold substantive policymaking authority while ultimate political control remains with an unelected ruler or ruling group.

Some of the trade-offs we'll explore which complicate technocrats' role in dictatorships share much in common with work on bureaucracies in developing democracies.[43] Technocratic ministers differ though from frontline bureaucrats. Their expertise exposes them to different risks of signing up as well as more attractive outside options that pull away from public service. They also govern within the elite coalition, alongside the most hardened cronies, who view them with suspicion and want to constrain their impact on policy. It is this paradox, of rulers empowering technocrats who might one day imperil them, that motivates the chapters that follow.

This book thus offers new explanations for why technocrats join dictatorships around the world, while focusing in depth on one of the most powerful and consequential autocracies of the 21st century: Russia. Few countries provide a better lens through which to analyze the role of technocracy under authoritarianism.[44] As we will see, Russia is awash in technocrats. As in other authoritarian regimes, they have taken up top posts across the government but also must share power with a variety of other elites and interests. Over the past three decades, Russia under Putin has also weathered its share of crises, wars, and sanctions, many of them of his own making. These shocks allow us to dig into why technocrats are brought into government and why they make the decisions they do when their loyalty is put under question.

But in many ways, Russia is also a least likely case for the book's arguments. Russia has fewer technocrats than many of its peer regimes (see China or Viet-

[42] Chen, Keng, and Zhang (2023) makes a similar argument.

[43] For example, Sarah Brierley has shown convincingly that in Ghana, merit guides the selection of candidates for the most highly skilled positions; partisan recruitment features more heavily for less professional roles (Brierley, 2021).

[44] Only China, with its more centralized system of bureaucratic monitoring, provides the same level of accessible detail on its officialdom.

nam), and has evolved into a harsh and increasingly personalist regime openly hostile to the West. If technocrats nonetheless play a meaningful role in sustaining authoritarian rule under these conditions, it strengthens the plausibility of the claims. Technocrats may even wield greater influence in more open settings where they are more numerous and international integration remains an important source of legitimacy. Lastly, Russia is also an extraordinarily data-rich setting. By combining official biographies, leaked datasets, and qualitative interviews, we can learn much more about how an authoritarian state works on the inside. The book exploits this variation across institutions and time to illuminate how technocrats rise, govern, and help sustain authoritarian rule in far greater detail than cross-national studies typically allow.

Main Arguments

The sharp rise in highly skilled individuals working for authoritarian regimes motivates a set of core research questions that structure this book. As a reference, Table 1 provides a road map for the chapters to follow. Each tackles a distinct research question, developing and defending an original argument.

First, existing theories contend that although dictators may be intelligent, they are paranoid about being overthrown and thus prefer to entrust authority to only the most loyal and potentially ineffective. We saw how in China, Mao created "coalitions of the weak" that could not challenge him, while in Ethiopia Haile Selassie preferred ineffective ministers that would not outshine him. Yet the data shows clearly that the fear of competence may be overstated. When and why do modern authoritarian regimes delegate power to technocrats?

This book develops and tests three sets of arguments explaining this rise of technocrats working for dictatorships. First, I argue that over the past century, an increasing number of regimes have attempted to legitimate their claims to power based on their performance in office rather than on an ideological vision or personalist claims to authority. In some settings, this means achieving economic growth, while in others it takes the form of adequate social services and law enforcement. If dictators cannot demonstrate they know how to govern, citizens will be wary of acquiescing to a social contract where they must concede democratic rights. Even the most repressive and propagandistic regimes struggle to survive for long on the knife's edge of economic collapse.[45]

In short, this *demand* explanation holds that dictators turn to technocrats when their legitimacy in power depends on how well they perform in office. Governance requires empowering and overseeing a minimally competent bu-

[45] Guriev and Treisman (2023)

