

RETHINKING POST-SOVIET POLITICS FROM A NEOPATRIMONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Focusing on the battle between democrats and their opponents does not provide a satisfying way to explain the political trajectories of the former Soviet states. A more useful approach is neopatrimonialism. From this perspective, we can explain the colored revolutions as elite-led efforts by rent-seeking entrepreneurs to resist increased pressure placed on them by neopatrimonial states.

The Rise of Hybrid Regimes

Twenty years of transformation in post-Soviet Eurasia make it possible to draw some conclusions regarding politics and regime development. A growing diversity of forms and models among post-Soviet political regimes prods us to revise and clarify many established conceptual approaches to the analysis of political development and democratization. Despite a large number of good theories explaining what is happening, it appears that many post-Soviet political developments are leading to the renewal of patrimonial systems of domination instead of Western-style, rational-legal, competitive democracies.

Initially, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's theory of a global third wave (1991) of democratization urged the majority of researchers to

analyze post-Soviet developments in the context of democratic transitions in other parts of the world—particularly Latin America and Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Today, skepticism and disappointment have replaced the euphoria that emerged after the downfall of the USSR. Researchers talk about the development of various types of post-Soviet hybrid regimes, façade democracy, and even quasi-democracy, whose nature and “machinery” are very far from liberal standards.¹ These insights are useful but incomplete for solving the puzzle of post-Soviet politics. Today, we have a consensus in understanding that the political transformations of 1991-2011 gave birth to a variety of new political regimes that can be identified as hybrids, which combine elements of democratic and non-democratic regimes.

What are the inner workings of hybrid regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia? What are the distinctive characteristics of the political regimes, which have arisen in the former Soviet area? How are they different from similar hybrid regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America? Is a hybrid regime a stage on the road to a competitive democracy or does it turn into something else? What do we understand and what do we not understand after twenty years?

Time for New Concepts

Twenty years after “the fall,” political scientists must rethink their theories about the entire experience of post-Soviet political development. Importantly, a key point in our misunderstanding of post-Soviet politics is that a significant obstacle to developing conceptual clarity is the dominating tendency to study these politics in terms of the traditional dichotomies of “democracy versus authoritarianism,” which brings researchers to theoretical dead ends, best exemplified by the various efforts to define “democracies” and “authoritarianisms” with adjectives. The scholastic search for battles between democracy and authoritarianism in the post-Soviet political space—conflicts between good and bad, or democrats and non-democrats—is not an adequate tool for understanding post-Soviet societies. It discourages an understanding of the real meaning of political struggle—the dynamics of elite contestation and its consequences for political and regime development in post-Soviet societies.

Current research clearly shows that the model of democratic elite pact-making, which was peculiar for Central and Eastern Europe, proved irrelevant for post-Soviet development. Post-Soviet elites made pacts in one form or another, but instead of establishing democracy, these pacts

¹ Among seminal articles: Michael McFaul. 2002. “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World.” *World Politics* 54: 2 (January): 212-244; Thomas Carothers. 2002. “The End of the Transition Paradigm.” *Journal of Democracy* 13: 1 (January): 5-21.

instead stabilized and consolidated different variants of non-democratic or semi-democratic regimes.² The post-Soviet intra-elite consolidations resulted in cartel agreements for restricting competition and excluding “outsiders” from exploiting public resources. Thus post-Soviet pacts did not facilitate democratization, but instead led to informal arrangements of state capture and monopolistic appropriation of public, political, and economic functions.

Former Soviet Regime Characteristics

So what are the distinctive characteristics of the political regimes in the former Soviet area? Basically, after the fall of the Soviet Union, political trajectories in most countries are leading to a renewal, modification, and rationalization of the patrimonial systems of domination, and by no means to the establishment of Western-style, rational-legal competitive democracies.

In contrast to Latin America and Southern and East Central Europe, where Huntington’s third wave of democratization took place after the completion of nation-building and rational-legal state-building phases, democratization in post-Soviet states (with the exception of the Baltic region) has preceded both nation-building and rational-legal state-building.³ The concept of neopatrimonialism is essential for understanding both post-Soviet politics and regime dynamics.⁴ The key element of post-Soviet development is the unfinished process of building modern states and nations and the failure to carry out a rational-bureaucratic transformation.

