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Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire? Post-Soviet Regime Changes in Comparative Perspective

VLADIMIR GEL'MAN

ABSTRACT. Why do some countries become democracies, while others move from one nondemocratic regime to another? Post-communist transformations in the countries of the former Soviet Union could be viewed as a “natural experiment” in regime change: the politics of post-Soviet states demonstrate a great diversity. In this article, I present a partial theory of post-Soviet regime change and attempt to explain the outcomes of elite conflicts in post-Soviet states and their consequences for regime change. The account of political transformations in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus will outline certain common features and peculiarities of regime change in each case and provide several implications for comparative studies of regime change.

Keywords: • Regime change • Post-communism • Elites
• Political conflict

Why do some countries become democracies, while others move from one non-democratic regime to another? Considerable effort has been invested in the study of democratization and its alternatives, and the proliferation of hybrid regimes has led to the rejection of the paradigm of worldwide democratization (Carothers, 2002). New frameworks for the study of hybrid regimes, such as “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way, 2002), focus on alternative paths of regime change in a theoretical and a comparative perspective. Specification within the gray zone of hybrid regimes, which focuses on the concentration of power (“dominant power politics”) and on the hyper-fragmentation of competition (“feckless pluralism”) (Carothers, 2002), and in-depth analyses of the factors influencing regime stability and trajectory of change, are very promising. But many questions about the causes and consequences of the dynamics of regime change remain both theoretically and empirically unanswered.

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In this respect, post-communist political transformations in the countries of the former Soviet Union could be viewed as a natural experiment in regime change. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, the trajectories of post-Soviet states' political development differed considerably. The Baltic countries evolved into fully-fledged democracies, while in some Central Asian states authoritarian regimes developed; these countries are unlikely to experience further regime change in the near future. Still other post-Soviet countries, most notably Russia and Ukraine, experienced pendulum-like swings between democratic and non-democratic courses of regime change (Hale, 2005; Way, 2005). But why have the politics of post-Soviet states, formerly parts of the same country, demonstrated such diversity in 15 years? Why have some of these political regimes become unstable and how can we explain the ups and downs of regime change? The study of these issues will help analyze the causes and consequences of regime change in a broader comparative perspective. However, as yet, the explanatory power of existing theories is insufficient. For example, the modernization argument has failed to explain why Moldova and Ukraine, which are much poorer in terms of GDP per capita than Belarus and Russia, have made more progress in developing democratic politics than their affluent neighbors. Culturalist arguments generally fail to explain the diversity of regime change despite the fact that various surveys demonstrate many similarities in values and attitudes among post-Soviet citizens. In addition, institutional theory, which blames the negative impact of initial institutional choices on post-communist regimes (Fish, 2005), cannot adequately explain the survival, or further evolution, of newly established institutions.

New approaches for solving this puzzle are required, and in this article I will first build a theory that can assist in analyzing post-Soviet regime change. Then, I will explain the outcomes of elite conflicts in post-Soviet states and their consequences for regime change. An account of the political transformations in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus will outline certain common features and peculiarities of regime change in each case and will provide a basis for discussing the implications for the comparative study of regime change.

Regime Change: From Legacy to Choice

First and foremost, the very terms "political regime" and "regime change" need to be defined. For the purposes of this discussion, "political regime" is understood as a particular political game, consisting of two basic elements: (1) a set of actors, or players, who possess available resources and pursue certain strategies for achieving their goals and (2) a set of institutions, or the actual "rules of the game," which impose certain constraints on or provide certain incentives for the political actors' actions. This formal definition is designed for the specific purpose of the study of regime change (Gel'man et al., 2003: 19–32). It allows us to draw a distinction between competitive and noncompetitive regimes: in noncompetitive regimes only one dominant actor matters. The definition also allows us to replace the ill-defined concept of regime consolidation with the more precise concept of equilibrium. If political regimes have reached equilibrium (whether democratic or not), actors have no incentives to change the status quo. In these terms, the process of regime change might be described as a destabilization of the equilibrium of a political regime, leading to the eventual replacement of one equilibrium by another.

Political regime actors are understood as consisting of various segments of elites or those organized groups within society who might influence politically meaningful decisions (Higley and Burton, 2006). For this discussion, it is assumed that actors in the process of regime change are driven by the goal of maximizing their control over available resources in the given polity. If actors prefer democracy, they do so not because of ideological commitments (although for some of them this might be true), but because they believe that democracy would increase their control over resources more than any other type of regime. Such a view echoes arguments that democracy emerged unintentionally, as a by-product of power struggles (Weingast, 1997).

Without going into a detailed overview of the different approaches to the study of regime change, one can simply summarize the long discussion between proponents of various theories by remarking that attempts at constructing monocausal explanations for the varied outcomes of regime change have not proved particularly fruitful. Alternatively, the puzzle of multicausality cannot be reduced to its component parts through the use of standard techniques. Statistical studies have shown firm evidence of the impact of several variables (such as economic policy or institutional design) on regime change (Fish, 2005), but the substantive link between these factors is not always clear. Therefore, despite the vast potential of such studies, the question of why post-Soviet regime changes were so diverse remains open and statistical research in this field can be complemented by small-*N* comparative research with a special emphasis on causal inference. The framing of an appropriate theoretical framework is necessary for accomplishing this research task.

The emerging gap between theoretical approaches and the deficiency of their explanatory power in analyzing regime change was a matter of concern to Kitschelt (1999), who criticized excessively deep, structure-based, and excessively shallow, agency-based, studies of the diversity of post-communist regimes. His explanation of post-communist political developments explores the role of mid-range political factors, such as the *legacy of the past*, which can have an immediate impact on post-communist change. This legacy, which defines the initial constellation of actors and the distribution of their resources at the beginning of a regime change, imposes structural constraints on the political actors' actions and provides them with a set of resources available for mobilization during the process of regime change. In other words, legacy is viewed here as a point of departure leading to diverse transformation paths. To use Kitschelt's (1986) own terms, it is a part of the initial *political opportunity structure*, or external structural constraint, which is subject to change at different stages of regime change. While some scholars have argued that "[social] movements are created when political opportunities open up for political actors who usually lack them" (Tarrow, 1994: 1), the same statement would make sense in a broader context of regime change. The focus on a constellation of "resources, arrangements and historical precedents" (Kitschelt, 1986: 58), including the international environment, economic conditions, and a nation's previous experience, is useful for understanding the diversity of regime change in post-Soviet states and beyond.

