

TWO DECADES OF POST-SOVIET REGIME DYNAMICS

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Abstract: To understand the first two decades of post-Soviet politics, it is helpful to think in terms of regime dynamics instead of regime change and to consider the context of clientelism that drives these dynamics. Political struggle tends to be waged by extended personalistic networks, and presidentialist constitutions and leadership popularity encourage their arrangement into closed single-pyramid systems. This process tends to be disrupted and leaders ousted when presidential succession approaches and when the president and successor are unpopular.

More than two decades have now passed since the breakup of the USSR and political developments there have continued to take us by surprise. One reason may be that we have yet to develop a solid framework for understanding these political systems. This brief essay proposes that we might move closer to finding such a framework through two core analytical moves. First, we can gain analytical leverage by thinking about the context of post-Soviet politics as that of *highly clientelistic* societies, where the same formal institutions that might promote stability and openness in the West can often have very different effects in the former USSR. Second, it can be helpful to think less in terms of “regime type” and “regime change” and more in terms of *regime dynamics*. By these lights, what has

often appeared to be periods of “democratization” or “autocratization” in post-Soviet countries might better be understood as particular phases in larger cyclic patterns of opening and closure in the arrangement of these countries’ main clientelistic networks.

I use the term “clientelistic” here in a particular way, referring to a social equilibrium where individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations that include many people one has not actually met in person.¹ Naturally, all societies feature elements of both. Nevertheless, some societies experience the clientelistic element to a much greater extent than do others. We can see this in global indices that measure things we would expect to be correlated with clientelism. Post-Soviet countries other than the Baltic states have generally appeared at the lower end of global scales of rule of law and social capital and at the higher end of indices of “corruption.”

Highly clientelistic societies tend to feature certain patterns of politics. For one thing, politics is primarily a battle of extended personalized networks rather than of formal institutions or even individuals. Second, state leaders have incentives and social resources favorable for arranging the most important networks in society around a single center of power, often known in local parlance as a “power vertical” or “pyramid of power” and in the United States as a “political machine.” Creating a tight “single-pyramid system” involves extensive and elaborate coordination of a society’s many complex networks, a process that takes both skill and—crucially—time to accomplish. Fourth, variation in larger regime dynamics comes from factors that complicate or accelerate this time-consuming and complicated process of coordinating networks effectively around a single “patron.” In particular, presidentialist constitutions and leadership popularity tend to facilitate such coordination, while constitutions stipulating roughly equal and separate sources of executive authority (divided-executive constitutions) and uncertainty over leadership succession tend to complicate this coordination.

After an initial period of turmoil, the political history of (non-Baltic) post-Soviet countries can thus largely be seen as a history of the emergence of single-pyramid systems, with important dynamics in this process stemming from the obstacles and facilitators supplied by constitutions, popular support, and issues of succession.

¹ While this usage differs from certain other uses of “clientelism,” it is employed to avoid becoming bogged down in the conceptual discussion that introducing a new term here would require. Other terms that could be used include “patrimonialism,” “neopatrimonialism,” or “a state of low social capital.”

The Emergence of Single-Pyramid Systems

To begin, let us look at what happened in the 1990s across the non-Baltic post-Soviet space.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were the only post-Soviet countries to emerge from the USSR with their republic-level Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) organizations largely intact, with their leaders essentially just renaming them. This meant that the specific single-pyramid arrangement of elite networks inherited from the Soviet period (here, organized largely but not exclusively along regional lines) was never seriously disrupted, putting these countries' leaders in a strong position to reaffirm single-pyramid politics after 1991. They thus went further than all other post-Soviet countries in quashing open opposition, entirely eliminating it from elections by the mid-1990s.

Four other countries emerged from Soviet rule in virtually the opposite manner, in a state of (or on the verge of) civil war that severely disrupted the pre-independence arrangement of clientelistic networks and made it difficult for the initial leaders to coordinate their countries' main networks around their authority and establish dominance. Nevertheless, we tend to see single-pyramid systems gradually taking shape where presidentialist constitutions were in place after the wars, including in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tajikistan. These power pyramids became increasingly closed over time as their leaders skillfully practiced the arts of co-optation, coercion, and divide-and-conquer in order to rally the most important networks to their side, strengthen the most loyal ones, and marginalize others. Moldova is the exception, the lone case where the parliament eventually won its 1990s struggle with the presidency and eliminated the directly elected-presidency entirely, creating a parliamentary system of rule. This outcome may have been facilitated by Moldova's status as the only post-Soviet country with a parliament elected solely by party-list proportional representation, lacking the district-based elections that had enabled presidents in most other post-Soviet countries to gain initial control over resisting parliaments in the 1990s by such methods as manipulating regional resource flows. In any case, this set Moldova on a somewhat different course in the 2000s from the other post-Soviet countries.