² Vladimir Gel'man. 2003. “Post-Soviet Transitions and Democratization: Towards Theory-Building.” *Democratization* 10: 2 (Summer): 95.

³ Valerie Bunce. 2000. “Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations.” *Comparative Political Studies* 33: 6/7 (August- September): 703-34; Taras Kuzio. 2001. “Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?” *Politics* 21: 3 (September): 168-77; Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong. 2002. “Reconceptualizing the State: Lessons from Post-Communism.” *Politics & Society* 30: 4 (December): 529-54; Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen E. Hanson, eds. 2003. *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Jeffrey Kopstein. 2003. “Post-Communist Democracy: Legacies and Outcomes.” *Comparative Politics* 35: 1 (January): 231-50.

⁴ Several recent works explain what neopatrimonialism is. It emphasizes personal rule, the domination of patron-client relationships instead of rational-legal ties, the appropriation of the public sphere and state apparatus, the feudalization of the state and the local elite’s dominance of the provinces, and the model of center-periphery relations. See a review of the relevant growing literature here: Oleksandr Fisun. 2006. *Demokratiia, neopatrimonializm i global'nye transformatsii* [Democracy, neopatrimonialism, and global transformations]. Kharkiv, Ukraine: Konstanta, 154-163. For recent developments of the concept see: Gero Erdmann, Ulf Engel “Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered – Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept.” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*. 45: 1 (February): 95-119; Daniel C. Bach. 2011. “Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism: comparative trajectories and readings.” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49: 3 (July): 275-294.

Compensating for these failures requires neopatrimonial modes of rulership and state-society relations. Making this distinction the central part of our analysis provides a more articulated and clear difference between the post-Soviet transformations, on the one hand, and the transitions of Latin America, Southern Europe and most of East Central Europe (including the Baltic states), on the other.

Neopatrimonialism

The German political scientist Max Weber widely used the concept of “patrimonialism” in his fundamental work *Economy and Society*, which he contrasted with both feudal and bureaucratic rational-legal forms of government.⁵ The patrimonial set-up derives from the household administrations of a chief, especially from the separation of clients from their chief’s household and the granting to them of fiefs, benefices, preferences, tax-farming opportunities and so on. According to Weber, in the pure type, patrimonial domination “regards all governing powers and the corresponding economic rights as privately appropriated economic advantages.”⁶ The main feature of patrimonialism is the private appropriation of a governmental sphere by those who hold political power, and also the indivisibility of the public and private spheres of society. In the neopatrimonial system, the ruling groups regard society as their own private domain, and the fulfillment of public functions as a legitimate means to their own personal enrichment.

Guenther Roth from the Berkeley school of historical sociology was the first scholar to point out the rise of new modernized forms of patrimonial domination, especially in the new post-colonial states of Africa and Asia.⁷ A profound comparative and historical analysis of the distinction between traditional patrimonialism and modern neopatrimonial structures was first presented in the innovative works of Shmuel Eisenstadt.⁸ The distinctive feature of neopatrimonialism is a symbiosis of patrimonial and modern rational-bureaucratic rule, in which the formal institutions of political democracy (for example, the parliament, multi-party system, and electoral competition) yield and adapt to neopatrimonial logic about the operation of the political system as a whole. The foundation of

⁵ Max Weber. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 226-241: 1010-1110.

⁶ Weber. *Economy and Society*, 236.

⁷ Guenther Roth. 1968. “Personal Rulership, Patrimonialism, and Empire Building in the New States.” *World Politics* 20: 2 (January), 194-206.

⁸ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. 1973. *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism*. London: Sage; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. 1978. *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies: A Comparative Study of Civilizations*. New York: Free Press.

neopatrimonial regimes is the patron-client relationship.⁹ In the neopatrimonial system, the individual national leader controls the political and economic life of the country, and the personal client relationships with the leader play a crucial role in amassing personal wealth, or in the rise and decline of members of the political elite.

