

THE FATAL COMBINATION: HOW DEMOCRACY DIED IN RUSSIA AND HOW IT MAY SURVIVE IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. *This article presents a comparative examination of de- and re-democratization processes in Russia and Ukraine, utilizing the concept of patronalism to delineate distinct regime types: patronal democracy and patronal autocracy, in contrast to Western-style liberal democracy. The analysis emphasizes the critical factors leading to the decline of democracy, specifically the monopolization of political power and the patronalization of social networks – the so-called “fatal combination.” In Russia, these factors converged under Vladimir Putin’s leadership, resulting in the death of democracy even before the war began. In contrast, while Ukraine has faced recurring autocratic attempts, the fatal combination has not fully materialized, though it has led to cyclical regime dynamics. The article concludes by examining the structural consequences of the war: “the good news” (potential anti-patronal transformation in Ukraine), “the bad news” (the rise of dictatorship in Russia and the threat of autocracy under Volodymyr Zelensky), and “the hope” (the elements indicating Ukraine’s long-term transition from patronal to liberal democracy).*

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War is a state of exception. In a country that suffers a full-scale invasion, all aspects of the regime – society, economy, and politics – are subordinated to the needs of national defense. Power is centralized in the hands of the dominant political force organizing the defense; elections are not conducted; political competition is suspended. War overrides democracy.

But what happens after the war? Can democracy return? Ukraine has been in a state of exception, as described above, for three years now, since February 24, 2022, and the prolongation of the war is making more and more people to wonder what is left of Ukrainian democracy. Of course, Ukraine has never been a perfect liberal democracy and has consistently scored low in various international rankings on indicators such as the rule of law and corruption. However, it hasn't been Russia either. Ukraine did not develop the kind of single-pyramid rule that characterized Putin's regime but instead maintained a competitive, multi-pyramid system. Whenever attempts to create a single-pyramid rule were made – most notably by presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich – they were resisted by the color revolutions. The Euromaidan Revolution of 2013 and the election of the charismatic, anti-oligarch president Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019 indicated that things were moving in a positive direction. During the invasion, Zelensky strengthened his social and international legitimacy and used his power to crack down on the Ukrainian oligarchs who were weakened by the ravages of war.

Zelensky is concentrating power and neutralizing the oligarchs in Ukraine. For many, this may sound familiar: Vladimir Putin, after seizing supermajority in the Duma elections of 2003, also concentrated power and neutralized the oligarchs in Russia. This was followed by the decline and eventual death of Russian democracy. The question is whether we should be concerned about a similar scenario in Ukraine. Is it not true that, in the aftermath of the war and the suspension of political competition, Zelensky is creating the single-pyramid system that none of his predecessors could achieve? Is Zelensky saving Ukraine at the expense of democracy?

The answer is both yes and no. Ukrainian democracy is at risk but has a good chance of survival. The main reason for this is that Zelensky's single-pyramid rule during the war, efforts toward de-oligarchization, and the social and historical context are markedly different from what we have seen in Putin's Russia. To explain this, we need to analyze the trajectories of the Ukrainian and Russian regimes in parallel. We will see that while Putin is steering Russia further towards dictatorship in the course of the war, the terrible destruction shaking Ukraine's political and economic system to its core also holds the potential to rid the country of its stubborn structures. This analysis not only sheds light on a salient issue – the structural consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war – but also provides an opportunity to classify two post-communist countries within a regime typology. By examining the processes of de-democratization, we can identify the combination of processes that is indeed fatal for democracies.

1. PATRONAL DEMOCRACY AND PATRONAL AUTOCRACY

Before the war, Ukraine was most in the spotlight during the period of the so-called color revolutions: the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan, or Revolution of Dignity, of 2013. Such revolts, the likes of which took place in other post-communist countries as well, were met with considerable optimism by Western observers. Mainstream comparative regime theory thinks in terms of a democracy-dictatorship axis: there are two polar types, Western-type, rule-of-law based liberal democracy and openly repressive, classical dictatorship; in between lies a broad “grey zone” with various “hybrid regimes,” “electoral democracies,” “competitive authoritarianisms,” and so on. Interpreted along this axis, the color revolutions appeared to be replacing a regime closer to the repressive pole with one closer to the free pole. Liberal democracy was apparently coming.

