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POL 002

Russian Machine Politics and the Ukrainian Model

Though externally the presidencies of both Russia and Ukraine can seem quite similar, perhaps less so after Euromaiden^{1,2}, there is a significant berth between the powers of President Putin and President Poroshenko. According to Doyle and Elige³ (2016), Russia scores a 0.784 on their scale of presidential power, while Ukraine⁴ scores 0.329, less than half that of Russia. Russia, a parliamentary-presidential system, provides the President extreme latitude: veto and extensive decree powers⁵, the ability to appoint heads of regional state administrations, override parliament, very strong budgetary authority, and, perhaps most importantly, extreme informal powers (Averchuk 2016; Chenoy and Kumar 2017, 79). Ukraine, a premier-presidential system, gives their president a large degree of foreign agenda powers, a veto, and the ability to appoint regional heads. With the reformed constitution, the Ukrainian president must rely on coalitional parliamentary majorities to get things done.

¹ Євромайдан/Евромайдан in Ukrainian/Russian, which translates to Euro[pean]-Square.

² Euromaidan being the 2013-14 protests against the Ukrainian government, sparked by anger against President Yanukovich's policies in general and his collaboration with Putin in particular which ended in Yanukovich fleeing to Russia, and the restoration of the 2004 constitutional reforms which limited the power of government that he had done away with (Diuk 2014; Stelmakh and Balmforth 2014; Averchuk 2016).

³ Who conducted a meta-analysis of 38 other studies attempting to measure presidential power, and came up with 28 scored measures of presidential power. Through a formula of their creation, they used this data to give countries values from 0-1, measuring the power of the presidency (Doyle and Elige, 2016)

⁴ Value given here is a measure of 2005-2010 Ukrainian government, which is assumed to be similar to the score Ukraine might have now if Doyle and Elige scored the 2014-2017 period after the 2004 constitutional reforms were reinstated in 2014.

⁵ In fact, in the 90s, Yeltsin made the majority of his biggest reforms by decree, including his unilateral "shock therapy" privatization of the economy (Chenoy and Kumar 2017, 99-100).

Outside of their shared history⁶ and the civil war currently raging in Donbas, East Ukraine⁷, the main similarity between the countries lies in how they came to be: countries created anew by the fall of the USSR. Both countries followed a somewhat similar path in their initial trajectories: the privatization of state-run enterprises turned party apparatchiks into oligarchs who were deeply interested in state power, intensely popular and personality-driven politicians—Yeltsin for the Russian Federation⁸, and Leonid Kuchma for Ukraine—were elected president, both used their executive power to unilaterally reform the country to their vision; and both were eventually rebuffed by the electorate (Chenoy and Kumar 2017, 48-53; Averchuk 2016; Åslund 2003, 108-109; Christensen, Rakhimkulov and Wise 2005). The difference between the two—between Russia’s presidential power score and Ukraine’s—becomes more readily apparent after this point.

Looking at the recent political history, the major differences between the political reality in Ukraine and Russia are easy to see. Ukraine had 29 political parties participate in their last parliamentary election; since 1991, they have had five different presidents, major constitutional reforms have been undertaken, undone, and then redone⁹; they have integrated oligarchs semi-officially into campaign funding, and had such party diversity in parliament that it has been suggested by Christensen, Rakhimkulov and Wise (2005) that political volatility was created by large and ineffectual coalitions (Konończuk 2017). In comparison, Russia had seven political

⁶ The state Kievan Rus, centered in Kyiv, founded by the viking Rurik is where both nations find their roots (Bates 2014; Schauss 2010).

⁷ Perhaps better described as an undeclared war, as it is being carried out by Ukrainian government troops against pro-Russian separatists who fighting alongside Russian army regulars and mechanized units (Bonemberger 2017).