Consequently, the main result of the collapse of the communist system at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was hardly a transition to democracy (like, for example, the ones in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic countries), but, on the contrary, a transition to the formation and institutionalization of a new, modernized form of semi-traditional domination, in which patrimonial relationships play the key and structure-forming role both in determining the rules of “political games” and in the operation of the political system as a whole. The post-Soviet “democratization” of the 1990s transformed the sprouts of patrimonial domination, which had long existed in the Soviet system, into a new form of “modernized” neopatrimonialism, appearing on the basis of the private appropriation by the ruling elite of the public realm and “electoral” benefits.¹⁰

The main features of post-Soviet neopatrimonialism are:

1. The formation of a stratum of rent-seeking political businessmen and/or neopatrimonial bureaucrats who use a combination of élan, politics, and property in order to achieve economic goals.
2. A more or less private appropriation of governmental administrative resources, primarily coercive and aimed at the fiscal functions of the state, and which are used largely to defeat any political opposition and eliminate economic competitors.
3. The crucial role of informal patron-client networks for the structuring of political and economic processes.

Neopatrimonialism in the Former Soviet Union

The neopatrimonial interpretation of post-Soviet political systems allows us to conceptualize enough of these systems’ specific features to place

⁹ Shmuel Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand, eds. 1981. *Political Clientelism: Patronage and Development*. London: Sage; Shmuel Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger. 1984. *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Ken Jowitt. 1992. *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Herbert Kitschelt. 1995. “Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions.” *Party Politics* 1:4 (October), 447-72. Georgi M. Derluguian. 2005. *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

them in the wider context of political and historical comparative analysis of different patterns of transition to modernity, which have been studied extensively in Western Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Post-Soviet variations of neopatrimonial structures include formal modern state institutions—parliaments, multiparty systems, electoral competition, and advanced constitutions—but they play the role of a façade. These institutions are internally subordinated to the patrimonial machinery. As a result, rational-legal relations in the public sphere do not play the key role in power relations. Instead, informal patron-client bonds do, since they regulate the access of neopatrimonial players to various resources on the basis of personal loyalty and capital exchanges.¹¹

Post-Soviet political regimes are characterized by a concentration of power in the hands of an individual ruler who maintains control, mainly, by distributing patronage to a network of various rent-seeking actors like political entrepreneurs, economic magnates, regional barons, loyal elites, particular societal groups, cronies, and relatives.¹² The connection between the neopatrimonial center and political participation is exercised through joining patron-client networks, different corporatist arrangements, or a formal “party of power.” Under conditions defined by an unfinished rational and bureaucratic transformation and incomplete divisions between politics and economics, the clientelistic chains of resource and capital exchange became the most beneficial and the “cheapest” strategy for rent-seeking groups. Within the “party of power,” the core positions belong to the “presidential clan” which holds the key positions in the polity and controls profitable industries. The central element of this clan is a system of personal ties centered on the president and based on regional, kinship, or ethnic ties, as well as on present-day rent-seeking interests. The neopatrimonial ruler completely dominates and controls the political and administrative elite around him.

Essentially, post-Soviet systems follow the logic of the neopatrimonial political process. This process is not a struggle of political alternatives in the context of parliamentary contestation but a competition in which different factions of the neopatrimonial bureaucracy seek to monopolize the main segments of patron-client networks. Other motives for political struggle include efforts to monopolize sources of political rents and economic spoils or to gain a controlling position over the distribution of

¹¹ As Robin Theobald once noted, “the essential feature of patrimonial regimes ... [is] ... the exchange of resources (jobs, promotions, titles, contracts, licenses, immunity from the law, etc.) between key figures in government and strategically located individuals: trade union leaders, businessmen, community [and regional – O.F.] leaders, and so forth. In return for these resources, the government or heads of state receive economic and political support.” See Robin Theobald. 1982. “Patrimonialism.” *World Politics* 34: 4 (July): 552.

¹² Richard Snyder and James Mahoney. 1999. “The Missing Variable: Institutions and the Study of Regime Change.” *Comparative Politics* 32: 1 (October): 108.

resources as a primary goal.¹³

Hence, in contrast to the patterns of the democratization processes in Latin America and Southern and Eastern Europe, neopatrimonial elites in post-Soviet regimes are divided, above all, over access to patronage and ruler-controlled clientelistic distributions of “fiefs and benefices”¹⁴ (not over democracy/authoritarianism). The post-Soviet party/elite cleavages may be defined according to an inside/outside position in relation to the spoils system.¹⁵ The rent-seeking entrepreneurs who emerged in the wake of post-communist reforms usually do not aspire for autonomous political activity beyond the patronage network set up by the state ruler, and rarely support alternative political forces. Generally, they are not interested in a democratic transformation of the political sphere or a transition to democratic rules of political and economic competition.