The failure to meet these expectations, along with the resurgence of corrupt regimes following most color revolutions (Pop-Eleches & Robertson 2014) suggests that the mainstream democracy-dictatorship axis is insufficient for understanding these countries. This approach focuses on surface-level factors, namely, the political institutions, and employs categories originally developed for liberal democracies. When we refer to “parties,” “party competition,” or even a “government” that extends its power in a way that threatens democracy, we are carrying over implicit assumptions from the Western liberal context that do not hold in the post-communist region.

Three such hidden axioms can be identified: (1) the spheres of social action (political, economic, and communal) are separated, autonomous, and their relationship is formalized, regulated, and transparent; (2) the *de jure* position of the actors coincides with their *de facto* position; and (3) the state, by definition, serves the common good, against which corruption or “bad policies” can only exist as deviations that the system seeks to eradicate. Challenging these axioms¹ reveals a very different world from that of liberal democracies. A world in which (1) economic actors possess informal political power (oligarchs) and political actors wield informal economic power (poligarchs); (2) legal status does not necessarily coincide with sociological reality, and one may lack autonomy over their constitutional or proprietary position; and (3) the state may, by definition, serve private interests rather than the public interest, elevating corruption from an offense to be prosecuted to a public policy.

The Ukrainian and Russian regimes differ in many ways, but they share one thing: the dominant presence of *patronalism*. It is to this phenomenon that the dissolving of the three axioms leads. The concept of patronalism was popularized by Henry Hale in his book *Patronal Politics*, which focused on regime dynamics in the post-Soviet region (Hale 2015). In our work, we define patronalism, or the patron-client relationship, as a particular, hierarchical form of informality.

In patronal regimes, decision-making is removed from formal decision-making bodies. Decisions are not made by the parties, their executive committees, or their formal memberships; rather, they occur within informal circles lacking formal membership. In

¹ For a more detailed exposition, see Magyar & Madlovics (2022).

pre-war Ukraine, what appeared to be a competition between parties was, in fact a competition among informal patronal networks in the guise of parties. Ukrainian scholar Mikhail Minakov (2019) calls them political-economic “clans”; in our terminology, they are referred to as *adopted political families*. Members of the adopted political family consist of both individuals holding formal positions of power (such as presidents, members of parliament, judges, prosecutors, heads of state-owned companies, etc.) and those who do not (heads of private companies, oligarchs, criminal groups, church leaders, etc.). The head of the family is the chief patron, and the loyalty to and dependence on them binds the informal web of adopted family members together in a broadly pyramidal, patron-client hierarchy. This network, and in particular the inner circle or “court” of the chief patron, uses the parties: they are not autonomous entities but transmission belts, relaying the chief patron’s informal agenda into the formal realm of politics.

Ukraine is a multi-pyramid system with several adopted political families. Even prior to the regime change, the country showed elements of patronal politics within the state party. Three regional groups from Kharkiv, Stalino/Donetsk, and Dnepropetrovsk represented the three largest party units and industrial clusters, providing factional competition and alternately occupying the positions of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party and Chairperson of the Council of Ministers. A system of competing patronal networks grew out of these roots after the country became independent in 1991. Minakov outlines the positions controlled by the Ukrainian adopted political families as follows. In the Dnipropetrovsk group, the informal patronal network of the Privat Group has controlled separate members of parliament (MPs), parliamentary parties and factions (since 1998), deputy heads of the National Bank, as well as managers and board members of state-owned gas and oil companies. Meanwhile, the Kuchma-Pinchuk network has controlled separate MPs, deputy ministers, and vice-general prosecutors (since 2005).

In contrast, the Donetsk regional group is comprised of “old” adopted political families that have controlled the Party of Regions, vice prime ministers, governors, MPs, separate ministers and deputy ministers, the Tax Administration, etc.; “new” families that have controlled governors and mayors of Donetsk (1996-2014), positions in the Party of Regions, Opposition Bloc, separate MPs, parliamentary factions (from 1998), prosecutors general, separate ministers etc.; and some smaller networks that have controlled the judiciary and separate courts, the Central Electoral Commission, various ministers, and state-owned companies (Minakov 2019: 234–37).