Table 1.1: Book Overview

	Question	Main Argument	Evidence
Chapter 2	When and why do autocrats appoint technocrats?	The demands of governing complex states and delivering performance best explain the turn towards technocrats.	Cross-national; Case studies
Chapter 3	Who are Putin's technocrats, and why does he need them?	Technocrats offer Putin performance legitimacy, help the regime respond to crises and sanctions, and serve as a counterweight to rival elites.	Russia
Chapter 4	Why do smart people work for dictatorships?	Dictators buy talent on the open market, bidding up wages during crises and binding officials to the regime with golden handcuffs.	Russia
Chapter 5	How do dictators empower technocrats without putting regimes at risk?	Dictators exclude technocrats from the security apparatus, monitor them with political commissars, and selectively punish those who step out of line.	Russia; cross-national
Chapter 6	Why do technocrats remain loyal to dictators in crisis?	Beyond just fear and a lack of exit options, technocrats bet that their expertise will be valued by whichever regime comes next.	Cross-national; Russia
Chapter 7	Do technocrats help dictators stay in power?	Authoritarian regimes that appoint technocrats are roughly 52% less likely to collapse within three years, as technocrats stabilize the economy and correct policy excesses.	Cross-national; Russia; case studies
Chapter 8	How do technocrats remake the authoritarian state?	Technocrats modernize the government by building digital infrastructure and importing corporate management techniques that strengthen surveillance, repression, and economic control.	Cross-national; Russia
Chapter 9	What can be done to weaken technocratic authoritarianism?	The West should create credible defection paths while also signaling that officials who stay will face accountability.	Case studies

Note: The table provides an overview of the research questions, arguments, and evidence: Cross-national refers to quantitative analysis of authoritarian regimes worldwide, Case studies refer to qualitative analysis of country cases, and Russia refers to both micro-level analysis and qualitative evidence from the Russian case.

reaucracy that can implement policy and satisfy the needs and expectations of citizens.[46] Technocrats help confer legitimacy, as people trust policymakers that apply their expertise to society towards better policy outcomes.[47] By bringing such expertise into government, authoritarian regimes are converging on a shared model of technocratic governance, though without the democratic rules and institutional oversight that typically accompany it.

But we might expect two other sets of factors to be at play. On one hand, not all dictatorships, for example, have equal access to a *supply* of technocratic talent. The ease of which talented students can attend elite universities abroad shapes how many technocrats dictators have at their disposal to tap for government work. Those which had been colonized by the British or French Empires see much greater numbers of technocrats staffing their governments today.

Finally, appointing technocrats creates *risks* for dictators. Promoting an expert usually means sidelining a loyalist, which can generate resentment within the ruling coalition. Empowered technocrats may attempt to reform institutions in ways that threaten entrenched patronage systems, or in rare cases become allies for challengers trying to unseat dictators. We might expect that autocrats who are better able to manage elites and the threats they pose, whether by developing democratic institutions or coercive capacity, are better equipped to keep such technocratic disruptions in check. Put differently, while demand-side theories highlight the advantages technocrats bring in terms of policy performance and legitimacy, the supply- and risk-based theories remind us that their inclusion incurs costs and creates vulnerabilities for dictators.

In Chapter 2, I put all three arguments to the test, and find the most consistent evidence for the *demand* explanation. Authoritarian leaders turn to technocrats primarily to strengthen their legitimacy through performance and to manage economic and political uncertainty. As regimes grow larger and wealthier, citizens expect more from their government. This leads to a much greater number of technocrats being given top political positions. The level of education within the population plays a much smaller role, while the regime's level of institutionalization or ability to repress seem not to matter. Appointing technocrats reflects an intentional strategy for addressing the growing challenges of governance, something I show in the last section of Chapter 2 by examining specific regimes in qualitative detail. Leaders have a choice about whether to delegate to experts, and not all possess the self-awareness to recognize they need help to govern effectively.