In this way, the basic elements of the modern democratic system, transferred to post-Soviet soil (e.g., political parties, elections, parliament) have been fundamentally transformed into Potemkin institutions that exist in a patrimonial and semi-patrimonial context. Tied together by patron-client connections rather than modern, rational-legal civic relations, post-Soviet modern political institutions are becoming convenient frames within which a process of reproduction of traditional forms of patrimonial rulership takes place.

Types of Neopatrimonialism in the Former Soviet Union

Depending on the model of elite consolidation, it is possible to delineate a few basic forms of neopatrimonialism in post-Soviet regimes:

- **Sultanistic Neopatrimonialism**—characterized by an extreme concentration of power, pure personal rulership, façade elections, and clan-based models of voting (e.g., Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan).¹⁶
- **Oligarchic Neopatrimonialism**—linked with the formation of wide

¹³ Usually, this opportunity arises from holding public office, which becomes a kind of private enterprise for the person in power. At the same time, the office-holder’s ability to remain in this position is not dependent on the performance of public functions or providing public goods. You can do nothing for the public because your reelection or job tenure is much more dependent on patrons from above rather than voters from below.

¹⁴ See Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle. 1997. *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in a Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 85-87; Snyder and Mahoney. “The Missing Variable,” 109.

¹⁵ The practice of rewarding loyal supporters (usually of winning candidates) with appointive public offices.

¹⁶ Juan J. Linz & H. E. Chehabi. 1998. *Sultanistic Regimes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

strata of oligarchic and/or regional rent-seeking actors, acting together with, or in place of, weak governmental institutions primarily via clientistic networks of patronage and pork barrel rewards (e.g., Yeltsin's Russia, Kuchma's Ukraine).

- **Bureaucratic Neopatrimonialism**—based on state-bureaucratic monopolies and semi-coercive centralization of neopatrimonial domination under super-presidentialism, operating via law enforcement/fiscal structures; and utilizing populist/patriotic mobilization and plebiscites (e.g., Belarus, Putin/Medvedev's Russia, Georgia).
- **Neopatrimonial Democracy**—where political actors compete through formal electoral mechanisms for different branches of government in a divided executive constitutional setting, but their goals are still focused on state capture as the primary gain of power-sharing (Ukraine since 2005).¹⁷

Explaining the Color Revolutions

Neopatrimonial interpretations of post-Soviet political transformations suggest an alternative hypothesis to explain the phenomenon of the colored revolutions, placing them in the context of already-existing theories of regime change. Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, and Jack Goldstone, in their classical analysis of revolutions, emphasize that state-building and nation-building has its own logic, and that the rise of the nation-state through centralization and mobilization of resources by an absolutist state will inevitably come into conflict with the interests of the traditional elite since it threatens their political privileges and undermines their resources.¹⁸ State-centered revolutionary theories have convincingly demonstrated the basic causes for the emergence of revolutionary situations and the involvement of the masses in revolutions, which is to say a conflict between the state and the autonomous elites that evolves against the background of pressure from the international system and which splits the elites and places them in confrontation with the regime.¹⁹

¹⁷ Oleksandr Fisun. 2010. "Ukrainian Teeter-Totter: Vices and Virtues of a Neopatrimonial Democracy." PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 120.

¹⁸ Theda Skocpol. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Charles Tilly. 1993. *European Revolutions, 1492-1992*. Oxford: Blackwell; Jack Goldstone. 1982. "The Comparative and Historical Study of Revolutions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 8: 187-207; Jack Goldstone. 1991. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁹ In the 1990s, Goldstone and some other researchers noted the emergence of the next generation of revolutionary theories that considerably specified and enriched the initial model of the revolutionary conflict suggested by T. Skocpol and C. Tilly. See Jack Goldstone. 2001. "Towards a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 139-187; Jeff Goodwin. 2001. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements*,

From this theoretical perspective, the colored revolutions should be regarded as a form of disintegration of the neopatrimonial system, and they should be comparatively analyzed in the context of different transformation scenarios among all post-Soviet neopatrimonial regimes, rather than individually.²⁰ This article maintains that the colored revolutions were an elite-led reaction by some rent-seeking interest groups to increased fiscal and coercive pressures by the neopatrimonial state. In this case, it is not important whether the increased resource extraction (a traditional trigger of revolutions) was an attempt by the state to bureaucratically regulate and rationalize the functioning of the economic sphere (in the spirit of enlightened absolutism and mercantilism), or whether everything can be explained by the increased predatory appetites of the ruler and his camarilla.