Furthermore, decisions within an adopted political family are not made by collective bodies but by individuals, with the chief patron and sub-patrons acting under their authority. The political, economic, and communal resources belonging to the family are not controlled through the bureaucratic chains familiar from communist dictatorship but through personal, clientelist chains. The essence of the clients’ dependence on the chief patron is that he or she is able (or perceived to be able) to turn normative regulations into discretionary regulations. This means using corruption as a disciplinary tool: the chief patron can control law enforcers to selectively apply or ignore the law in a targeted, tailored manner, or, in some cases, if he controls lawmakers, to custom-tailor the rules to

punish or reward certain actors. What is referred to in Russian as *krysha*, meaning “roof,” is precisely this form of personal protection from the criminal consequences of informality that transgresses the law. While loyal clients benefit from *krysha* and targeted state benefits, disloyal, outsider, or hostile actors are subjected to official investigations, police or prosecutorial procedures, custom-tailored “lexes,” and other kinds of attacks (even black PR), suffering moral, material, and/or physical damage (Ledeneva 2006).

With such informal dynamics under the surface of formal politics, Ukraine is not a liberal democracy; it is a *patronal democracy* (Table 1). The regime that emerged after the post-communist transition following the country’s independence was not primarily driven by voter demands, ideologies, and party competition for power but by the twin motives of power and wealth of the rivaling adopted political families.

Table 1. Comparative summary of ideal-type liberal democracy, patronal democracy, and patronal autocracy

	Liberal democracy	Patronal democracy	Patronal autocracy
RULING ELITE	multi-pyramid non-patronal system	multi-pyramid informal patronal system	single-pyramid informal patronal system
	politicians autonomous MPs	politicians/poligarchs partially patronalized MPs	poligarchs patronalized MPs
	autonomous major entrepreneurs	autonomous oligarchs	dependent oligarchs
	autonomous elites democratic political elite	partially patronalized elites competing patronal political elites	patronalized elites monopolistic patronal political elite
STATE-BUSINESS RELATIONS	lobbying	state capture	oligarch capture
	corruption as non- structural deviation	corruption as structural deviation	corruption as system- constituting element
	free-market capitalism	patronal capitalism	mafia capitalism
SOCIAL DYNAMICS	free civil society	free civil society	subjugated civil society
	legitimacy challenger is an anomaly	legitimacy challenger is a norm	accomplished legitimacy challenge
	stable equilibrium of competing political parties (democratic consolidation)	dynamic equilibrium of competing patronal networks (regime cycles)	stable equilibrium of a single-pyramid patronal network (autocratic consolidation)

In contrast, Russia is a *patronal autocracy* rather than a non-patronal conservative autocracy that would focus solely on monopolizing power in the political sphere. At first, Russian oligarchs were the patrons while politicians served as the clients. Despite President Boris Yeltsin's attempt to build an own patronal pyramid by mobilizing regional political machines and financial-industrial groups in the 1996 elections, he ruled under the shadow of oligarchs like Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, who owned substantial media empires, as well as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the country's wealthiest man who controlled much of Russia's natural resources as the CEO of Yukos oil company. Putin's infamous crackdown on the oligarchs – exiling Gusinsky and Berezovsky and imprisoning Khodorkovsky after 2003 – signaled his reversal of the patron-client roles and captured the oligarchs rather than being dependent on them. He became the chief patron of the Russian regime, with enormous inequality in power vis-à-vis his clients. The resulting elite structure, which persists today despite numerous crises, is a *single-pyramid patronal network*. Instead of a competitive landscape of multiple adopted political families, there is only one adopted political family comprising Putin's security forces (*siloviki*), the top federal bureaucracy, and the oligarchs. All competing forces have been subjugated, marginalized, or eliminated.

Figures 1-2 show the regime trajectories of Russia and Ukraine. The democracy-dictatorship axis is expanded into a triangle, which now contains three polar types of regimes: liberal democracy, communist dictatorship, and patronal autocracy. In between are the intermediate types: patronal democracy, conservative autocracy, and market-exploiting dictatorship. Countries move in this conceptual space spanned by the polar types, which are defined along political dimensions (plurality of power networks, the ruling party's function, etc.), economic dimensions (dominant coordination mechanism, corruption, etc.), and social dimensions (autonomy of civil society, etc.). The triangle was divided along each dimension and projected onto each other, giving for each point in the triangle the regime it represents according to all dimensions.¹ Intuitively, understanding how the triangle works can be achieved by considering the three polar types as *language-forming poles*. These are the regimes that require an independent language, that is, their own words and grammar, to describe them. In liberal democracy, you find terms like “politician,” “political party,” and “capitalist entrepreneur”; in a communist dictatorship, you encounter “cadre,” “nomenklatura,” and “state enterprise manager”; and in patronal autocracy, you have “oligarch,” “adopted political family,” and “oligarch,” respectively. The grammar, meaning the conceptual framework for each system, is drawn from the relationship between the various actors and institutions, which denotes a *sui generis* structure. Once we identify the “primary languages” of the polar types, we can mix the secondary languages of the intermediate types from them. Similar to a color wheel, where an intermediate color can be mixed from two primary colors (for example, orange from yellow and red), the language of patronal democracy combines the languages of its two neighbors: plural and competitive liberal democracy (“multi-pyramid”) and corruption-driven patronal autocracy (“informal patronalism”).

