

Neopatrimonialism in Eurasia: Why Policymakers Should Care about a “Historical Origins” Argument (Memo)

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Harriman Institute - IMEMO Conference
March 30-1, 2017

— Introduction —

Why are some government bureaucracies staffed by public servants, while others are packed with cronies, bosses, and rent-seekers? This is an especially salient question for post-Soviet Eurasia, where World Bank governance indicators like ‘rule of law’ and ‘control of corruption’ consistently sit at some of their lowest values. Just a few decades ago, Sam Huntington described the Soviet Union in opposite terms, as a model of political order: “For Lenin ultimate loyalty belongs not to the family, the clan, the tribe, the nation, or even the class: it belongs to the party. The party is the ultimate source of morality, *partiinnost’* the highest loyalty, party discipline the supreme sanction.”¹ Yet at the same time, in many parts of the Soviet Union *partiinnost’* was eclipsed by neopatrimonialism: party offices were treated as private property to be distributed to loyalists, bureaucratic agencies were hijacked by their ministers, and access to political power meant access to the local patron or “boss.”

My research seeks to explain why Huntington’s well-ordered Soviet Union coexisted with pockets of entrenched neopatrimonial government and mafioso politics - what has been termed in its various species as machine politics in old New York, amoral familialism in southern Italy,² and bossism in the Philippines.³ I argue that Soviet neopatrimonialism originated in the success or failure Stalin-era state-building policies designed to professionalize and nativize the Soviet party-state. In this memo, I also ask the question: why would a policymaker, interested in affecting the world today, be interested in neopatrimonialism in a country and a regime type that no longer exists?

The first half of this memo outlines existing approaches to neopatrimonialism, and then summarizes my

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¹Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 339.

²See Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*.

³See Sidel, *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*.

historical explanation of local neopatrimonialism in the Soviet Union. The second half of the memo considers implications for the skeptical policymaker in two ways. First, I suggest five “lessons” that can be learned by treating my explanation of Soviet neopatrimonialism as one case of a broader outcome of interest. Second, I consider the implications of my explanation as a “historical origins” argument in which Stalin-era policies continue to shape outcomes in places like Tatarstan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia today.

Figure 1: Ideal-Typical cases of Local Neopatrimonialism (or Bossism) in the Soviet Union



— Conventional Approaches to Neopatrimonialism —

One of the older but still influential explanations for neopatrimonialism is what I term the “society-centric” approach. For social scientists working in the modernization tradition, Banfield’s ‘amoral familism’ was an impediment to be overcome by rising incomes and social progress⁴ or institution-building.⁵ Patron-client relationships in these theories are the normal or indigenous way of organizing politics - a practice that penetrates state bureaucracies and thwarts the rationalizing efforts of would-be state-builders.⁶ Migdal’s “state in society” research program represents a contemporary update on this approach, in which “the ineffectiveness of state leaders who have faced impenetrable barriers to state predominance has stemmed from the nature of the societies they have confronted [emphasis mine].”⁷ The society-centric approach has showed up in Sovietology and Soviet history in arguments about the persistence of old Muscovite folkways⁸, a “continuity

⁴Lipset, *Political Man*; Inkeles, “The Modernization of Man.”

⁵Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*.

⁶Interestingly, early Bolshevik thinkers themselves expressed and formed policy according to a society-centric paradigm that viewed patron-client ties as one characteristic of cultural backwardness, which would be stamped out in the process of state-led development - this is why Georgians, who had achieved high literacy rates but were perceived as maintaining “feudal” political organization, were sometimes grouped in with the Soviet Union’s “backward” peoples (Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 127).

⁷Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, 33.

⁸Keenan, “Muscovite political folkways”

of [peasant] traditions”⁹, or the recomposition of solidarity groups in Central Asia¹⁰ Since society-centric explanations cannot by themselves explain change over time, they are best considered an important but intervening variable rather than a proximate cause of Soviet neopatrimonialism.

