



SSEES-ing post-communist regimes

Roundtable discussion

29 November 2023

BACKGROUND

On 29 November 2023 the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL-SSEES) hosted the roundtable discussion about Rethinking post-communist regimes, as part of its [SSEES-ing NOW](#) and [Politics & Sociology](#) events series.

Dr Bálint Magyar (Central European University Democracy Institute) and Dr Bálint Madlovics (Central European University Democracy Institute) discussed the findings of their book, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes* and other works and their implications for our understanding of regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.

They were joined by discussants Prof Henry E. Hale (George Washington University) and Dr Sherrill Stroschein (UCL Political Science) with additional comments from Prof Alena Ledeneva (UCL-SSEES). The panel was chaired by Dr Seán Hanley (UCL-SSEES).

PATRONALISM IN POST-COMMUNIST REGIMES

Dr Bálint Magyar (Central European University)

KEY POINT Post-communist regimes can oscillate between autocratic mafia states and patronage-based ‘patronal democracies’, not simply between democracy and dictatorship.

1. Mainstream political science has marked limitations. It focuses on formal

institutions but overlooks the impact of behind-the-scenes informal decisions and structures in post-communist regimes. It wrongly assumes that in post-communist systems politics, the economy and society are separate spheres.

2. Hierarchical informal power structures can be termed ‘patronalism’. Both democracy and authoritarianism can have varying levels of patronalism.
3. Post-communist regimes can follow complicated trajectories, shifting both between democracy and dictatorship and between patronal and non-patronal institutions.
4. There is a complex relationship between patronalisation and populism. Populism is best seen narrowly as a challenge to the legitimacy of formal institutions. Not all parties labelled populist actually do this. Some populists, like Trump have a patronal view of power, but still lack patronal structures.
5. Complexities of corruption: The fight against corruption requires new terms that helps us clearly understand that in states like Hungary and Russia corruption becomes a centralised and monopolised state function, resulting in the emergence of a predatory criminal state.

UKRAINE’S PROSPECTS

Dr Bálint Madlovics (Central European University)

KEY POINT Ukraine has been an unstable 'patronal democracy' affected by regime cycles driven by struggles between patronal groups. Zelensky's wartime presidency may break the cycle.

1. Ukraine is a 'patronal democracy' but has seen cycles of political regimes. It changed from a communist dictatorship to a patronal democracy but there were failed attempts to make it a patronal autocracy during Kuchma's and Yanukovich's presidencies.

2. In a patronal democracy like Ukraine informal networks use parties and formal political organizations to advance their agendas of power monopolisation and wealth accumulation. The ruling informal network always seeks to dominate. This poses a continual challenge to the system and democracy is always in danger.

3. In Ukraine no single informal network ever managed to dominate. Other networks and civil society mobilisation, for example in the Orange Revolution (2004) and Revolution of Dignity (2014), always blocked attempts to do this.

3. Western optimism following the 2004 Orange Revolution saw a struggle of democracy versus dictatorship, overlooking persistent oligarchical power structures. Zelensky always had an 'anti-patronal' agenda and since the start of the war has centralised power and partly neutralised the power of oligarchs.

4. Zelensky has not created a new dominant autocratic network as Putin or Orbán did. In Ukraine decisions are taken in formal institutions. Zelensky is not building an oligarchy of his own but instead follows a broad de-oligarchisation policy.

6. The threat to Ukraine is not degeneration into Putin-style 'patronal autocracy'. It is anti-patronal transformation without democratic

transformation. This scenario occurred in Georgia after the 2003 Rose Revolution. Ukraine's key post-war challenge will be to build a non-patronal regime that is liberal-democratic, rather than bureaucratic-authoritarian.

REFORM AND PATRONAL POLITICS

Prof Henry E. Hale (George Washington University)

KEY POINT Post-communist regimes are often characterized by the influence of entrenched patronage and corruption, but some are competitive and capable of reform.

1. Power structures in post-communist regimes have often been studied in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are. It is necessary to challenge simplistic views of corruption and highlight the complexity of post-communist power dynamics.
2. Ukraine's capacities and resilience: Despite an image as corrupt state and initial expectations of vulnerability, Ukraine managed to mobilize admirably; recent work by Ukrainian scholars has succeeded in developing a new vocabulary to understand post-communist power structures, patronage politics, and how reforms can still emerge.
3. Post-communist societies like Ukraine can combine high levels of corruption and patronage with vibrant political competition. Although they may take part in corrupt informal networks, it is a mistake to think that citizens and politicians in such "patronal democracies" lack any political ideals.

PATRONAL PARTIES

Dr Sherrill Stroschein (UCL Political Science)

KEY POINT The functioning of parties in Eastern Europe diverges from their expected role as

channels for representing interests.

1. Ideas of 'patronal democracy' can help make sense of situations where party politics does not fit the textbook model. Parties in countries like Romania, Serbia and Hungary ignore ideology and fail to represent the voice of voters because they prioritise attracting loyalists and distributing patronage.
2. This phenomenon may not only be characteristic of post-communist states. There may be parallels in the West in the behaviour of politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump.
3. This perspective is valuable for comparison. It helps us understand Orbán's success in controlling Hungary, but how a country like Romania has competition based on multiple competing pyramids of power.
4. Local patronage networks and local parties based on them can be co-opted into national pyramids but may also resist their control.

A full recording of the event can be found [here](#).

Briefing notes: Maka Berulava

**FURTHER
INFORMATION**

Dr Seán Hanley | Associate Professor in Comparative and Central East European Politics | UCL
School of Slavonic & East European Studies
Email: s.hanley@ucl.ac.uk