[46] Nathan (2020); Lucardi (2019); Whiting (2017)

[47] This argument therefore differs from Jones (2019) who finds that in Kuwait, international experts are unable to help authoritarian leaders in the Gulf states build their legitimacy among citizens. One crucial difference is that the technocratic expertise being analyzed here comes from within government.

The second part of the book moves beyond why dictators need technocrats to explore how they are drawn into the machinery of the state. Each chapter addresses a distinct facet of how authoritarian regimes manage the dilemmas of recruiting, controlling, and ensuring the long-term loyalty of technocrats. Together, these chapters highlight the different types of bargains that allow dictators to harness expertise without ceding control.

First, why would talented individuals ever want to join regimes not only infamous for repression and corruption but also paranoid about the threat they pose? Chapter 4 explores the puzzle of how modern autocracies recruit technocrats to join their governments. No longer equipped with ideology to cultivate loyalty, these regimes must compete in a more globalized marketplace for top employment. Smart managers have lucrative outside options in the private sector that outweigh the reputational costs of supporting dictators.

I argue that dictators must, in effect, purchase technocratic expertise on the open market. The price technocrats can command goes up during periods of crisis and reputational upheaval. To illustrate this, I look at the case of Russia during the 2010s which was hit hard by Western sanctions yet still managed to retain its most competent officials. As of 2021, Russian technocrats earned 40% more than their peers elsewhere in government. This wage premium kicked in only after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the stigma of working for an aggressive regime began to bite. The Kremlin was savvy enough to recognize that giving bonuses could compensate for a growing reluctance to aid an internationally scorned regime.

That financial compensation, however, laid a "corruption trap". Using data on the real estate and cars owned by top Russian officials, I then show that being trained in the West is no guarantee of upright, honest behavior. Technocrats in Russia were given coveted apartments in Moscow, discreetly allocated through illicit state channels. They and their families drove luxury cars far beyond what their official salaries could justify. And they invested in domestic real estate that could not be easily liquidated and which kept them tethered.

By the time Russia invaded Ukraine, technocrats had donned golden handcuffs. They had grown accustomed to an impressive standard of living and power, along the way giving Russian security agencies more than ample compromising material (kompromat) to hold them hostage. Although many technocrats join authoritarian governments because they want to contribute to development, we cannot ignore the material incentives that dictators wield to bring on and keep top performers loyal to their regimes.

Next, how do dictators delegate authority to technocrats without putting their own rule at risk? A dictator who hands too much autonomy over to the competent risks having their government disrupted by reforms and foreign ideas.

Technocrats who demonstrate an ability could end up defecting, and joining regime challengers. The challenge then for dictators is to tap technical expertise without sacrificing control over policy direction or coalitions.

In Chapter 5, I instead argue that dictators have developed a sophisticated toolkit to control their bureaucracy against threats from within. What matters most is how autocrats strategically assign, monitor, and discipline their officials. To start, the most competent officials almost never granted control over the coercive apparatus. In over two decades of Vladimir Putin's rule, Russian technocrats have never led an agency or ministry connected to the military, law enforcement, or the intelligence community (the so-called siloviki agencies). The same is true around the world: Western-educated officials are systematically excluded from leadership posts in security ministries, even though other types of civilians have risen to those posts consistently over the last fifty years. Autocrats are careful not to entrust the levers of coercion in the hands of those best equipped to wield them against the regime. Any kind of disloyalty within the security apparatus could prove fatal for the regime.[48]

At the same time, regimes still require technocratic expertise across their governments. To ensure loyalty, rulers employ a variety of monitoring tools. A notable example is the revival of the political commissar model, a holdover from early Communist regimes. In contemporary Russia, loyal security personnel, often with deep ties to Putin's inner circle, are embedded alongside technocrats within state institutions, effectively acting as minders who track their activities and report any signs of dissent.