Contemporary research on neopatrimonialism, especially work on vote-buying and electoral autocracies, often adopts what I term a “transactional” approach that conceptualizes patron-client relationships as “contingent, direct exchange[s].”¹¹ The transactional approach treats patron-client relationship as transient, countable, and involving a clear exchange of one good for another - for example, a beer for a vote. Transactional approaches have made impressive progress explaining one variety of neopatrimonial regimes - those where a clear market exists for a client-supplied good (for example, the market for votes).¹² In more fully authoritarian regimes where clients cannot credibly threaten to withhold their vote, instead of “contingent, direct exchange,” patron-client relationships may be based in the longer-term accumulation of political loyalty and dependence.¹³

The literature explicitly on patrimonial states and neopatrimonial regimes does adopt this longer-term “relational” conceptualization of patron-client ties. These approaches start from Weber’s conception of patrimonialism as a form of governance in which the right to rule is ascribed to a person rather than an office,¹⁴ and treat this form of governance as a deliberate choice. For premodern states that awarded government offices to members of the nobility as a formal private property or privilege, the patrimonial choice offered a less costly (in the short term) alternative to bureaucratization.¹⁵ For modern neopatrimonial or sultanistic regimes that treat state offices effectively as private property, the neopatrimonial choice offers a way to reward loyal allies of the autocrat on an ad-hoc basis.¹⁶ Both these approaches provide a conceptual picture of neopatrimonialism that is closest to the Soviet case, but lack an explanation for sub-national variation, whether across space, sector, administrative organ, or political faction.¹⁷

⁹Fairbanks, “Clientelism and the Roots of Post-Soviet Disorder”

¹⁰Roy, *The New Central Asia*, 85-100

¹¹Kitschelt and Wilkinson, *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*.

¹²These gains have occurred primarily on two fronts. The first front has gone far to explain how electoral authoritarian regimes use patronage networks to buy votes, muscle out opposition parties from the electoral game, and maintain high margins of victory that discourage competitors (Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*; Magaloni, *Voting For Autocracy*). The second front has focused more closely on the micro-dynamics of vote-buying, has made productive use of game theory and econometric methods, and made particular progress on the role of ethnicity in vote-buying (Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*) and the role of brokers (Stokes et. al., *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism*).

¹³This ‘relational’ view, in which the patron-client tie is based on long-term accumulation of loyalty and dependence, is consistent with works in Sovietology and Soviet history on Brezhnev-era patronage networks and cadre policy - see for example Willerton, *Patronage and Politics in the U.S.S.R.* and Rigby, *Political Elites in the U.S.S.R.*

¹⁴Weber, *Economy and Society*; Adams, “Rule of the Father,” 238-9.

¹⁵Tilly, *Coercion Capital and European States*; Ertman, *Birth of Leviathan*; Slater, *Ordering Power*; Karaman and Pamuk “Different Paths to the Modern State in Europe;” Johnson and Koyama, “Tax Farming and the Origins of State Capacity.”

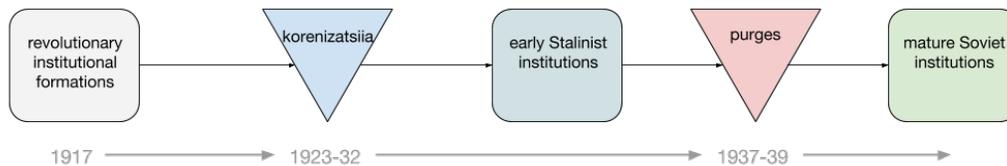
¹⁶Bratton and Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa;” Linz and Chehabi, *Sultanistic Regimes*.

¹⁷Recent work in Soviet history by Yoram Gorlizki makes this argument, showing explicitly how Stalin in the 1940s practiced politics in a manner consistent with the behaviors described by Linz and Chehabi or Bratton and Van de Walle; see Gorlizki, “Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers and the Soviet Neopatrimonial State,” as well as Gorlizky, “Scandal in Riazan: Networks of Trust and the Social Dynamics of Deception;” and Gorlizky, “Too Much Trust: Regional Party Leaders and Local Political Networks under Brezhnev.”