Even though the legacy of the previous regime is the major point of departure, it is not the only factor that affected post-Soviet regime change. First, the set of *exogenous factors* may change over time due to the dynamics of the environment in which political regimes function. These changes increase or decrease the relative

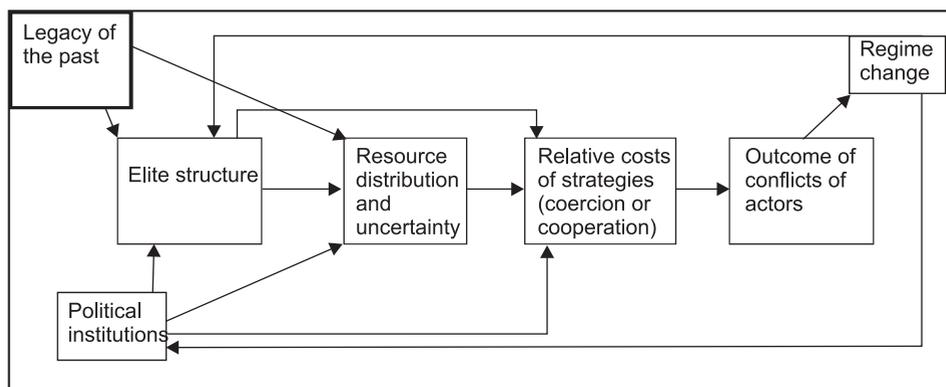
value of resources available to, and possessed by, political actors. Besides the role of the political opportunity structure, the internal dynamics of regime change depend primarily on *endogenous factors*, that is, the continuity and change of actors and institutions. This is why the *elite structure*, understood as a constellation of various elite factions and the relationships among them (Higley and Burton, 2006), forms a key element of analysis. The constellation of elites, defined by lines of elite integration (the capacity of segments of the elite to coordinate their actions) and elite differentiation (the autonomy of elite segments vis-à-vis the state and vis-à-vis each other), affects the distribution of resources possessed or mobilized by elite factors. The distribution, amount, and relative value of resources, in their turn, affect various *elite strategies*, which can be divided into *coercive* and *collaborative strategies*.

Why do elite factions behave in such different ways during the process of regime change, and why do some prefer coercion over collaboration or vice versa? First, the actors' choice of strategies is primarily based upon the relative amount and value of the resources the actors possess and their capacity to mobilize them. Second, the use of any strategy imposes certain costs on political actors, who have to pay for their choices. The actors' calculation of their strategies' relative costs is based upon the actors' *ex ante* perceptions of possible consequences. The relative cost of any strategy depends upon the distribution of resources: if the dominant actor has overwhelming control of resources, the relative cost of coercion is cheaper for him than the cost of cooperation, even though the absolute cost of coercion remains the same. This consideration of strategies' relative costs echoes in part the logic of an analysis by Dahl (1971: 15), who stated that democracy becomes possible if and when the costs of repressing the opposition becomes higher for the ruling elite than the costs of tolerating them. In fact, the rational actor will choose for or against democracy based on a cost-benefit analysis of two hierarchically structured conditions: (1) the *relative distribution of resources* possessed by himself and his opponents and (2) the *relative costs of strategies*. A choice in favor of democracy presupposes the coexistence of both these conditions: the cost of coercion must not only be higher than the cost of cooperation, but the range and amount of resources the actors possess and have available to them at the moment of political choice should be roughly even.

In addition to the distribution of resources and the costs of strategies, several other conditions influence an actor's choice. The *effects of institutions* can potentially change the relative value of resources or the relative costs of strategies, or both. For political leaders on the eve of (free and fair) elections, popular support is the most valuable resource; the absence of such elections would decrease its value. Strong formal institutions cause the costs of coercive strategies to skyrocket. But during times of regime change, institutions not only serve as constraints that produce incentives for actors, but they themselves also result from actors' political choices. As Przeworski (1991) stated, democracy is an equilibrium that produces uncertain outcomes, while its (formal) institutions are certain; non-democratic equilibriums produce certain outcomes within uncertain (and informal) institutional frameworks. The disequilibrium during the process of regime change is characterized by the *uncertainty* of both outcome and institutions, or the lack of adequate information about the possible consequences of actors' actions. Frequently, the degree of uncertainty during a regime change is so high that it influences actors' strategies and choices independently of the distribution of

resources. This factor can affect actors' preferences in terms of risk-taking or risk-aversion. The impact of uncertainty on the process of regime change is undeniable, especially in post-Soviet states (Jones Luong, 2002), where increased uncertainty over the possible outcomes of political conflicts led actors temporarily to preserve the status quo even when regimes were far from an equilibrium (McFaul, 2001). In summary, the outcome of conflicts during the process of regime change is conditioned, but not determined, by a set of interrelated exogenous factors, such as the political opportunity structure in general and the legacy of the past in particular, and endogenous factors, such as the elite structure, the distribution of resources among and between actors, the effects of institutions, and the relative costs of strategies of coercion and cooperation (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. *The Process of Regime Change*



Note: Political opportunity structure in bold.

Explaining the Diversity of Regime Change

The combination of the relative distribution of resources and relative costs of strategies can be illustrated as a two-by-two matrix of possible scenarios of conflicts among political actors during the process of regime change (see Figure 2). The term “scenarios” is used in this matrix in preference to “outcomes” because the upper-left cell of the matrix does not represent any outcome. Rather, it is a continuity of conflict in a manner similar to the Hobbesian *war of all against all*, which should be considered a deadlock or stalemate. This scenario is usually associated with civil wars or ethnic conflicts, but does not lead to a stable equilibrium. The status quo under such a scenario persists only as long as the distribution of resources remains even and the costs of coercion are cheaper than the costs of cooperation. If the balance of resources shifts to favor a particular side, the equilibrium shifts easily to the lower-left cell. At the same time, shifts in the relative costs of strategies could lead to the equilibrium in the upper-right cell.

The lower-left cell of the matrix represents a zero-sum victory by one actor, who is likely to receive all powers according to the *winner takes all* principle. In other words, such a scenario leads to the emergence of one dominant actor (a charismatic leader, dominant party, or ruling clan or clique) who can rule without significant cooperation from other actors who then become subordinated

Balance of resources/costs of strategies	Coercion cheaper than cooperation	Cooperation cheaper than coercion
Even distribution of resources	“War of all against all”	“Struggle according to the rules” (institutional compromise)
One-sided prevalence of resources	“Winner takes all”	“Cartel-like deal” (co-optation of subordinated actors by the dominant actor)

FIGURE 2. Possible Scenarios of Elite Conflict

Note: Stable outcomes are shaded.

to him. Subordinated actors cannot challenge the regime without grave risk of punishment. The dominant actor is likely to oppress real or potential opposition due to the relatively low costs of coercion. If the dominant actor is capable of ensuring his dominance through institutional guarantees of the status quo, the regime achieves a stable equilibrium due to the lack of incentives for change for all actors. This scenario would lead to an authoritarian situation (Linz, 1973) and might be described as a transition to a (new) nondemocratic regime.

If the cost of coercion is higher than that of cooperation, the dominant actor will have different preferences. He might offer the subordinated actor a tacit agreement, which can be termed a *cartel-like deal*. This means that the dominant actor would share some of his resources with the subordinated actor, while retaining control over major decisions without constraints from the subordinated actor. The subordinated actor is likely to be co-opted by the dominant actor, and given that he suffers from a deficit of resources, has no incentives to challenge the status quo. In other words, the subordinated actor follows the dominant strategy regardless of the strategy's relative cost to the dominant actor. No wonder that the outcomes of these deals do not produce competitive politics and the rule of law, but, rather, prevent them; democratic institutions serve as merely a facade for the dominant actor's power politics. Such cartel-like deals between dominant and subordinated actors are best described as “cartels of incumbents against contenders, cartels that restrict competition, bar access, and distribute the benefits of political power among the insiders” (Przeworski, 1991: 90).