If and when technocrats dare to step out of line, the authoritarian judicial system puts them back in their place. Most officials in these regimes have accumulated their fair share of compromising information that can be used to trigger anti-corruption cases unless they demonstrate unbridled loyalty in the state. Using new data on criminal proceedings, I show that Russian technocrats have a 100% chance of being sent to jail if they are investigated for corruption, compared to just 54% for the rest of bureaucrats. Even after being convicted, technocrats receive considerably longer jail sentences. The strategic use of punishments sends a signal to high-performing bureaucrats that there are costs for them aspiring to fly too close to the sun. They carry out their duties under a veritable "sword of Damocles".

Authoritarian regimes often drift from their original course, sometimes descending into aggression abroad and severe human rights violations at home (Russia and Rwanda are two prime examples). In Chapter 6, I ask why technocrats remain loyal to dictators over the long run. Using the case of wartime

[48] Gläßel and Scharpf (2025) make a similar argument about why less competent, career-pressured individuals tend to rise within security agencies.

Russia, I argue that many technocrats are held hostage by their past complicity in corruption. Bound by a thieves' bargain, they see little reason to jeopardize their status and lifestyle, or more painfully put the lives of themselves or their family members at risk. Once they decided to enter the Russian government, the exits closed behind them and few entrances to the West opened. Their fates became intertwined with that of the regime.

But that sense of fear explains only part of the puzzle. Technocrats may gamble they can outlast the dictatorship, and their competence and institutional knowledge will be valued by whomever comes next. Using cross-national data on historical regime changes, I show that technocrats around the world are also the most likely to keep their positions when dictators are overthrown. Further, evidence from focus groups illustrates how even today Russians are reluctant to punish technocrats for their work on behalf of the regime.[49] Expertise can act as an insurance policy against future lustration or reprisals.

The final part of the book investigates whether technocrats actually deliver on their promise of helping authoritarian regime. The evidence offered in Chapter 7 is striking. Over the past six decades, authoritarian regimes that entrust power to technocrats are approximately 52% less likely to collapse within the next three years than those that appoint no technocrats to their cabinets. More technocrats in the cabinet means greater economic and social stability, and in particular stronger growth and higher investment. Using paired case studies of Burma and Indonesia, and then Venezuela and Russia, I show how technocrats correct for the excesses of regime policies and improve the quality of macroeconomic policymaking.

But as we've seen, technocrats are not just economists, but rather professionals trained across a range of disciplines. In Chapter 8, I argue that worldwide technocrats are helping build and strengthen so-called "digital dictatorships."[50] Their expertise, often gained in the corporate world, modernizes governance by introducing new digital tools while also importing corporate management techniques into the bureaucracy. These reforms help dictators surveil their opponents, control financial transactions, and carry out repression. Technocrats have empowered the Russian state to digitally target and punish with frightening precision. Without their participation in government, many regimes, including Russia, would have much less success controlling their citizenry and responding to shocks that imperil their hold on power.

[49] An original survey experiment asking ordinary Russians these same questions is currently in the field, but delayed.

[50] Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright (2020); Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright (2020); Gohdes (2024)

Building the Evidence Base

I have endeavored to write a book accessible not only to specialists but also to curious readers seeking to understand how modern authoritarian regimes operate. While quantitative data lies at the core of the analysis, no background in statistics is required. Although I draw on econometric insights, I've worked to translate them into plain language. The aim is not to overwhelm with technical detail, but to use data as a tool to reveal the hidden architecture of authoritarian rule. For readers interested in causal identification and the underlying methodology, all empirical tests are fully documented in the Appendix.[51]

The technocrats themselves are also not nearly as dry and buttoned up as their elite resumes might lead you to believe. In fact, nearly every chapter introduces a different and prominent Russian technocrat whose story helps anchor the book's broader arguments. Sadly, much of their work has helped entrench a brutal regime that cares little for the lives of those who oppose it, whether in Ukraine or at home. These narratives are informed by over 40 interviews I conducted with former officials, businesspeople, think tank analysts, and experts. I also tap the views of ordinary Russians about the technocrats working for the state, using a set of 583 semi-structured interviews with exiles conducted by Indiana University and the OutRush project.