— A Historical Institutional Explanation of Soviet Neopatrimonialism —

My approach to Soviet neopatrimonialism is a historical institutionalist one, and hews closest to those explanations in the state-building and regimes literature that view neopatrimonialism as a deliberate strategy by which self-interested politicians forego routinized procedures in favor of ad-hoc personalized relationships that bolster their own political fortunes. I break with these conventional wisdoms by taking seriously the stated intentions of state-building regime elites (the Bolshevik leadership) to professionalize, proletarianize, and nativize the Soviet state. Bolshevik principles initiated Union-wide policies intending to fill the Soviet state with apolitical, proletarian, and nationally indigenous bureaucrats. However, only in some places did their agents carry through these policies to their intended outcome; in others, agents instead built or reinforced patron-client networks. My theory points to two Union-wide critical junctures - “korenizatsiia” and the great purges - that each provided what Soifer (2012) calls “permissive conditions” that “change[d] the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospects for divergence” by providing the opportunities and incentives for Soviet politicians to seek a patron or attract a clientele.

Figure 2: Summary of Historical Institutional Timeline, with Two Critical Junctures



Korenizatsiia describes a bundle of Soviet policies implemented between the early 1920s and the mid 1930s designed to incorporate indigenous non-Russian-speaking ethnic minorities into Soviet government. These policies were the consequence of an ideological debate in the Bolshevik party, the winners of which envisioned the Soviet Union as a multi-national, ethno-federal state that would be “nationalist in form, socialist in content.”¹⁸ Korenizatsiia can be read as a change to the rules of who the state hires.

I hypothesize that the effect of korenizatsiia on institutional form was conditional on the supply of qualified indigenous cadres and the prospects for vertical mobility up to and beyond the republic level. Where qualified indigenous cadres were abundant and upwardly mobile to the republic level, a (non-Russian) could expect the credible commitments to a predictable and long-term party career that resembles closely the classic ‘Weberian’ model of bureaucracy.¹⁹ In the opposite case, where qualified indigenous cadres were scarce, constructing an upwardly mobile, meritocratically based bureaucracy would have been more difficult.²⁰ Instead, those few and irreplaceable indigenous cadres that did enter government would have had comparatively more

¹⁸Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 12.

¹⁹In David Laitin (1994)’s study of language choice amongst the Russian-speaking populations in the former Soviet states, he terms this the ‘integrationist’ model of peripheral incorporation, best represented by the Baltic republics after 1940

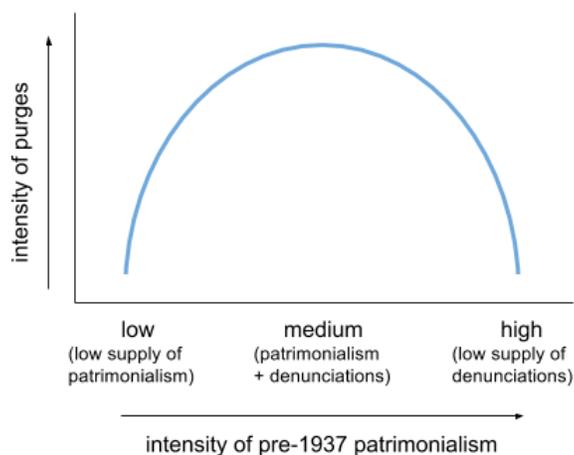
²⁰Laitin terms this the ‘colonial’ model of incorporation, which characterizes eastern territories like the Central Asia republics and Tatarstan

discretion to build a loyal clientele from co-ethnics, while underqualified job-seekers owing their jobs to their patrons could be expected to more willingly deliver the benefits of a good client: rule-bending, a pool of loyalty for times of political threat, and more clients.²¹

Without my second critical juncture, I argue, the institutional topology of the Soviet party-state would have looked largely like it did in the early 1930s. However, waves of political arrests at the end of the 1930s (Stalin’s great purges) reformed neopatrimonial networks in some places, while consolidating them in others. I assume that the chief purpose of the purges was to professionalize, rationalize, and proletarianize the Soviet state by rooting out neopatrimonial “family circles” and replacing them with cadres from a new generation of apolitical technocrats.²² However, I also assume that the NKVD required denunciations to target a political arrest - thus, purge intensity would have been a function of both the supply of corruption and the supply of denunciations.

By this logic, purge dynamics would have crudely resembled prisoner’s dilemmas. In a weak patron-client relationship, where mutual information and trust was low and incentives for denouncing your super-ordinate or subordinate were high, patrons and clients should have had strong incentives to defect on one another by supplying denunciations to the NKVD. In a strong patron-client relationship, where mutual information and trust was high, Soviet officials should have remained loyal to one another and survived the purges with their network intact. We should therefore expect the great purges to have reformed patron-client networks where relationships were weak, but reinforced them where relationships were strong.