The vulnerability of cartel-like deals stems from their lack of self-enforcement mechanisms. If the subordinated actors experience a relative increase in their resources, they obtain a degree of autonomy from the dominant actor and the cartel-like deal can easily be broken and turned into a new round of elite conflicts with unpredictable outcomes: “struggle according to the rules” or institutional compromise among actors (upper-right cell in Figure 2) is a possibility, but not the only scenario for such developments. If the cost of coercion becomes relatively cheaper than the cost of cooperation, the dominant actor is more likely to turn to repression of the subordinated actors than to share his powers, and the scenario effectively becomes one of “winner takes all.” In the short term, a “cartel-like deal” could produce a hybrid regime, which might be close either to dominant

power politics (if the dominant actor is much stronger than the subordinated actors) or to feckless pluralism (if subordinated actors are capable of ensuring their autonomy from the dominant actor). But in the long term, it could lead to instability and even cause the collapse of the political regime. The persistence of cartel-like deals, on the one hand, and their fragility, on the other, lies in the very nature of such tacit agreements. In particular, leadership succession became an Achilles heel of such regimes in post-Soviet states, due to the lack of institutional mechanisms for power transfer (Collins, 2004; Hale, 2005).

Finally, “*struggle according to the rules*” or *institutional compromise* becomes possible only under certain conditions: if resources are evenly balanced and if coercion is relatively costly. In these circumstances, actors are faced with the “prisoner’s dilemma,” so both sides tend to prefer mutual coercion (“winner takes all”) unless they are simultaneously willing to shift to mutual cooperation. Scholars argue that the shift to mutual cooperation is possible under certain conditions, such as repeated games or the impact of uncertainty on actors’ preferences, which may lead to strategic cooperation between both actors (Colomer, 2000; Przeworski, 1991). These mechanisms must be strengthened at the same time through the imposition of institutional guarantees for participants in the conflict: the former produce incentives for actors to cooperate and the latter prevent violations of the agreements. This outcome of conflict *ceteris paribus* could become a major step toward democratization due to the establishment of democratic rules of the game. This would prevent the use of coercion even under the unilateral predominance of any actor (which is inevitable at some point) and would tend to “freeze” the new rules through a set of collectively established and mutually accepted institutions. The sustainability of institutional compromise is conditional upon self-enforcement of the newly established equilibrium (Weingast, 1997).

The “struggle according to the rules” is similar to widely known “pacts” and “elite settlements” (Colomer, 2000; Higley and Burton, 2006; O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991). More precisely, all of these models might be designated “good pacts,” as opposed to cartel-like deals or “bad pacts,” in terms of their democratic prospects and their potential for political stability. The major distinctions between “struggle according to the rules” and “cartel-like deals” lie along two dimensions. First, while good pacts are based upon mutual acceptance of competition among elites, bad pacts are designed to avoid elite competition. Second, while good pacts provide institutional guarantees for participants that are enforced by formal institutions, bad pacts are based upon informal institutional arrangements or uncertain procedures (Przeworski, 1991). Yet, the “struggle according to the rules” in itself produces only a democratic situation (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 446) which is not a guarantee of democratic stability.

To summarize, among four possible scenarios of conflict, two (“winner takes all” and “struggle according to the rules”) may become frozen endgames, one (“cartel-like deal”) denotes a partial equilibrium which is highly dependent on the political context, and one (“war of all against all”) is not a true equilibrium at all. What leads to these diverse scenarios and outcomes of regime change?

Explaining Post-Soviet Diversity

According to the above-mentioned logic, the impact of the legacy of the past should be re-examined. The Soviet communist regime produced two distinctive

institutions which played a major role in the formation of the post-Soviet elite structure and in the distribution of resources among elites. The first was the Soviet governing structure and the second was Soviet ethno-federalism. Soviet governance combined two distinct sets of organizations: (1) nationwide extraterritorial branch ministries and agencies responsible for governing certain sectors of the economy and (2) multilayered territorial divisions of Communist Party units responsible for governance in certain areas. During the communist period the former was mainly in charge of major heavy industries, energy, transportation, and communications, while the latter was in charge of agriculture, light industries, and social and other policies. In some parts of the Soviet Union, this combination led to the prevalence of regional-based or sector-based elite networks, dubbed “localism” and “departmentalism,” respectively (Rutland, 1993). These networks survived after the collapse of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. They were often based upon local, traditional clans (Collins, 2004) or upon certain sectors of the economy or large enterprises, which metamorphosed later into several financial-industrial groups (Hoffman, 2002). The constellation of elite networks played a major role during the very first semi-competitive elections that took place as early as 1990 in the republics of the Soviet Union, and was one key reason for the diversity of political developments in Russia’s regions in the 1990s (Gel’man et al., 2003). Soviet ethno-federalism strengthened the institutional foundations of localism through the creation and maintenance of local elite power bases at various levels of the ethnic-based territorial units in the Soviet Union. Thus, the Soviet governance structure produced different constellations of post-Soviet states, depending upon their heterogeneous economic, spatial, and socio-demographic profiles. While departmentalism as a phenomenon was a feature peculiar to only one post-Soviet state, Russia (which inherited most of the nationwide governance structures of the Soviet Union), the degree of localism varied in different post-Soviet states. Some of them faced strong localism, especially in the ethnic-based autonomous republics; in some others, localism had not developed at all.

Despite localism and departmentalism, the monolithic Soviet elite structure rested on the very existence of a one-party regime. However, in post-Soviet states the way new elite structures formed upon the breakdown of the Communist Party was merely a function of elite networks formed by the legacy of the past. Localism heavily undermined elite integration in the post-Soviet states. Extreme localism has the potential to produce a divided elite, as has occurred in Tajikistan with its interclan conflict (Collins, 2004). But it can also produce a fragmented elite, if elite differentiation is high enough (see Figure 3). The lack of both localism and departmentalism produces an atomized elite (the lack of an organized elite

Elite integration/Elite differentiation	Low differentiation	High differentiation
High integration	Monolithic elite (Communist regimes)	Consensual elite (democratic regimes)
Low integration	Divided elite	Fragmented elite

FIGURE 3. *Ideal-type Elite Structures*

Note: Reconstructed from Higley and Burton (2006).

structure). Under such circumstances, the low density of regional-based and sectoral-based elite networks favored the capture of states and regimes in these countries by new dominant actors, whether insiders or outsiders. Such a capture would be rather difficult in countries with strong elite factions (see Table 1).

Although the distribution of resources among competing actors depends upon exogenous factors, the post-Soviet elite structure affected this to some extent thanks to the various degrees of elite fragmentation, as illustrated in Table 2. The existence of a monolithic elite presupposes the dominant actor's control over the majority of resources. If the elite are divided into two competing groups, the distribution of resources will either be even or lead to a one-sided dominance. If the elite are fragmented, it is highly likely that no single actor will gain a majority of resources. Finally, an atomized elite makes the very possession of resources nearly impossible (and this constitutes an additional reason for the appearance of outsiders as dominant actors).

To some extent, the relative costs of strategies also depend on elite structure. If a very cohesive ruling group faces a highly fragmented opposition, the cost of repression is likely to be low; but if the ruling clique is a loose coalition and it comes up against a highly disciplined opposition, the cost of coercion seems to be higher regardless of the balance of resources among those actors. In addition,

TABLE 1. *Elite Networks and Post-Soviet Elite Structures*

Configuration of elite networks	Country	Elite structure	Elite integration	Elite differentiation
Localism	Tajikistan	Divided	Low	Low
	Ukraine	Fragmented	Low	High
Localism and departmentalism	Russia	Divided (1991–93);	Low (1991–2000);	Low (1991–93);
		Fragmented (1993–1999/2000);	High (2000–?)	High (1993–2000);
		Trend toward a monolithic (2000–?)		Low (2000–?)
Neither localism nor departmentalism	Belarus	Atomized elites (1991–94);	Very low (1991–94);	Very high (1991–94);
		Trend toward a monolithic (1994–?)	High (1994–?)	Low (1994–?)