Technocrats abound across authoritarian regimes, and I've deliberately cast a wide net to capture that diversity. The book features a global roster of authoritarian leaders and their technocratic lieutenants, from Central Asia presidents to Gulf monarchs, all of whom surround themselves with highly educated ministers. The book also draws on in-depth qualitative case work from Burma, Indonesia, and Venezuela, three countries that help reveal how technocrats can shape the course of authoritarian governance. In Burma and Indonesia, we'll see how the differing fates of military regimes in part depended on how much technocrats were brought into the governing coalition. Venezuela, meanwhile, offers a stark counterpoint to Russia, as a more contemporary example of an authoritarian regime has largely rejected technocratic competence to devastating effect.

Investigating the rise and impact of technocrats also requires getting hard numbers about who such officials are and where they work. I rely first on the Paths to Power database (PtP), which was created and graciously shared by the WhoGov team based at the University of Oslo. PtP contains comprehensive biographical information on all ministers working for 141 countries from 1966-2020,

[51] I have included the most important tables at the end of each empirical chapter, with the remaining analysis in the Cross-National Data Appendix and Russian Data Appendix at the end of the manuscript.

including often hard-to-study authoritarian regimes. This wealth of data makes it possible to systematically compare technocrats across vastly different political systems, shedding light on patterns that would otherwise remain anecdotal.

But Russia is where the book digs deepest. There is a rich tradition of scholars analyzing Russian politics by examining the makeup of a country's governing elite. Sovietologists scoured whatever they could get their hands on – yearbooks, encyclopedias and statistical materials – to peer inside the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.[52] That same diligence and manual labor used to parse printed sources was also applied by social scientists in the post-Soviet period, who turned to telephone books and biographical directories to learn about the make-up of the emergent Russian government.[53] As the decades of Putin's rule have worn on, yearbooks have given way to the internet. But for all the praises of open data the Putin government has sung (prior to 2022), there has never a complete accounting of who has worked for the regime, where and when.

This book fills this gap by combining tactics from the open source playbook with the latest artificial intelligence tools. I first collected over 175,000 unique biographies of Russian elites from across the internet.[54] I then deployed OpenAI's ChatGPT to transform each text into structured data.[55]

The result is the Political and Economic Elites of Russia database (PEER), a mapping of all 1,576 individuals who held top executive positions in the Russian government between 2000 and 2024. PEER provides a one-of-a-kind lens through which to view modern Russian politics. With it, I can identify the exact universities officials attended, the exchange programs they participated in, and their first jobs out of college. It also, perhaps surprisingly, includes information on how much money bureaucrats made in office each year, and even the makes and models of the cars they and their families drive. These are the raw data I use to explain how technocrats come to work for the Russian state and why they

[52] Harasymiw (1984); Fortescue (1986)

[53] Those early labors proved fruitful. Scholars such as Olga Kryshtanovskaya were able to piece together snapshots of top Russian elites as well as changes over time (Kryshtanovskaya and White, 2003). Other work on Putin's first two presidential terms helped draw attention to the influx of siloviki, Soviet nomenklatura, and businesspeople taking over elite perches (Bremmer and Charap, 2007; Rivera and Rivera, 2006; Snegovaya and Petrov, 2022; Chaisty, 2013; Szakonyi, 2020*a*).

[54] Achieving personal access to officials is critical in Russia, and there is large demand among companies and other interest groups for information on who is in office. Numerous private-owned websites vacuum up publicly available biographical data from government websites and other resources and make it available to the public.