¹ The dimensions and the exact functioning of the triangle can be observed on our website in the form a 3D interactive model. See <https://www.postcommunistregimes.com/3d-trajectories/>.

Figure 1. Modeled trajectory of Russia (1964–2022)

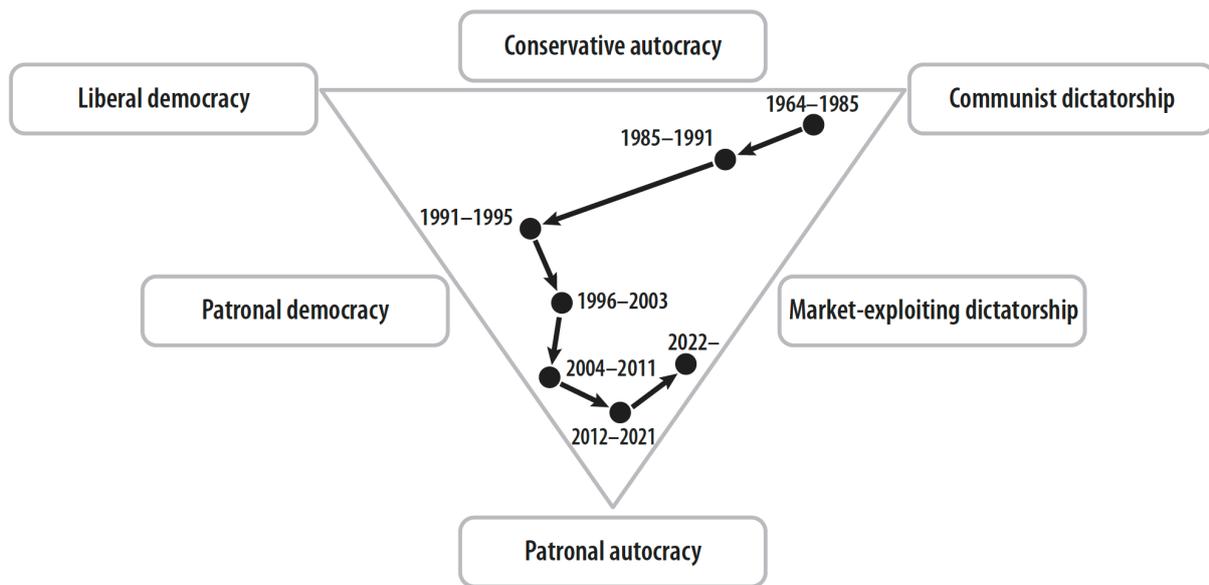
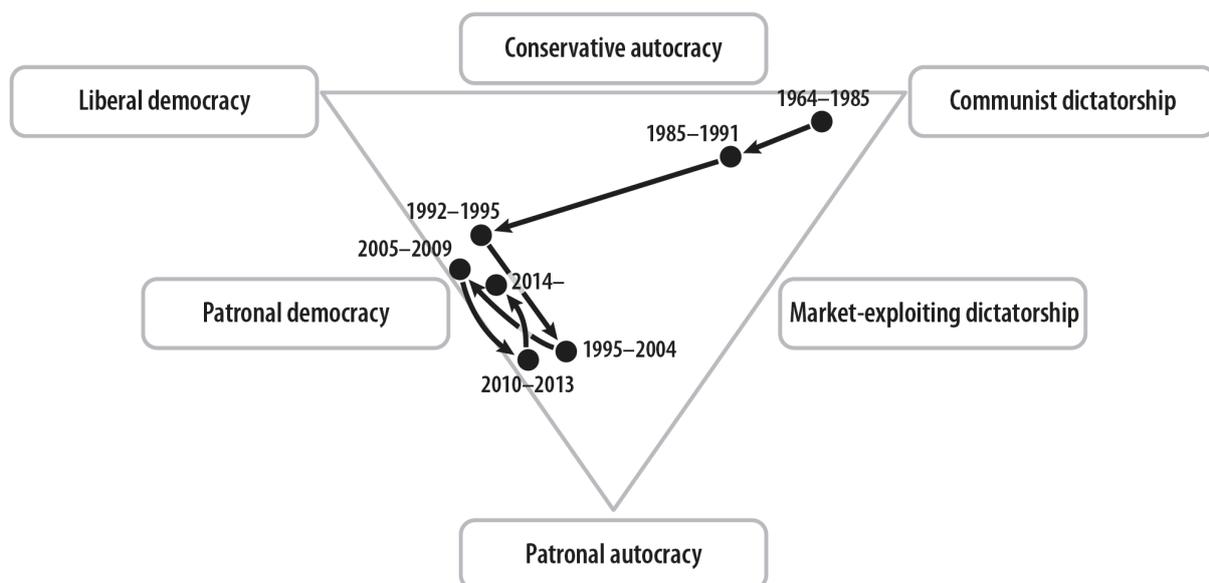