Another six countries emerged from Soviet rule without civil war, but also without the order maintained in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan by surviving CPSU organizations. Leaders here, where extended networks vied openly for power after the USSR fell apart and where political outcomes were initially somewhat uncertain, had to work hard to coordinate the main networks around their authority and to marginalize those that would not fall in line. Where presidentialist constitutions were firmly in place from the beginning (as in Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan),

the process of building single-pyramid systems went fastest. In Ukraine, however, Leonid Kravchuk blew his presidential advantage through poor political maneuvering and inattention to clientelistic politics that led him to call early presidential elections before he could be confident of victory in 1994. The real machine-building in Ukraine thus began only after Leonid Kuchma defeated him and adopted a more strongly presidentialist constitution in 1996. In Russia, Yeltsin had to literally shell the old parliament out of existence (something Moldova's leaders never dared to try) to establish his dominance and install a presidentialist constitution in late 1993, at which point the process of single-pyramid building began in earnest, first by rallying the country's main business and regional networks for Yeltsin's reelection in 1996. Due to heated internal political competition, Belarus was the lone country as of 1993 not to have had a presidency at all, holding presidential elections only in 1994. These were won by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who step-by-step co-opted, cowed, or eliminated the most influential political networks, effectively depriving opposition movements of political oxygen.

Already by the year 2000, then, one finds a nearly universal pattern of presidential political machines increasingly dominating their competition as time passed. In the most general sense, each post-Soviet president other than Moldova's (where parliament won the initial struggles with the presidency) was able to tighten his single-pyramid system over time as he gradually solved the complex process of coordinating networks around his rule.

This dimension of timing is extremely important for understanding, in any given year, why some countries appeared to be "more democratic" or "more authoritarian" than others: The degree of closure in the single-pyramid system tended to be greater for presidents who had enjoyed more time to progress in the coordination process of political closure. Presidents who enjoyed high levels of popularity also found it easier to coordinate elite networks around themselves since resisting there seemed especially like a losing proposition, helping explain the relatively rapid political closure experienced in Nursultan Nazarbaev's Kazakhstan and Lukashenka's Belarus.

Succession Politics and Revolution

Several factors have gone on to determine the relative degrees of openness and closure in these single-pyramid systems after the early-mid 1990s. Very importantly, the coordination process at the heart of Eurasia's single-pyramid systems can be sharply interrupted when the various agglomerated networks in the pyramid anticipate a specific moment when presidential succession is likely. This is because the smooth operation of

the political machine depends crucially on every cog (each “subpatron” and each “client” in the various networks on which the system depends) being confident that they will be rewarded for obeying the president and punished for disobeying. When the president is on his (or potentially her) way out, or at least when a large number of crucial actors (elites) believe that there is a significant chance that the president will leave office at a certain time, it suddenly becomes an open question whether the rewards or punishments promised or threatened by the president will be carried out. Plus, rival clientelistic networks within the president’s power pyramid have incentive to defeat their rivals in order to capture the presidency, and they simultaneously fear with good reason that they will be purged if these same rivals capture the presidency for themselves. Specific moments of expected succession, therefore, have a strong potential to fracture single-pyramid systems.

Succession does not always have this effect, however, since the reason for open struggle depends to a large degree on whether there is enough uncertainty for a network to justify trying to shape the outcome. The elites who lead the various networks are thus forced to try to figure out who is likely to be the new president lest they take the wrong side and get cut out of future resource flows. There is an important catch here, however: Because a major network’s decision to join one side makes that side more likely to win, widespread perceptions of who is likely to win can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus the party representing Mikheil Saakashvili’s network won only 27 percent of the vote in the 2003 parliamentary election that triggered the Rose Revolution according to an independent count, but this was greater than that received by any other opposition or pro-governmental network, setting him up to claim a stunning 96 percent of the official vote in the 2004 presidential election that followed the ouster of the old regime. Succession struggles in clientelistic presidential systems, therefore, are crucially and primarily about *shaping expectations as to who will win* rather than about forming opinions about who *should* win. Likewise, outgoing incumbents have strong incentive to minimize perceptions that they are leaving office: Heydar Aliev refused to rule out a candidacy even while dying until shortly before the election in order to avoid an elite split before his son could win the election in 2003, and Vladimir Putin balanced between two possible successors in 2008 (Dmitry Medvedev and Sergei Ivanov) and in the end refused to leave the political scene himself.