TABLE 2. *The Impact of Elite Structure and Uncertainty on the Strategies of Actors*

Elite structure	Degree of uncertainty	Likelihood of strategies
Monolithic elite	Low	Coercion
Divided elite	Mid-range	Coercion or cooperation depends mostly upon resource distribution and relative costs of strategies
Fragmented elite	High	Cooperation is more likely because of risk aversion
Atomized elite (no organized elite)	Very high	Cooperation is unlikely because of collective action problem

elite structure, along with institutions, affects uncertainty during the process of regime change. Uncertainty is least likely under a monolithic elite, which will almost always use coercive strategies; a divided elite faces mid-range uncertainty; for a fragmented and atomized elite, the degree of uncertainty is high. Stable and efficient institutions tend to reduce uncertainty, but the process of regime change is often accompanied by institutional decay or institutional change (or both), leading to an increase in uncertainty. In addition, exogenous factors (such as leadership succession, international influence, and poor regime performance) tend to increase the degree of uncertainty. If uncertainty is low or mid-range, then the probability of the use of coercion or cooperation would depend mostly upon the distribution of resources and the relative costs of strategies. However, if uncertainty is high, if actors overestimate the relative strength of their rival, or if they overstate the relative costs of coercion, then *ceteris paribus* actors are more likely to prefer cooperation over coercion (Tversky and Kahnemann, 1986).

Whatever the scenario of elite conflict and subsequent regime change, it is likely to affect both institutions and elite structure. The impact of regime change on political institutions is straightforward (see Table 3). The “winner takes all” scenario has tended to result in an all-powerful presidency; this was true of many post-Soviet states (Fish, 2005; Frye, 1997). Conversely, a “struggle according to the rules” scenario of conflict is more likely to facilitate an equal distribution of power through empowering legislatures. As for “cartel-like deals,” these scenarios lead to mixed incentives for institution-building, which tend to eclipse informal institutions and serve merely as a facade for the dominance of informal institutions. The impact of regime change on elite structure is more complicated. A “winner takes all” scenario could produce a drift toward a monolithic elite, if the dominant actor manages to overcome elite cleavages and maintain or re-establish organizational unity of the elite either through the use of elite organizations (party, military, or clans) or through repression. “Cartel-like deals” tend to preserve a fragmented elite structure in a scenario of feckless pluralism, but in the case of dominant power politics, the dominant actor might try to maintain or re-establish elite organizational unity through the use of elite organizations or through repression. Finally, a “struggle according to the rules”

TABLE 3. *Scenarios of Elite Conflicts, Regime Changes, Institution-Building, and Elite Structure*

Scenario	Regime changes	Subsequent institutional changes	Changes of elite structure
“Winner takes all”	“Authoritarian situation”	Overwhelming presidential powers	Shift toward a monolith elite
“Cartel-like deal”	Hybrid regime (“dominant power politics” or “feckless pluralism”)	Mixed incentives; formal institutions serve as a facade of informal “rules of the game”	Shift toward a monolithic elite (“dominant power politics”) or fragmented elite (“feckless pluralism”)
“Struggle according to the rules”	“Democratic situation”	Shift toward parliamentarianism	Shift toward a consensual elite or fragmented elite

scenario could produce an elite consensus or retain elite fragmentation (Higley and Burton, 2006).

These considerations lead us to several theses. First, different variants of regime change are by-products of various scenarios of elite conflict, which depend upon both structure (the legacy of the past and resource distribution) and agency (elites and their perceptions and strategies). Second, scenarios of elite conflict do not always lead to certain endpoints during regime change: one scenario could still transform into another due to exogenous factors and the changing political opportunity structure. Third, the variety of regime changes in the post-Soviet states (and, presumably, elsewhere) can be analyzed through a systematic comparison of interrelated factors, developments, and outcomes according to the logic outlined above. Approaching the latter task is a challenge. A first step toward an analysis will focus on three of the 12 post-Soviet cases: Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. After a brief description of these cases, they will be compared within this theoretical framework.

Belarus: Winner Takes All

Belarus, with a reputation as the last dictatorship in Europe, is a remarkable example of the “winner takes all” outcome of elite conflict. The outsider populist, Alexander Lukashenka, a former state-farm director and a deputy of the national legislature, in 1994 won the first (and, to date, the last) competitive presidential elections. In 1996, he imposed a new constitution through a national referendum, and later turned the parliament into a rubber-stamp legislature, engaged in extensive repression of opposition politicians, independent parties, the media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and also abolished term limits on his presidency, resulting in his triumphal re-election in March 2006. Scholars have designated the Belarusian regime one of “authoritarian populism” and “sultanism” (Eke and Kuzio, 2000), and as a “hard-line authoritarian regime” (Silitski, 2005).

The legacy of the past deeply affects post-Soviet politics in Belarus at the level of elite structure and institutions. During the Soviet period, Belarus experienced a highly centralized system of government that lacked both localism and departmentalism: neither autonomous economic actors nor powerful, local-based elite networks emerged there before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The lack of ethno-federal divisions within Belarus also undermined any potential institutional basis for localism. Michael Urban's (1989) study of late-Soviet Belarusian elite mobility exposes a strong tendency toward centralization and the lack of any local-based elite networks. Unlike their counterparts in Central Asia, who consolidated and strengthened their local power bases (Jones Luong, 2002), communist leaders ran Belarus by virtue of their high personal authority and relatively successful performance (Marples, 1999). No wonder that the Belarusian elite did not pursue any independent policy line directed at achieving independence from Moscow. The defeat of the coup d'état and collapse of the Communist Party in August 1991 were ultimate defeats for the leaders of Belarus: they lost the most valuable assets of the Soviet system, while controlling any other resources proved to be difficult. The opposition in Belarus, in turn, was also very weak: its mobilization capacity was limited by a lack of popular and widely known leaders, the low profile of organizations, and by misguided attempts to exploit

the ideology of nationalism, which was not attractive to many Belarusians. After 1991, the formerly monolithic elite disintegrated into an atomized one with weak and disorganized factions. Given these conditions, “pluralism by default” (Way, 2005) was vulnerable to disequilibrium.

Institutional decay was another important issue. Belarus preserved the Soviet model of government, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this model became defunct: against a background of high inflation and deep economic recession, elites found the establishment of a presidency to be a plausible solution for improving government performance. The representative of the former elite, Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, widely considered to be the presidential front-runner, faced numerous alternative candidates, however the challenge came not from within the elite, but from outside it. Lukashenka, who gained fame as an activist on the parliamentary commission for combating corruption, possessed few administrative, economic, organizational, or ideological resources. But given the incredibly low entry barriers to the Belarusian political market, outrageous allegations of corruption sufficed to gain support among angry voters. Lukashenka won with a landslide victory in the runoff against Kebich (Marples, 1999). The weakness of all segments of the elite and institutional decay led to very high uncertainty and unintended consequences regarding institutional changes. Paradoxically, the 1994 presidential elections, by and large considered to be free and fair, became the first step toward a dictatorship.