Figure 2. Modeled trajectory of Ukraine (1964–2022)



Source: Magyar and Madlovics (2022).

The trajectories show that Russia and Ukraine – unlike countries like Estonia, Poland, or Hungary – have never transitioned into liberal democracies. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they moved towards patronal regimes. In Ukraine, a patronal democracy was created, which, despite attempts to create a single-pyramid rule did not become an autocracy but operated in a state of dynamic equilibrium. In Russia, this kind of equilibrium could not be sustained, leading to the emergence of a patronal autocracy. The question is what causes this divergence. If both regimes are patronal and both possess informal, oligarchic stubborn structures, what has enabled democracy in Ukraine to survive while it perished in Russia? The answer lies in the different levels of autocratization and in the emergence, or absence, of what is the fatal combination for

democracy: the monopolization of political power and the patronalization of social networks.

2. THE FATAL COMBINATION: THREE STAGES OF AUTOCRATIZATION

Democracy is always at risk within a patronal democracy. Attacking the institutions and “the rules of the game” instead of abiding by them is not an anomaly but rather the norm. This occurs because whichever patronal network comes to power, under whatever ideological banner it flies, ultimately wants the same thing: to maximize its power and access to resources. The fundamental obstacles to this at the level of state power include constitutional institutions, such as the machinery of checks and balances, and the danger that rival adopted political families can remove them from power through elections. Moreover, as the Ukrainian example shows, rival networks exercise parallel control over different parts of the state, which means that opposition networks consistently engage in partial state capture alongside the ruling network. It is this limited and precarious situation that the ruling network seeks to overcome, ensuring the fulfillment of its power and wealth objectives. Indeed, it wants single-pyramid rule: the ruling network always aims to replace patronal democracy with patronal autocracy.

Such attempts have been made in Ukraine under all the adopted political families, but under the presidencies of Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko they were not strong enough to pose a systemic challenge to the democratic system (Fisun and Movchan 2023). Such a challenge was posed by the two presidents whose rule ended in a color revolution – Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) and Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014). During his first presidential term, Kuchma essentially coerced parliament into changing the constitution into a fully presidential model and formed a pact with the emerging oligarchs that allowed him to concentrate economic power and media control. Once in power, Yanukovich repealed the 2006 constitutional amendment that limited presidential powers and, alongside his disciplined parliamentary faction, began integrating the patronal networks of other positions of power (represented by the Reforms for the Future parliamentary faction, the United Center party, as well as former presidents Poroshenko and Yushchenko) into his newly adopted political family. The “Family,” as it was also colloquially called in Ukraine, included actors with no formal power as well, such as Yanukovich’s son Oleksandr, who became one of the wealthiest oligarchs in the country during this period.

Their presidencies are marked in the Ukrainian trajectory by the arrows pointing “downwards,” towards patronal autocracy. But they were followed by arrows pointing “upwards” as well, meaning their attempts to break democracy down were reversed. This was made possible by the fact that only a relatively early stage of autocratization was reached.

We can distinguish three phases of autocratization: (1) the autocratic attempt, (2) the autocratic breakthrough, and (3) the autocratic consolidation. An *autocratic attempt* involves a series of formal institutional changes aimed at breaking down checks and balances and eliminating the separation of powers. Court packing, replacing the heads of

civil courts, taking over prosecution with clients, weakening local governments, rewriting electoral rules to favor a majoritarian direction, and amending the constitution to expand the competencies of the executive all belong to the arsenal of an autocratic attempt.