Because elections in these systems remain the formal mechanism for a transfer of power, actual popularity becomes one (though not necessarily the only) critical indicator as to who is most likely to win the succession struggle. Popularity is important not only because it can win a candidate

real votes, but also because it becomes more costly to falsify elections against a genuinely popular candidate. Thus in 2008, polls showed that voters would favor en masse whoever Putin endorsed as his successor, enabling Putin to successfully play the role of kingmaker (never allowing authority to tip to either Medvedev or Ivanov) and ultimately to reclaim the presidency in the March 2012 election. While his popular support had plummeted, he was still more popular than all other potential pretenders to the presidency. Popularity matters also because popular candidates are more likely to be able to rally large numbers of people into the street. Protests help candidates because they create the impression of popularity and because they can be costly or even dangerous to try to quash, especially when they get very large. Hence the great deal of attention paid by regime, opposition, and observers alike to the numbers of protesters generated by pro-Putin and anti-Putin rallies during the 2011-12 election season.

Moments of succession, therefore, are fraught with revolutionary potential in single-pyramid systems, and who wins political struggles in such moments is likely to have a lot to do with patterns of popular support. We thus find the following pattern: Every instance of presidential ouster in an independent non-Baltic post-Soviet state after the mid-1990s took place when both of the following two factors were present: (1) The leader was in his final constitutional term in office (as were Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Kurmanbek Bakiev in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia in 2003, and Levon Ter-Petrossian in Armenia in 1998) or had opted not to run for reelection (Kuchma in Ukraine in 2004); and (2) The leader was highly unpopular and his hand-picked successor (if there was one) was not popular enough to be a clear winner in the eyes of the country's most important networks. Where incumbent leaders or their chosen successors were more popular, as in Russia in 2000 and Azerbaijan in 2003, succession went along the lines envisioned by the reigning network.

Regime Dynamics after Presidential Ouster

Where the emergent single-pyramid systems were shattered by this kind of succession-related revolution and a new network came to power, and where a presidential system remained in place, the process of reconstructing a single-pyramid system had to start again, essentially from scratch. This is what we see in Georgia after 2003 and Kyrgyzstan after 2005, and to a lesser extent in Armenia after 1998, where the president was ousted in a more orderly way. In terms of how these countries looked relative to other countries, therefore, they registered as more politically open than "non-revolutionary" post-Soviet countries at any given point in time after their presidential ousters at least partly because they had enjoyed less time to engage in the coordination process necessary to produce strongly

closed single-pyramid systems. The overall trend as time passed, however, remained toward political closure.

After the wave of color revolutions subsided in 2005, there remained three general exceptions to the pattern of steadily tightening political machines: Ukraine, Moldova, and (after 2010) Kyrgyzstan. Interestingly, these are the only three countries to have rejected presidentialist constitutions, Moldova having done so at the start of the 2000s and Ukraine as a result of the Orange Revolution. While Moldova did develop a single-pyramid system in the 2000s not too different from presidentialist ones, its pyramid was a weaker one that required the president to make concessions to other political forces in order to obtain the supermajority in parliament necessary to elect a president, giving the opposition more room to operate and exercise influence, ultimately ousting the incumbents in 2009. In Ukraine, the constitution had a greater confounding effect on the single-pyramid coordination process because it formally stipulated *divided* executive power between a president and an autonomous prime minister responsible only to the parliament. This underpinned bitter competition between president and prime minister, which created a political opening and eliminated the correlation between time and political closure that is evident in the presidentialist countries. So open was Ukraine's system that Orange Revolution loser Viktor Yanukovich finally won the presidency in an essentially free contest, though he used this moment of victory to quickly orchestrate a change in the constitution back to a presidentialist one lest it start to hinder his pyramid-building efforts once the aura of his victory wore off. To date, without a divided-executive constitution to work against him, he has faced few obstacles to rebuilding a single power vertical. It is too early to tell if Kyrgyzstan will prove a success or a failure, but after its 2010 revolution, it too adopted a divided-executive constitution and went on to hold remarkably (in the post-Soviet context) free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections.

The known paths out of these patterns are difficult and tenuous. Few societies have managed to escape the social equilibrium of pervasive clientelism, and this took decades in the fastest transitions. While divided-executive constitutions do offer a path to political opening in the short run, such openings can be fragile and expose corrupt practices that can disillusion the public, as the case of Ukraine cautions.