[55] Importantly, ChatGPT was not used to acquire biographical data on officials, but rather to clean existing open-source data from the websites and resources listed in Table B-1. To minimize extraction errors, I validated all the structured records against the original biographies, finding a low error rate of 2%.

stay put over the years. Chapter 3 goes into more detail about the rise of technocratic talent specifically within Russia over the past three decades, using the PEER dataset as its guide.

Events in Russia move fast. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Prigozhin mutiny of June 2023 were each unthinkable until they happened. The regime's future remains uncertain, and this book does not attempt to chase the latest developments. Rather I focus on how the Putin government has evolved over time. It is less a study of specific policy debates and execution, but rather an attempt to understand why the Putin regime has decided to empower the competent, and the implications of that decision for its resilience to date.

The Bigger Picture

The last two decades have brought a reassessment of how dictators survive in office. We now know that institutions, from succession rules and elections to strong parties and parliaments, are not mere window-dressing, but an essential part of the autocratic playbook.[56] And as the costs of committing widespread violence have escalated, modern dictators have to be more selective about how they wield their power.[57] Propaganda and censorship can be more effective means of control than repression alone.

This book argues that we should be paying equal attention to "personnel politics", the study of who joins and sustains authoritarian governments. Scholars have done fantastic work on the autocratic security apparatus, in particular leaders' careful attempts to fend off threats to their rule.[58] Yet over the past six decades, the ranks of the dictators' civilian administration have quietly filled with more and more accomplished officials. They oversee critical parts of the governments, replacing regime cronies far beyond the traditional economic bloc where they are often presumed to be confined. Their work creating more advanced, more responsive states allows dictators to both recognize what they must provide to those that they rule and how best to repress those that object.[59]

The rise of technocratic authoritarianism introduces a central tension in autocratic politics, one that motivates this book. Technocrats represent a latent political threat to dictators. Their expertise and credibility can disrupt the political status quo, and make them attractive alternatives around which rival coalitions might form. For these reasons, there has been a tendency to write off dictators

[56] Wright (2008); Williamson and Magaloni (2020); Meng (2020)
[57] Dobson (2013); Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2023)
[58] (Greitens, 2016; Gläßel and Scharpf, 2025)
[59] Nathan (2003); Guriev and Treisman (2020*a*); Morgenbesser (2020)

as preferring the incompetent to the capable, particularly for the most senior positions.[60]

Yet autocrats repeatedly elevate technocrats over loyal but less competent allies. I demonstrate that regime survival depends on performance, and in particular the extent to which autocracies empower competent officials to deliver "good enough governance".[61] One of the greatest achievements of modern autocracies has been their ability to convince the most capable and ambitious to devote their talents to state-building, even if they might disagree with certain directions those states are headed. And for those less committed to the authoritarian project, savvy leaders have other tools at hand for controlling officials. If handled correctly, the "perils of meritocracy" need not be so treacherous.[62]

Authoritarian regimes are thus far more pluralistic than is often assumed. The most durable are often those that cultivate a mix of the competent and the loyal, and invest in developing both qualities within the governing elite. The rise of technocrats committed to building durable authoritarian regimes demonstrates that the strict dichotomy between loyalty and competence is false.[63]

We are also making a grave error by dismissing the capacity of many authoritarian countries. These states have come a long way in delivering a minimum level of public services that in many ways is satisfactory for citizens. As Tom Pepinsky has observed, "everyday life in the modern authoritarian regime is ... boring and tolerable."[64] Technocrats are often the behind-the-scenes drivers of these improvements in state capacity.[65] They bring rationalized management techniques, a preference for data and evidence, and more recently, an obsession with technology, which taken together allow autocracies to simply get more things done.[66] Technocrats have helped to contribute to authoritarian rule feeling surprisingly normal in many settings.