Over the first two years of his presidency, Lukashenka increased his power by attempting to appoint regional chief executives, imposing censorship of the media, and targeting noisy opposition. The threat of a presidential power grab became dangerous for all actors, and the new legislature (elected in 1995), along with the Constitutional Court, turned down many presidential initiatives (Marples, 1999: 80; Silitski, 2005: 87). Lukashenka, in his turn, employed plebiscitary rule as the basic instrument of power. In 1996, he proposed putting the question of a new constitution to popular referendum. The proposed constitution would dramatically increase presidential power, extend his term in office, invest him with a unilateral power of appointment to all posts in central and regional government, and give his decrees the status of laws superior to legislative acts. The power of the new bicameral legislature was greatly weakened and it could be dissolved by the president at any time (Marples, 1999: 89). Unsurprisingly, most of the elite ultimately objected to this proposal, but its range of reaction was limited. The possibility of the “voice” option (Hirschman, 1970) was severely limited for Lukashenka’s opponents, as they had little public support, lacked access to the media, and were intimidated by police and security forces. The chair of the legislature attempted to bargain with Lukashenka on the basis of loyalty, requesting some concessions of secondary importance. Without challenging the referendum proposal as such, he suggested that the new constitution should be adopted, based on the referendum results, by a special assembly appointed jointly by the legislature and Lukashenka, who was to chair this body (Marples, 1999: 95–6). But even this compromise could not be reached: the legislature considered it unconstitutional and the president felt strong enough to ignore the lawmakers and act unilaterally. Finally, the legislature opted for the “neglect” choice (that is, to do nothing) (Dowding et al., 2000), and without serious resistance gave Lukashenka a free hand, whereupon he decisively won the referendum with 70.5 percent support for the constitutional

proposal. Soon after the referendum, Lukashenka appointed the members of the new parliament's lower chamber from the pool of loyal members of the previous legislature, which was bloodlessly dissolved.

The outcome of the 1996 conflict fits into the framework of "winner takes all." Lukashenka had overwhelming control over available resources, and the costs of repression were low for him, especially given the fact that the opposition was organizationally weak, unpopular, and not cohesive. In cooperating with the opposition, he might have lost at least some of his proposed new powers; the costs of compromise seemed to be higher than the costs of repression. Coercion was Lukashenka's dominant strategy, while the lawmakers were doomed to be subordinated due to the deficit of their resources and the very high cost of disobedience. Simply not resisting was less costly; also, some lawmakers did nothing to oppose Lukashenka because they expected a reward in the form of an appointment to the new legislature. As one local observer noted: "with the 1996 referendum the institutionalization of personalist authoritarian rule in Belarus was completed" (Silitski, 2005: 88).

During the subsequent decade, the equilibrium froze. The regime's self-maintenance was based on Lukashenka's overwhelming domination of resources and the low cost of coercion. Lukashenka effectively combined selective, but thorough, repression of various segments of the elite with pre-emption of any organizational activities that lay beyond his personal control, whether on an economic, societal, or cultural level (Silitski, 2005). The combination of coercion, populism, and a relatively successful economic performance helped Lukashenka to postpone major dissatisfaction over his policy and eliminate any possible alternatives. Having no incentives to do so, Lukashenka also refused to establish a party of power for his supporters and built the entire state apparatus upon personal loyalty. The political regime in Belarus was merely a replica of Soviet-style government without the dominant party. The subordinated actors (that is, all but Lukashenka) had a limited choice of strategies – between neglect, loyalty, and exit. None of these choices challenged the regime, and the choice of "voice" remains costly. In such difficult conditions, the opposition's strategy became self-defeating (Silitski, 2005: 88). Even though its various segments had united against the common enemy, nominated their candidate for the 2006 presidential elections, and gained significant Western support, they were noisy opponents who lacked domestic resources, and were easily suppressed by Lukashenka.

As one can see, the following factors affected regime change in Belarus: (1) the legacy of the past, that is, the lack of an organized elite; (2) institutional decay and a high level of uncertainty in 1991–94, which enabled a political outsider to make a breakthrough to a dominant position; (3) Lukashenka's overwhelming dominance of resources; and (4) the cheap cost of coercion for the dominant actor, which made the "winner takes all" scenario of elite conflict in 1996 possible. Although the personalist nature of the political regime in Belarus made it very vulnerable and poorly institutionalized, from the perspective of domestic politics, disequilibrium of the status quo is unlikely if the political opportunity structure remains stable. Since Lukashenka is young and healthy enough not to be concerned about leadership succession, it is difficult to foresee any changes in the Belarusian political regime. Once the "winner takes all," he is likely to hold on to this "all" for as long as possible.

Ukraine: From “Cartel-Like Deals” to “Struggle According to the Rules”?

Political developments in post-Soviet Ukraine are best described as feckless pluralism (Carothers, 2002) or pluralism by default (Way, 2005). During the entire period, Ukraine has faced multiple inter-elite conflicts, large-scale political fragmentation, and the permanent instability of its cabinets of ministers. Although Presidents Kravchuk (1991–94) and Kuchma (1994–2004) experienced major conflicts with the opposition, they resolved them with several “cartel-like deals.” The conclusion of Kuchma’s term led to an open electoral contest for the presidency between the incumbent’s handpicked successor, Viktor Yanukovich, and the opposition-backed challenger, Viktor Yushchenko. The alleged electoral fraud and official announcement of Yanukovich’s victory led the opposition to mobilize and organize a mass civil-disobedience campaign. The outgoing president had to negotiate with the opposition, which led to a major institutional compromise: the result of the fraudulent election was nullified (Yushchenko won in the new round of elections) and the Ukrainian constitution was simultaneously revised to make it a premier–presidential system of government rather than a presidential–parliamentary one (Shugart and Carey, 1992). Since then, Ukrainian politics have developed within the framework of a “democratic situation” and became a “struggle according to the rules.”

Ukrainian pluralism emerged not only from historical East–West divisions, but also from the Soviet legacy. While regional authorities were primarily responsible for governing Ukrainian agriculture during the Soviet period, heavy industry belonged to vertically integrated, nationwide branch ministries. This provided the bases for both localism and departmentalism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former industrial branch ministries ceased to exist, and the governance of major industrial assets passed into the hands of locally based elite networks. This reinforced localism through the formation of regional financial-industrial groups (“clans”),¹ particularly in the most economically developed areas, such as Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk (Zimmer, 2004). Given that the number of regions in Ukraine was relatively small and the relative influence of the clans was large, regional oligarchs were able to act as veto players in the decision-making process at national level. Such a constellation of elites affected the basic parameters of conflicts: resources were distributed fairly evenly among the political actors and nobody claimed unilaterally to be the dominant actor, meaning that the relative costs of coercion were high. Thus, a “winner takes all” scenario was unlikely in Ukrainian politics, which turned into cycles of “cartel-like deals.”

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the chair of the Ukrainian parliament (Rada), Leonid Kravchuk, soon realized that advocating Ukrainian independence might increase his own power (Wilson, 1997). His political maneuverings ended in success: in December 1991, 91 percent of voters endorsed Ukrainian independence by referendum, and Kravchuk was simultaneously elected as president of Ukraine. Unlike in Belarus, where the entire elite structure broke down after 1991, the Ukrainian elite secured its structure and most of its resources after the Soviet collapse, thus making it impossible for outsiders to encroach upon high politics without major support from influential actors. However, economic performance during Kravchuk’s presidency was gloomy. In 1992, a native of Dnepropetrovsk, Leonid Kuchma, became the new prime minister. At the expense of both the president and the legislature he was granted emergency powers in

order to stimulate economic recovery, but the situation did not improve and by mid-1993 this led to a conflict. It culminated in a bitter struggle which played out against the background of miners' strikes in the Donetsk region backed by powerful regional authorities. A compromise was reached at the expense of the cabinet: Kuchma "voluntarily" resigned and the Donetsk clan nominated the new prime minister (Wilson, 1997). The outcome became a typical "cartel-like deal": Kravchuk possessed more resources than the lawmakers, but coercing the deputies would have been costly due to his own poor performance and the fact that influential regional clans did not endorse this strategy. Also, the Donetsk clan received additional payoffs, while Kuchma was excluded from the deal.