The “oligarchic turn” of 1993-2002, in most cases, gave way to the reversal of 2003-2008, which reinforced the position of the state and bureaucracy in the economic sphere and strengthened attempts to limit and control political competition, which itself leads to the development of semi-authoritarian tendencies and a gradual “closure” of the political sphere.²¹ This strategy resembles “coercive rationalization,” which is similar to the development of the absolutist state in Western Europe and its struggle with other competing power centers.²² The bureaucratic regulation and enhanced fiscal functions of the state immediately brings the post-Soviet neopatrimonial bureaucracy into conflict with most economic and political elites who are not in the closest circle of the state ruler and, consequently, suffer from reduced economic opportunities.

Therefore, the colored revolutions, to a significant degree, can be explained as the response by some influential elites to the enhanced enforcement and coercive functions of the neopatrimonial state. Further, to a large extent, the revolutions were triggered by a change in the strategy of the rent-seeking groups who began investing their funds, conventionally

1945-1991. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; John Foran. 2005. *Taking Power: On the Origins of Third World Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ See Henry E. Hale. 2005. “Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia.” *World Politics* 58:1 (October): 133-65; Henry E. Hale. 2006. “Democracy or Autocracy on the March? The Colored Revolutions as Normal Dynamics of Patronal Presidentialism.” *Communist & Post-Communist Studies* 39: 3 (September): 305-29.

²¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. 2002. “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 13: 2 (April): 51-65; Lucan A. Way. 2005. “Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.” *World Politics* 57: 2 (January): 231-261.

²² Charles Tilly, ed. 1975. *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Hendrik Spruyt. 1994. *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Thomas Ertman. 1997. *Birth of the Leviathan. Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

speaking, not in the state ruler but in systems of outsiders, like political parties, civil movements, and independent media. Coercive rationalization under the slogan “putting the economy in order” leads to a counter-revolutionary stabilization. This process includes the expropriation of the resources controlled by powerful economic actors (oligarchs), the elimination of any significant political leverage they may exercise, and, ultimately, the decline in the role played by the parliament and political parties (e.g., Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan). It transforms the regime into a type of bureaucratic neopatrimonialism that has counterparts in the bureaucratic authoritarian governments of Latin America or East Asia. In this context, the transition of some rent-seeking actors from their support for the neopatrimonial center to conflict with it can be viewed as a democratic alternative to the coercive rationalization from above. The colored revolutions have come to express the need of both outsiders from below and the most powerful actors from above to reduce the crucial role of the state ruler as the key veto-player and focal point of the neopatrimonial machinery. Doing this requires the political rationalization of the polity through giving more power to the parliament and addressing demands for an institutionally weak president.

Thus, a significant fault in the mainstream interpretation of the colored revolutions (e.g., as the clash of democrats and the middle class with an authoritarian regime) lies in three points. First, it disregards the major trigger of the revolutionary upsurge: the conflict between the neopatrimonial bureaucracy and rent-seeking political entrepreneurs. Second, it does not recognize that the decisive factor for revolutionary success was the role of the leading economic elites, whose support for the neopatrimonial system outsiders was crucial for the success of all the colored revolutions. Finally, the argument made here clearly separates the colored revolutions from their protagonists and from the attempts of coercive rationalization on the part of authoritarian rulers. In this respect, “political rationalization” from below through the colored revolutions, and “coercive rationalization” from above toward counter-revolutionary regime stabilization can be treated as different scenarios that could lead to transformations of post-Soviet neopatrimonial regimes into modern states.²³

²³ Cf. the opposition of capital-intensive and coercive-intensive paths in the rise of European national states in: Charles Tilly. 1992. *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*. Oxford: Blackwell.