In brief, technocrats help strengthen authoritarian rule. China's extraordinary economic growth is partly a product of its meritocratic bureaucracy, which rewards officials for attracting investment and improving public services.[67] Politically vulnerable in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government turned to expert bureaucrats for the performance legitimacy that would

[60] Egorov and Sonin (2011, 2026); Bai and Zhou (2019); Zakharov and Sonin (2024)

[61] Grindle (2004)

[62] De Mesquita and Smith (2011)

[63] See also Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim (2015). (Woldense, 2022) also arguing that diversifying a coalition may help mitigate coup risks.

[64] "Everyday Authoritarianism is Boring and Tolerable." Tom Pepinsky, January 6, 2017, tompepinsky.com/2017/01/06/everyday-authoritarianism-is-boring-and-tolerable

[65] Geddes (1994); Suryanarayan (2024)

[66] Besley and Kudamatsu (2007); Szakonyi (2024*a*)

[67] Xu (2011); Huang (2012); Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim (2015); Bo (1996); Yao and Zhang (2015)

endear it to the population.[68] Technocrats are essential to understanding this changing face of modern authoritarianism.

It may be helpful to think of the rise of technocrats working for dictators as yet another consequence of globalization. For decades, the West opened itself up to foreign capital. Investors and kleptocrats alike poured their money into equity markets and real estate. But the same is also true for universities and other prestigious institutions. Foreign students have contributed immeasurably to the growth and development of higher education across the West. The innovation and ideas generated have been a critical source of economic progress far beyond the developed world.

What this book shows is that exposure to Western curricula and corporate practices is no guarantee of a liberal outlook, economic or political in nature. Challenging a large body of previous work, this book shows how Western educated officials can help strengthen authoritarian regimes.[69] Technocrats have become part of the vanguard helping to digitalize and modernize dictatorships, developing new ways for states to repress their populations using advanced technology.[70]

Indeed, dictators survive when they can successfully recruit and retain such talent to join their governments. In countries such as Russia, the lure of a high salary and luxurious lifestyle can quickly crowd out misgivings about one's role in the system. Over time, I show how this material compensation helps trap officials within the authoritarian system. Though it can damage the image and efficiency of authoritarian regimes, corruption – and the compromising material it produces – also needs to be understood as a tool of bureaucratic recruitment and control.[71]

Over the long-run, we also must be more cognizant of the limits of transitional justice.[72] Not only do most countries transitioning to democracy fail to hold previous officials accountable, this book illustrates how the most competent are the most likely to avoid lustration or other penalties. Even the most vehement oppositionists to the Putin regime carve out space for technocrats in their dreams of democratizing Russia. For the most educated and experienced, it may be better to stay put and weather the tumult and reputational damage of working for dictators, than put one's own status and safety at risk by trying to defect.

This is not to argue that authoritarian regimes are always paragons of gov-

[68] Chemouni (2019); Chemouni and Dye (2020)

[69] Spilimbergo (2009); Mercier (2016); Gift and Krcmaric (2017); Barceló (2020)

[70] Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright (2020); Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright (2020)

[71] Carothers (2022); Wedeman (2012); Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni (2011); Szakonyi (2024*c*, 2020*a*)

[72] Elster (2004); David (2004); Nalepa (2010); David (2011); Nalepa and Remington (2023)

ernance. Many fail on innumerable accounts to genuinely improve and protect the lives of their citizens. This book's theoretical framework outlines the clear limits on how much power can be delegated to technocrats. At some point, the political risks from reform and disruption become too much to bear. So long as political considerations and fears of threats cloud autocrats' decision-making, their regimes will lag democratic governments that fully embody meritocratic competition.[73] But without some semblance of stable welfare, so-called 'informational autocrats' cannot effectively manipulate public opinion.[74]

This is particularly true in Putin's Russia, where Putin's notorious cronies and judo buddies steal the limelight (and the country's vast resources). Authors such as Catherine Belton (2020) and Karen Dawisha (2015*a*) have done much to expose the corruption and cronyism underpinning Putin's government. As Vladimir Gelman has argued, Russia in particular is teeming with examples of "bad governance" and rent-seeking.[75]