Figure 3: Hypothesized Relationship between Pre-1937 Neopatrimonialism and Purge Intensity



²¹Laitin also describes a ‘most-favored lord’ model of incorporation, which was best represented by Ukraine and Belarus and saw vertical mobility exceeding the republic level and reaching the all-Union level. In my broader dissertation work, I hypothesize that these regions also developed neopatrimonial networks, but ones tied to Russian and Ukrainian patrons at the center rather than indigenous patrons at the periphery. Nikitia Khrushchev’s rise through the party ranks on the tail of his patron Lazar Kaganovich is a useful example.

²²This assumption is drawn from my reading of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s 1979 article, “Stalin and the Making of a New Elite;” this only applies to the great purges at middle to higher levels at the party-state; the “mass” element of the purges was characterized by different dynamics, based largely on nationality and class background.

— Policy implications #1: Taking Lessons from a Historical Case —

If we consider my research as an explanation of one case that is part of a broader category of neopatrimonial regimes, there are at least a few lessons that a policymaker considering similar and contemporary cases should keep in mind (for example, the Nazarbayev and Karimov regimes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan).²³

1. Varieties of neopatrimonialism

We cannot necessarily generalize our theories of and policies for neopatrimonial regimes that are based on contingent, direct exchange, to regimes where patron-client relationships are based on the longer-term exchange of loyalty and dependence. One implication of this is that the patron-client politics of regimes with contested, if uncompetitive, elections likely differs from the patron-client politics of fuller authoritarian regimes.

2. Measuring neopatrimonialism

Where patron-client exchange is based on discrete, countable transactions, measurement is more straightforward. Measuring political loyalty and dependence is more difficult. Sovietologists interested in corruption and cadre policy during the Brezhnev era made significant headway developing sketches of factional patronage networks from data on hiring and promotions, but the fall of the Soviet Union interrupted this research program, which was never allowed to benefit from more recent advancements in methods.²⁴ More work is needed to develop a larger base of methods for studying this relational variety of patron-client networks in order to catch up to the literature on transactional patron-client networks.

3. Reforming Neopatrimonialism

Where reforms or anti-corruption campaigns require cooperation from participants in the patron-client network, as in the case of the NKVD's use of political arrests to professionalize Soviet bureaucracies, the success of reform will be conditional on pre-existing institutions and the incentives they create for cooperation with the reform effort. In other words, reform efforts must give the beneficiaries of the neopatrimonial regime a credible expectation of gaining from the reform, or of facing costs from failing to cooperate with the reform.²⁵ However these expectations will be conditional on the pre-existing patron client network. Policymakers should not expect reforms to generate the same outcomes across political units when incumbent neopatrimonial forms vary sub-nationally.

4. Return to classic understandings of neopatrimonialism

Conventional explanations of neopatrimonial regimes, where regime elites deliberately choose to ascribe the right to rule to people while treating offices as private property to be distributed to regime loyalists, can still explain a broad and important category of authoritarian regimes for which transactional or cultural approaches are insufficient.

²³Note: currently I am at the pre-proposal stage of the dissertation, and I expect my argument to change as I collect evidence. These policy recommendations are based on the assumption, for now, that the basic argument of my dissertation is right (which may or may not be true).

²⁴The baton was picked up in part by researchers specializing in the Chinese nomenklatura system, where similar techniques have been used in combination with network analysis.

²⁵This the same basic lesson as Hale's argument that patronal pyramids break down when clients no longer expect to continue to receive rewards or punishments from the incumbent patron, or see a new patron with the credible potential to issue greater rewards or punishments (Hale, *Patronal Politics*, 34-7).

5. Breaking with classic understandings of neopatrimonialism

Nevertheless, policymakers and researchers alike should consider several aspects of neopatrimonialism that the classic literature has left on the table. Neopatrimonialism may emerge against the wishes of state-building principles, if policies formed at the center incentivize agents to form clienteles at the periphery. Such incentives may be especially likely to form at moments when regime elites must decide how to govern the state's constituent units - for example in the formation of federal systems, or in states undergoing decentralizing reforms. Unlike the traditional literature on neopatrimonialism that focuses on the top of the patronal pyramid, my approach encourages researchers and policymakers to consider the middle and the bottom of the pyramid. Don't just look at Nazerbaev, Shevardnadze, and Shaimiev - look at their clients, who are themselves patrons, too.