The solution to the 1993 conflict was fragile. In 1994, the economic situation worsened, Kuchma won the presidential runoff, and struggles for power flared up again. The bargaining over the new constitution lasted almost two years; finally, in June 1996, the Rada adopted a compromise constitution. Just before the adoption of the constitution the representative of the Dnepropetrovsk clan was appointed as the new prime minister. In terms of scenarios of conflict, the 1996 deal was a replica of 1993: the president opted for less costly preservation of the status quo and rewarded an influential (though different) regional clan. Lawmakers pursued the dominant strategy of compromise (Wilson, 1997), and the Donetsk clan became a loser, being barred from the spoils by the Dnepropetrovsk clan.

Thanks to successful maneuvering (Wilson, 2005b), Kuchma effectively implemented divide-and-rule tactics and in 1999 was re-elected for his second term in office. The electoral victory bestowed still more resources on Kuchma, permitting him to appoint a new cabinet, led by the former chair of the national bank, Viktor Yushchenko. But these successes did not allow Kuchma to govern unilaterally. In early 2000, he proposed adopting the new constitution by popular referendum, which also included a no-confidence vote against the Rada (presumably, with its dismissal à la Belarus to follow). Such a major breach of the 1996 deal's conditions would have seriously undermined the status quo, and the entire Ukrainian elite strongly opposed this plan. Kuchma realized that coercion would be too costly, and turned away from his earlier proposals on the no-confidence vote against the Rada. Soon, Kuchma was accused of organizing the contract murder of an investigative journalist and opposition parties requested the president's resignation, but after a series of bargains they were appeased in favor of the status quo. The cabinet became the victim of the deal: the Rada dismissed Yushchenko in 2001. Again, the actors agreed to preserve the status quo without major self-enforcement of the "rules of the game." Once the actors felt that their resources had increased (as in the case of the 2000 constitutional referendum), they tried to defect from the "cartel-like deal." When they realized that coercion was costly regardless of the balance of resources, they went back to the bargaining table, and the cycle repeated itself.

Although successful manipulation enabled Kuchma to win the 2002 Rada elections and form a pro-presidential majority in the Rada (Wilson, 2005b), constitutional term limits prohibited him from being re-elected for a third term of office. Since coercion appeared too expensive, Kuchma's choices were limited. He tried to introduce constitutional changes replacing Ukraine's presidential-parliamentary government with a premier-presidential system, attempting to reserve the post of prime minister for himself. But most factions in the Rada opposed this proposal, each keeping in mind possible victory during the 2004

presidential elections. Kuchma was forced to pick a successor. The powerful Donetsk clan found Yushchenko unattractive as a successor, and insisted on its nominee, Viktor Yanukovich, governor of the Donetsk region, who was appointed as prime minister in November 2002 (Wilson, 2005a).

The first round of the 2004 presidential elections demonstrated the roughly equal balance of the electoral resources of Yushchenko and Yanukovich. Yushchenko's team, which included various segments of elites, had been endorsed by most of the first round's losers, including left-wing politicians. This is why Ukraine's rulers turned from the soft strategy of limiting electoral competition to hard methods of coercion (Fish, 2005: 54–61). Besides an outrageous attempt to poison Yushchenko (allegedly linked to the presidential security services), the stuffing of ballot boxes, mainly in Eastern Ukraine, was widespread and noted by observers (Wilson, 2005a). Despite complaints, the Central Electoral Commission announced that Yanukovich had won the runoff. This obviously unfair move provoked mass mobilization by the opposition. Yushchenko's team initiated mass protests, particularly in Kiev, where the scale of protest exceeded the technical boundaries of one-shot coercion. The Donetsk clan initiated some efforts to declare autonomy for pro-Yanukovich regions: this was blackmail directed toward Yushchenko's camp in order to prevent its one-sided victory. The balance of resources was roughly equal and the cost of coercion was incredibly high for both sides. If Yushchenko had taken power in Kiev unilaterally, he would have faced threats of separatism in Eastern Ukraine. If Kuchma had taken the path of coercion against mass protest, his losses in terms of bloodshed would have been very high. This was a classical "prisoner's dilemma," which has been resolved on the way to peaceful democratization in a variety of cases, ranging from Spain to Poland (Colomer, 2000; Przeworski, 1991). In the Ukrainian case, third-party enforcement assured both sides that they could simultaneously move from mutual coercion to mutual cooperation. Kuchma, who had to quit Ukrainian politics anyway, initiated talks with Yushchenko through international intermediaries: Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski, alongside other European politicians, and the chair of the Rada played major roles in this process (Wilson, 2005a).

The enforcement of cooperation by a third party was necessary to launch the bargaining process, but insufficient to reach a working compromise. Initially, the incumbent's proposals were oriented toward "cartel-like deals" (Kwasniewski, 2004). The equality of resources allowed the opposition to reject these and other "cartel-like deals," but the lack of trust between actors brought fears of defection after the European mediators' departure. Also, the compromise required not only one-time, third-party enforcement, but also long-term, self-enforcement mechanisms. This is why the idea of institutional changes, initially rejected by both competitors, arose again. Such change would not only prevent a new president's unilateral dominance in the manner of "winner takes all" (Linz, 1990) in the short run, but would also guarantee more equal distribution of resources and an increase in the cost of coercion in the long run (Weingast, 1997). The elimination of the very position of dominant actor (that is, an overwhelming president), thereby breaking the vicious circle of "cartel-like deals," became the major result of the Ukrainian orange revolution (Christensen et al., 2005). Henceforth, institutions could freeze the "struggle according to the rules" and turn it into a structure-induced equilibrium based on institutional constraints. Actors agreed to denounce the fraudulent runoff results as well as adopt a series of constitutional amendments

which transformed Ukraine into a premier–presidential system. Unsurprisingly, in the new round of elections, Yushchenko won.

If “democracy is a system in which parties lose elections” (Przeworski, 1991: 10), this institutional compromise became Ukraine’s fundamental democratic moment. Although in the course of the conflict between Yushchenko and the oppositional Rada in 2006–07 several attempts to revise the institutional compromise had been made, the fragmentation of Ukrainian politics prevented these developments, so finally all sides agreed on a preservation of the democratic rules of the game through early parliamentary elections in September 2007. The “struggle according to the rules” in Ukraine resulted from the following conditions: (1) the legacy of the past, which produced several strong regionally based actors and a fragmented elite; (2) the lack of overwhelming control of resources by a dominant actor; and (3) the relatively high cost of coercion, leading to multiple “cartel-like deals” which were then exhausted by (4) constraints set up by political institutions (term limits and competitive elections), such that elite conflict turned into (5) institutional compromise. As one can see, the conditions of democratic equilibrium, namely a simultaneously even distribution of resources and relatively high cost of coercion, are rare, especially in the post-Soviet area.

Russia: Breakdown and Re-emergence of the Monolith?