But the Putin regime is more than just a story of KGB veterans pillaging their way to the top. It is also a story of many capable bureaucrats assenting to and supporting corrupt and authoritarian rule. For all its many failings and disastrous decisions from above, the regime has weathered crisis after crisis and consolidated control far beyond many expectations.[76] Where this book diverges from previous accounts is in showing that technocratic expertise is far more widespread than the handful of "pockets of effectiveness." Technocrats have been thoroughly integrated into the Russian state through patronage networks and participation in rent-seeking schemes. This book details where and why technocrats have been offered such perches, and helps explain why we see such variation in the quality of governance across the Russian state.

Moreover, Russian technocrats have built state capacity across many areas: tax collection, digitalization, macroeconomic stability, banking regulation, supply chain security, military production, and even hosting international events. On some of these issues, Russia has distinguished itself internationally, while on others, it still lags behind its peers. But these successes, often far from liberal or market-oriented, are undeniable. In many respects, the work of technocrats in Russia parallels that of the technocratic central bankers in post-Communist

[73] Acemoglu et al. (2019)

[74] Guriev and Treisman (2019)

[75] Gelman (2022); Gelman et al. (2020)

[76] Bad information compounded by officials' fear of repression clearly contributed to Putin's severe miscalculation on an issue very personally salient to him, that is whether to all-out invade Ukraine (Egorov and Sonin, 2026). However, I disagree that this framework explains all government decisions made under Putin, particularly in those areas where he has delegated power. Governance in Russia has not been uniformly bad (see again Gelman (2022)).

Europe highlighted in the work of Juliet Johnson.[77] But here the story is less about transnational, epistemic communities, but Russian technocrats' integration into specific domestic networks, often based around a single patron, that enable them to achieve their preferred policy objectives.

Russia today is not a pure technocracy, militocracy, a continuation of the Soviet system, or even a 'degenerate autocracy' that prizes loyalty to Putin above all else.[78] Rather it is a tragically resilient combination of all these elements. Part of the regime's durability owes to Putin's willingness to empower networks of technocrats that compete with the fiefdoms and cronies endemic to his regime. Technocrats have now become patrons themselves, recruiting and building their own verticals. Although they are still heavily outnumbered by other factions, their relative overperformance in office has for now solidified their foothold within the policymaking apparatus. Like most authoritarian governments, Putin's regime combines elements of meritocracy and nepotism.

What, then, is the future of technocrats in authoritarian politics? As of late, both autocracies and democracies have witnessed an explosion of disdain for traditional expertise, particularly that gained in elite institutions. Personalistic leaders have preferred to concentrate power within their loyal support base. And many countries are increasingly closing themselves off from globalizing forces, including educational exchange. Might we be at a moment where technocracy has passed its peak in this post-truth world?

The role technocrats play in helping modern dictators remain afloat makes their disappearance unlikely. Authoritarian leaders may rail against experts in public, but when crises hit and hard decisions need to be made, they still turn to trained specialists. The free flow of information and travel worldwide is making it more possible than ever for citizens to benchmark their lives against their counterparts elsewhere. So long as performance in office remains one of the main criteria by which authoritarian leaders are judged, there will be a role for technocrats in the modern state. They provide the concrete economic and social results that dictators can point to when presenting themselves as effective stewards of the state.

The puzzle then becomes whether democracies can weaken the bonds that keep technocrats loyal to authoritarian regimes. I argue in the Conclusion that the West has levers available to draw these experts away without jeopardizing international security or their regime's prospects for democratization. In place of sanctions, I propose a new policy direction that focuses on encouraging defections through credible guarantees of safety and opportunity in the West. Perhaps the fastest way to weaken a dictatorship is to deprive it of its brainpower.

[77] Johnson (2016)

[78] Kryshtanovskaya and White (2003); Snegovaya and Petrov (2022); Egorov and Sonin (2026)