⁸ Although Yeltsin was elected before the collapse of the USSR, he was the first directly elected president in both the USSR and the Russian Federation

⁹ After the Orange Revolution, election of Yanukovych, and Euromaiden, respectively (Christensen, Rakhimkulov, and Wise 2005; Averchuk 2016; Diuk 2014).

parties, only three presidents since 1993¹⁰, and has been described as a “patronalistic presidency” by Hale (2016, 222)¹¹. In fact, former president Yanukovych finished his term by fleeing to Russia in 2014 in the face of the Euromaidan—a sort of end almost unimaginable for Putin (Stelmakh and Balmforth, 2014). So the question becomes: how did two countries with such similar geneses diverge so wildly?

Focusing in on Russia, there are two broad concepts to which its stability could be attributed: Firstly, the Russian president’s broad power to legislate. Beyond decrees and vetoes, the president may also dismiss the government, schedule referendums, and “resolve disagreements between bodies of state power or between members by using reconciliation procedures” (Chenoy and Kumar 2017, 105-106). Even if Putin was against an opposition parliament—which he is not likely to be, as discussed below, there would be more than enough tools at his disposal to accomplish his will unilaterally. This stands in stark contrast to the Ukrainian presidency, where power is heavily dependent on the favor of parliament, similar to the Majority Power thesis of the French Fifth Republic, which proposes the ebb and flow of presidential power based on whether the president is for or against the majority, and whether it is a single party, balanced or unbalanced coalition (Elgie 1996, 283-284). This on its own is an immense resource, but it alone is not enough: Yanukovych was not chased out by lack of unilateral executive power¹², but by his deep unpopularity and lack of institutional support. The

¹⁰ Even then, Dmitry Medvedev has often been accused of being Putin’s puppet, elected in order to allow Putin to circumvent the rules and attain the presidency again.

¹¹ Such a presidency is “characterized by the fact that major political actors are not in parties or parliament, but rather part of an extensive network of “actual personal acquaintance” (Hale 2016, 223), which stands in direct contrast with the various way that unofficial networks (in Ukraine’s case, oligarchs) have been integrated officially (Averchuk 2016; Konończuk 2017).

¹² In fact, he had more than most: because he rolled back the 2004 constitutional reforms the Doyle and Elige (2016) score for his 2011-2014 reign jumped up to 0.464.

second major factor in Russia's stability is its patronalist-presidency. In practice, this refers to networks of major political actors outside of politics proper: for Russia, this means oligarchs, the regional political machines, and the branches of the Russian state—unofficial, personal relationships that operate on the age-old “mutual back-scratching” principle; the support of these factions means the support of regional and state bureaucracies, and perhaps most importantly: the media (Hale 2016, 224). There are potentials for this to go wrong: these networks are gamblers, trying to fund the winning candidate; the easiest way to find the winning candidate is by popularity, but popularity is best gathered with network support (Hale 2016, 227-228). The flip side: unless a sudden event injects serious doubts into the network, their support tends to stick because the candidate with their support has the capabilities of getting the widest popular support. Essentially, this helps to ensure that the Russian president has the means—most meaningfully, the ability to platform who he wants and deplatform those he doesn't—to produce real electoral wins. Thus, redundancy upon redundancy is created. There is no incentive for on-side politicians to go against the party line for a multitude of reasons: access to Putin's resources is contingent upon his favor, opposition can never be anything more than symbolic, etc. Contrast this with Ukraine's abundance of opposition, where majorities can only be formed by public will and a president's deal-making abilities.

The above is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the the reasons for the divergence between Russian and Ukrainian politics: the reason for the development of the patronalist-presidential system in Russia, and its failure to develop in Ukraine is perhaps chief among the lingering questions. It is, however, a solid first step to understanding the divide between the two: the centralization of Russian politics and the stability of the regime did not

happen by accident; it was, rather, a concerted effort on the part of Putin to stack his deck. And though Ukrainian presidents have tried to follow the same path, the lack of broad powers granted by the constitution have somewhat reined in, if not entirely checked that impulse.

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