The previous analysis is also useful for understanding the logic of post-Soviet regime change in Russia (Baker and Glasser, 2005; McFaul, 2001; Shevtsova, 1999). To some extent, it combines features of the two previous cases. Like pre-2004 Ukraine, Russia experienced a series of temporary and fragile “cartel-like deals,” and like Belarus, major intra-elite conflicts twice resulted in the “winner takes all” scenario (under both Boris Yeltsin in 1993 and Vladimir Putin after 2000). The shifts between these two scenarios of elite conflict in Russian politics resembled pendulum-like swings from feckless pluralism in the 1990s to dominant power politics in the 2000s. In fact, the country moved from one type of nondemocratic equilibrium to another.

The Soviet legacy affects the constellation of Russia’s elites in two ways. First, Russia represents an example of extreme localism, with a huge number of relatively strong regional elites, none of whom was able to exert decisive influence on the national decision-making process: collective action problems rendered interregional coalition-building inefficient (Hale, 2006). Second, the presence of a limited number of powerful nationwide economic actors provided grounds for the emergence of departmentalism. The intense conflicts among Russia’s elites emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union and against the background of dramatic economic hardship. The elite divided into two rival camps: one centered on Boris Yeltsin, elected president in 1991, and another grouped around the Supreme Soviet, the Russian legislature (McFaul, 2001: 121–204). Despite disagreements over economic policy, the major issue was a struggle for the position of dominant actor. The distribution of resources was very uneven: Yeltsin was overwhelmingly stronger and more popular than his rivals, and the costs of coercion seemed to be low. In September 1993, Yeltsin declared the dissolution of the legislature, but it refused to accept his decree and declared in its turn the president’s impeachment. However, the cost to Yeltsin of returning to cooperation was certainly higher than the cost of coercion: the legislature’s building was

brought under fire by tanks, and the parliament, having no choice, gave up. In December 1993, Yeltsin imposed his draft of the constitution through a popular referendum and without major resistance (Frye, 1997; Shevtsova, 1999).

Unlike post-1996 Belarus, where the “winner takes all” scenario of conflict permitted Lukashenka to employ coercion as his dominant strategy in the absence of institutional constraints and organized elites, Yeltsin post-1993 rejected this path due to an increase in elite fragmentation and the impact of institutions. The loose coalition of Yeltsin’s supporters disintegrated into several competing cliques, and Russia’s formerly divided elite became a fragmented one; this led to an increase in the relative costs of coercion and prevented any challenges to the status quo. Moreover, in the December 1993 parliamentary elections opposition members of different colors won nearly half the seats in the State Duma. Yeltsin, who had established himself as the dominant actor in Russian politics, turned toward relatively cheap cooperation with subordinated actors, including former rivals. After 1994 Yeltsin’s camp initiated a series of implicit “cartel-like deals.” Almost all regional leaders who demonstrated their loyalty to Yeltsin and signed generous bilateral treaties with Moscow were in return accorded a number of privileges regarding taxation and property rights (Solnick, 2000). Several business tycoons received control over highly profitable entities within major state enterprises for practically nothing (Hoffman, 2002). The opposition parties and politicians were included in the new political system without challenging its status quo. The president’s implicit deals with major actors demonstrated a fundamental turn from strategies of coercion to those of cooperation in Russia’s political development. The 1996 presidential elections played a crucial role in this respect: a defeat seemed likely, so the dilemma of whether to cancel the elections was a critical choice in the Yeltsin electoral campaign (McFaul, 2001: 300–4). Yeltsin’s team even moved to dissolve the Duma, but surviving by the use of coercion and refusal to hold presidential elections would have been very expensive for the ruling group: it could have entrenched intra-elite conflict even deeper than it had been in 1993. Thus, the presidential team was forced to opt for less costly cooperation with subordinated actors as the lesser evil. Yeltsin won the 1996 elections, widely regarded as unfair (Shevtsova, 1999).

Soon after the election the cartel-like deals were broken: subordinated actors, who acquired additional resources, entered into a new round of conflicts between elite factions with the aim of succeeding Yeltsin. On the eve of the next election cycle of 1999–2000, a loose coalition of regional leaders and oligarchs prepared to seize control over the position of dominant actor through elections. But Yeltsin still had administrative resources under his control, and appointed as prime minister the former head of the security service, Vladimir Putin. Soon after that bomb explosions in Moscow and other Russian cities killed several hundred people. These explosions were widely blamed on Chechen terrorists, and Putin successfully mobilized popular outrage against this threat. This proved helpful for Putin and his allies in Unity, the newly emerged electoral coalition (Hale, 2006). Most regional and business leaders switched their allegiance to Unity during the State Duma elections, so results were highly favorable for Putin: Unity and its allies won about one-third of the seats, and the presidential administration controlled the parliamentary agenda. Yeltsin soon resigned from his presidential post and passed his powers to Putin as acting president. During the early elections, Putin won in the first ballot.

"Cartel-like deals" in Russia under Yeltsin were unsuccessful because of the regime's poor performance; subordinated actors sought autonomy from the dominant actor, who was incapable of securely defending his position. But under Putin the situation has changed and become more favorable for the dominant actor. Thanks to the military operation in Chechnya, Putin was able to reinstate state capacity; thanks to high oil prices, Russia soon achieved 6–8 percent annual economic growth; and thanks to his electoral legitimacy, Putin's mandate was unquestionable. Since the beginning of Putin's presidency the autonomy of subordinated actors has gradually become more and more limited. The State Duma supported virtually all bills initiated by the president, regardless of their content (Remington, 2006), while the pro-presidential party, reorganized as United Russia, occupied a majority of seats in the house (Hale, 2006). The resources of regional leaders, who had previously had almost unlimited power in their fiefdoms, were severely restricted. Simultaneously, Putin launched attacks on the independent media, forcing them to resort to self-censorship. Putin made the oligarchs an "offer one can't refuse," proposing a subordinated role for them and declaring an equidistant state approach toward business actors in exchange for the oligarchs' noninterference in political decision-making (Baker and Glasser, 2005). In short, Putin increased his powers by restoring the monolithic elite and making institutional changes, which weakened everyone but the dominant actor.

The subordinated actors' choice of loyalty was apparently driven by the deficiency of their resources for resistance. By contrast, Putin's initial preference for collaboration over coercion mostly resulted from his rise as a dominant actor; at the beginning of his presidency, the resources he controlled were relatively modest, and the use of coercion toward opponents would have been very costly given the previous record of a decade of intra-elite conflicts and the poor performance of the regime (Baker and Glasser, 2005). Collaboration with subordinated actors worked to Putin's advantage, as he successfully increased his own possession of resources and balanced various subordinated actors with the help of divide-and-rule techniques (Wilson, 2005b). This constellation of elites took shape as the result of informal bargaining between the subordinated actors themselves within the frame of a "cartel-like deal," rather than through meaningful electoral competition (McFaul and Petrov, 2004).