— Policy implications #2: What to do with “Historical Determinism” —

My argument about the Stalinist origins of Soviet neopatrimonialism contributes to a wider, emerging research program on the historical origins of contemporary political outcomes.²⁶ Causal arguments in the *long duree* have benefited from a proliferation of studies that pair econometric methods of causal inference with historical data collected from primary sources. This outpouring of research has generated a wealth of evidence but little guidance for what to do with it. How much scope of action do policymakers have over political outcomes that are historically ‘determined?’²⁷

Conventional historical institutionalist theories explain long-run persistence by referring to path dependence.²⁸ For persistent neopatrimonialism in Eurasia, this requires clearing a high bar: it requires specifying a mechanism of reinforcement (an “increasing return”) that is consistent across the Soviet successor states and through the transition.²⁹ A more accessible explanation for persistence is Hale (2015)'s concept of patronalism as “a social equilibrium” based on the continued expectation that patrons will supply rewards and punishments. Policymakers interested in reforming neopatrimonial systems should then ask: what is likely to change the expectations of prospective clients?

The literature on institutional persistence offers two off-the-shelf answers. The first is an exogenous shock - for example, policymakers might consider supporting reform efforts when an economic crisis deprives the patron of spoils to distribute to clients, as occurred in the PRI's Mexico,³⁰ Pahlavi Iran,³¹ and Suharto's

²⁶For an authoritative and compelling argument on the usefulness of long-duree arguments and their application to regime type in Eastern Europe, see Ekiert and Ziblatt, “Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe One Hundred Years On.”

²⁷The answer depends in part on the kind of “historical origins” we are dealing with. Structural determinist theories are useful for determining the more absolute constraints on policy; institutional determinist explanations, like mine, offer policymakers more latitude to effect outcomes. (Note that some structural determinist arguments, however, are institutional arguments in structuralist clothing. When Acemoglu and Robinson applied fixed effects to the well-known “income and democracy” relationship, and found that country-specific history explained patterns in development better than a cross-national measure of democracy, and then explained those country-specific histories in “colonial origins,” they essentially converted a structural theory of the long duree into an institutional one.)

²⁸For a discussion of path dependence, its alternative conceptualizations, and the role of increasing returns as a mechanism of reinforcing path-dependent institutions, see Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” 252-3.

²⁹By “mechanism of reinforcement,” I mean a reason that the decision to add to a patron-client network at time t increases the returns to the network as well as the costs of breaking the network at time $t + 1$.

³⁰Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*, 82-97.

³¹Skopcol, “Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution.”

Indonesia. However, while we know that neopatrimonial regimes are vulnerable to economic crises,³² this finding may be scoped to regimes based on transactional patron-client relationships where client expectations are contingent on the immediate rewards and punishments supplied by the patron.

Eurasian neopatrimonialism based on longer-term relational ties of loyalty and dependence may be more robust to economic shocks. For example, during the early 1950s, KGB chief Lavrentiy Beria's patron-client network in Georgia survived even though "Beria had no resources with which to reward his clients for over a year."³³

For Eurasian cases, it may be more fruitful to consider endogenous sources of changing client expectations. Greif and Laitin (2004) note that an institutional equilibrium may not last if "the changes in the quasi-parameters that it entails imply that the associated behavior will be self-enforcing in a smaller set of situations."³⁴ A focus on endogenous change should lead policymakers to attend to alternative sources of rewards and punishments that originate from the patron-client network itself. Again, one potentially fruitful place to look is at the middle-levels of the neopatrimonial pyramid - those patron-clients who are low enough in the network to potentially benefit from a more Weberian system and could be candidates for defection if the network were to become increasingly unsustainable.

³²For a useful typology of neopatrimonial regimes and a discussion of their vulnerability to economic crises, see Bratton and Van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa," 460-4.

³³Fairbanks, "Clientelism and the roots of post-Soviet disorder," 370

³⁴Greif and Laitin, "A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change."

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