FOREWORD

A new paradigm for understanding post-communist regimes

On February 24, 2022, Ukraine was invaded by Russia. The military aggression perpetrated by Vladimir Putin brought death, destruction, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from the war-torn zones—myself included, whose home and university in Kharkiv was leveled. Russia’s aggression not only destroyed the international order but also forced us to look for a new answer to the question: How can we explain the nature of post-communist regimes such as Putin’s Russia? What are the conceptual tools for explaining their behavior?

The lack of understanding, particularly the inability to see the actual nature of Putin’s regime, contributed to the escalation of events leading to this point. In mainstream political science, the regime has been described using a system of categories rooted mainly in the West, such as ‘illiberal democracy’ or ‘hybrid regimes’. Such categories are inadequate to make sense of the nature of post-communist actors and institutions, their motivations, and modes of action. The lack of appropriate language leads to deficient understanding, and deficient understanding leads to misconceptions about the acts and plans of people like Putin. The tragic events in Ukraine must compel Western observers to seek a more authentic language, words, and concepts that can explain the post-communist world, its peculiarities, and tendencies.

The conceptual framework devised by Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, presented here in 120 short propositions, provides just such a language. Their post-communist regime theory offers a fresh and original perspective on explaining the nature of post-communist dynamics. We are talking about a new paradigm for explaining post-communist regimes, which considers the role of formal and informal institutions. A significant shortcoming of the previous concepts of analysis of post-communist regimes was that they used the conceptual language developed to analyze classical transitions from authoritarianism to democracy from the point of view of formal institutions undergoing
transformation. However, the post-communist world cannot be understood through the language of formal legal and constitutional norms, rational-legal actions, and the language of bureaucratic rationality. This language addresses only the visible part of the political reality, which cannot grasp the real nature and motives of the actions of post-communist leaders. In fact, what is a deviation from the point of view of the classical mainstream is the main principle of the operation of these systems.

This concise book by Magyar and Madlovics proposes a new language for describing post-communist regimes, one which integrates informal institutions and makes it possible to see how, where, and why they are the main basic principle of operation in post-communist systems. The basic hypothesis of the authors is that the post-communist political trajectory after the fall of communism is leading to ‘informal patronal’ systems of rule, and by no means to the establishment of Western-style legal-rational liberal democracy. This approach represents the third stage in the evolution of paradigms for understanding post-communist regimes, following the transitology of the 1990s (when transition from communist dictatorship to liberal democracy was taken for granted) and ‘hybridology’ (the combination of authoritarianism and democracy). But these paradigms tried to place regimes on a democracy-dictatorship axis and focused primarily on political institutions while treating everything else as external or ‘tutelary’ interference. In contrast, Magyar and Madlovics start their exposition by questioning three basic axioms of the mainstream comparative paradigm and develop a triangular conceptual space with six ideal types of political-economic regimes: three polar types (liberal democracy, communist dictatorship, patronal autocracy) and three intermediary or hybrid types (patronal democracy, market-exploited dictatorship, conservative autocracy). Finishing the 120 propositions, the reader will gain a clear understanding of these types, their differences, and most importantly their inner workings in terms of politics, economics, and society.

The book contributes to the development of a new language for the description of post-communist realities. According to them, post-communist regimes are characterized by a concentration of power in the hands of a chief patron, a patronal president or prime minister who maintains control by distributing rewards and punishments to a network of various rent-seeking actors from an adopted political family (oligarchs and poligarchs, regional barons and loyal elites, relatives and front men). The connection between the center, i.e., the patron’s court and political participation is exercised through joining the single-pyramid patronal network, different corporatist arrangements, or a formal
transmission-belt party. The adopted political family holds the key position in
the polity and controls profitable industries of the national economy. The cen-
tral element of this network is a system of personal ties, centered on the chief
patron and based primarily on regional or “clan” unity, as well as on current
rent-seeking interests. The ruler, the chief patron does not govern but disposes
over wealth and people: they completely dominate and control the political,
administrative, and economic elite around them.

This approach is very close to my neopatrimonial interpretation of post-com-
munist development. The mainstream of democratization studies has largely
ignored the role of Max Weber’s theoretical heritage, especially his magnum
opus *Economy and Society*, for understanding post-communist processes.
Max Weber widely used the concept of ‘patrimonialism,’ which he contrasted
with both feudal and bureaucratic rational-legal forms of government. The
main feature of patrimonialism is the private appropriation of a governmental
sphere by those who hold political power, and also the indivisibility of the
public and private spheres of society. This is essential for understanding both
post-communist politics and regime dynamics: post-communist politics is not
a struggle of political alternatives in the context of parliamentary contestation,
but a struggle of different factions of rent-seeking entrepreneurs to monopolize
the main segments of patron-client networks.

Magyar and Madlovics understand the concept of neopatrimonialism and incor-
porate it in their framework as one of four sides of patronal autocracy. Combin-
ing the political concept (neopatrimonial state) with a sociological concept (clan
state), a political economy concept (predatory state), and a legal concept (criminal
state), they come to define the complex entity of the mafia state. This term rep-
resents one of the key messages of the book, namely, that political, economic,
and communal spheres of social action are not separated in post-communist
regimes, and they must not be analyzed separately if one is to understand this
part of the world.

Beyond neopatrimonialism, the paradigm presented by Magyar and Madlovics
finds its roots in Weber’s three types of domination (traditional, charismatic,
rational-legal), Karl Polanyi’s types of exchanges (market, redistribution, recip-
rocity), as well as the work of Henry E. Hale on post-Soviet patronal politics.
Hale wrote one of the blurbs for the authors’ previous book, *The Anatomy of
Post-Communist Regimes* (CEU Press, 2020), for which the present book is a
condensed companion. There, Hale wrote: “This ambitious book provides not
only a better vocabulary, but a whole new grammar for describing the political
regimes that emerged in communism’s wake.” Masha Gessen, journalist of *The New Yorker*, stated: “Reading this book feels like having the curtains opened, letting the bright light come in.” And Iván Szelényi, Professor Emeritus of Yale and an important intellectual figure of the Eastern bloc, wrote: “This book is better and more important than anything I have done during the past 30 years.” The accolades apply to this book just as much—if not more so, as it is shorter and probably more accessible to today’s readers.

While *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes* was a breakthrough in post-communist studies, *The Concise Field Guide* brings the innovations of that breakthrough to a wider audience. The highly structured theoretical exposition of the 120 propositions is accompanied by 12 short country studies in the second half of the book. These studies are not just enlightening in their description of the last 30 years of development of Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Hungary, and other countries, but they also illustrate how appropriate language can result in insightful analyses. This is what makes this book so important amidst the difficulties of today’s world.

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