The conditions of this fragile deal soon faded away. In 2003, Putin launched several attacks on the elite. Mikhail Khodorkovskii, the owner and chief executive officer of the large private oil company Yukos, was accused of tax evasion and other violations of the law, arrested, and later imprisoned, and the state-owned company Rosneft took over his business (Tompson, 2005). The dramatic revision of property rights in the aftermath of the Yukos affair (Volkov, 2005) was a major blow for the oligarchs and marked a principal turn toward state control over major economic assets under the supervision of Putin's cronies. Soon after that United Russia received more than two-thirds of seats in the Duma, thus making all other parties meaningless (Gel'man, 2006; Hale, 2006). Its domination came as the result not just of Putin's high level of popularity, but also of the unfair conduct of the elections (McFaul and Petrov, 2004; Wilson, 2005a). In 2004, Putin abolished elections for regional chief executives, who from then on became his appointees. The parliamentary electoral system was changed, thus shrinking the political opportunity structure for the weakening opposition in Russia and

preventing the legislature from being disloyal to Putin (Remington, 2006). Finally, Putin initiated a new law on NGOs which increased state control over civil society, making it more dependent upon state officials. In all these instances any voices of protest were very minor and did not affect the decisions made by the dominant actor. In sum, after 2003–04 Putin's dominance turned former "cartel-like deals" into a "winner takes all" scenario of conflict.

The reasons for this turn are related to the major changes which occurred in comparison with the initial conditions of Putin's presidency. His control over resources became overwhelming, not only because of oil and gas revenues, which guaranteed the regime's successful performance and its high level of popular support, but also because of changes in the elite structure and institutional changes. Also, the degree of uncertainty had greatly diminished by 2003–04. When the relative costs of coercion significantly decreased vis-à-vis the relative costs of cooperation, Putin no longer needed to make further concessions to subordinate actors. The lack of organized resistance among the elites made using coercion cheaper still. Putin's administration, for its part, used the creation of a dominant party as a tool to establish a unified elite (Gel'man, 2006). United Russia included within its ranks almost all regional governors and many top industrial and business managers, and its membership exceeded 1 million people; a key Putin aide stated that the party of power should rule Russia for the next 10–15 years (Surkov, 2006). In the long run, these investments in the institutionalization of a party-based, noncompetitive political regime might bring some benefits to the dominant actor; as a rule, one-party-based regimes are longer lived in comparison with personalist regimes (Geddes, 2003: 47–88).

To summarize, regime change in Russia can be divided into two stages. In the first stage (1991–1999/2000), the legacy of the past encouraged (1) the proliferation of actors and (2) fragmentation of the elite structure, which, along with (3) political institutions (federalism and competitive elections), after the 1993 elite conflict increased (4) the relative costs of coercion and forced the dominant actor to turn from "winner takes all" to "cartel-like deals." In the second stage (after 1999/2000), the dominant actor was able (1) to increase his possession of resources and make his dominance overwhelming, (2) to reshape the elite structure from fragmented to monolithic, and (3) to change political institutions and their performance, decreasing (4) the relative costs of coercion and turning from "cartel-like deals" back to "winner takes all." If the institutionalization of Russia's regime by means of the dominant party-driven integration of elites is successful, the regime's status quo might be frozen due to Russia's resource-based economic growth and the permanent inflow of export revenues. This scenario might stabilize Russia and preclude its democratization by preserving the equilibrium of dominant power politics.

Concluding Remarks: Comparative Implications

The comparison of three post-Soviet cases has shed some light on the causes and consequences of the diversity of regime change within the framework of the analysis outlined above. Varieties of regime change reflect different combinations of key elements, namely, (1) the legacy of the past, (2) elite structure, (3) the distribution of resources among actors, (4) the impact of institutions, (5) the relative costs of strategies, and (6) scenarios of conflicts; thus, either

locking regime change at an endpoint or turning it into a cyclical process (Hale, 2005). Several lessons can be learned from comparing these developments.

The Soviet legacy strongly affected elite structure in all cases by defining an initial constellation of actors and their distribution of resources. A homogeneous elite structure with an absence of strong regional-based or sectoral-based actors seems favorable to the “winner takes all” scenario (Belarus), but an extreme diversity of weak actors (Russia) is also not conducive to “struggle according to the rules,” which might be feasible *ceteris paribus* due to the presence of a limited number of strong actors with autonomous resource bases (Ukraine). In sum, the legacy of the past places limits on the scenarios of regime change, although it does not always predict their consequences.

Political institutions (both inherited from the previous regime and newly established) can play a dual role in the process of regime change. First, they can push the distribution of resources among actors either toward a more equal balance or toward unilateral dominance. Second, they can cause an increase or decrease in the level of uncertainty (depending upon their performance), thereby affecting actors' perceptions of the distribution of resources or relative costs of strategies, or both. In Belarus, institutional decay and high levels of uncertainty led to the emergence of Lukashenka's regime, but his successful performance and elimination of uncertainty locked this outcome. In Ukraine, the high level of uncertainty, especially in the wake of a leadership succession, led to a breakdown of “cartel-like deals” and caused open competition among the actors. The subsequent institutional changes marking the end of regime change froze the authoritarian situation in Belarus and the democratic situation in Ukraine, preventing a new cycle of regime change.

The distribution of resources among actors changes over time not only due to the effects of institutions, but also due to shifts in the political opportunity structure, the regime's performance, and changes in elite structure. One might assume that if the dominant actor becomes overwhelmingly strong and successful, he would be more likely to opt for a “winner takes all” scenario, while his not-so-strong counterpart would be doomed to muddling through “cartel-like deals” until their breakdown and a move toward a new scenario. Failure on the part of the dominant actor could trigger democratization, while his success would become a major roadblock to this process, conditional upon the regime's political opportunity structure.

The relative costs of strategies are, in fact, by-products of changes in the constellations of actors and their resources, but they are subject to change. One might compare the behavior of three presidents during their conflicts with their respective legislatures. Both Yeltsin in 1993 and Lukashenka in 1996 preferred coercion because it was cheap, given their approval ratings vis-à-vis the lawmakers and the lack of cohesion among the opposition against a background of low uncertainty. In contrast, for Kuchma in 2000, the use of coercion was too costly because of elite pluralism and his dependence upon regional clans; he preferred to avoid risk and engage in bargaining, given great uncertainty about the outcome. If the “struggle according to the rules” had led to a major increase in the cost of coercion due to institutional compromise, the likelihood of “winner takes all” would have been low.

The comparative analysis of regime change is useful for understanding the cyclical nature of regime change in the post-Soviet world, which resulted from

permanent changes of various “cartel-like deals” (Ukraine before 2004) or even “winner takes all” scenarios of elite conflicts (Russia under Yeltsin). In this sense, the crucial difference between the two types of hybrid regime is important. Feckless pluralism might be viewed as the protracted growing pains of nascent regimes infected by “cartel-like deals” (Ukraine), while the emergence of dominant power politics due to a “winner takes all” scenario is a basic symptom of a dangerous, chronic, nondemocratic disease (Belarus and Russia). Feckless pluralism opens the possibility of a cycle of regime change, and dominant power politics is favorable to its conclusion.

To what extent can the above framework of analysis be extended beyond post-Soviet cases, where the political opportunity structure and the legacy of the past are certainly different? Some generalizations suggest themselves. Democracy is not born by default, as a result of the rise to power of politicians who call themselves democrats. Open competition among actors is to a certain degree a forced choice, a form of lesser evil compared to other methods of interaction, because its costs for the actors are lower than the costs of coercion or “cartel-like deals.” Democratization is a lesser evil in this context. This can serve as a point of departure for a realistic approach to the study of regime change as an open-ended (and not an endgame) process out of which various regimes are possible.

Note

1. Regionally based elite networks were not kinship-based clans such as those found in Central Asia (Collins, 2004), but they operated in a similar manner.

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