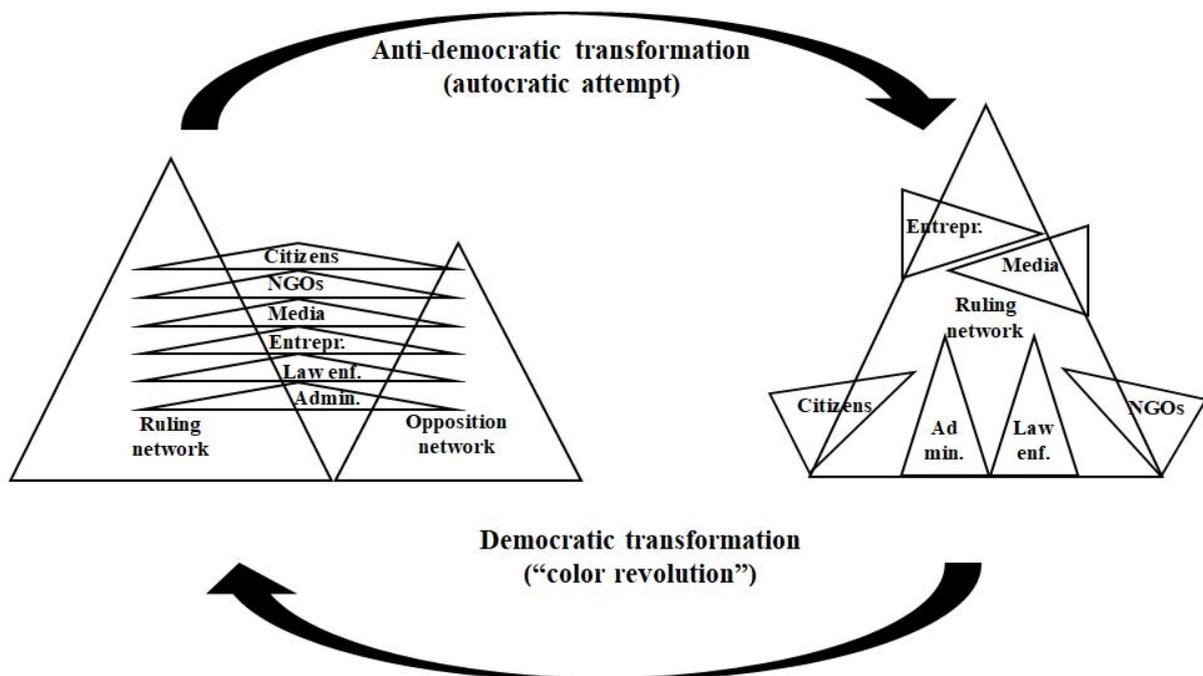
The success of an autocratic attempt mainly depends on one factor: whether the would-be autocrat gets the monopoly on political power, typically by winning the elections with a supermajority. This gives them the power to change the constitution, modify the electoral system, and appoint the heads of institutions that provide checks and balances unilaterally (i.e., without the consent of the opposition). They do not *de jure* abolish the separation of powers but *de facto* connect them through their competences of appointment in a single patron-client vertical. This is the moment when we can discuss the autocratic breakthrough following an *autocratic attempt*.

The third and final step is *autocratic consolidation*. This lengthy process in which the autocrat destroys the sociological foundation of democratic pluralism: the autonomy of competing elite groups (effective opposition) and civil society (potential opposition). The former includes the opposition parties in a liberal democracy, the adopted political families in a patronal democracy; the latter, in the broader sense of civil society, includes the four groups that control politically relevant resources. These comprise entrepreneurs (material resources), the media (publicity), NGOs (watchdog functions), and citizens (civil liberties). While competing elites actively challenge the ruling network, it is civil society's autonomous resources that allow new alternative power centers to arise. Therefore, in cases of co-optation of the opposition, there remains the possibility for new competitors to enter the political arena.

While autocratic breakthrough means the monopolization of political power, autocratic consolidation refers to the patronalization of social networks. Patronalization involves replacing autonomous positions with positions dependent on the chief patron and their ruling network. The means of submission are varied and can be more than just direct: like a chokehold in wrestling, where the opponent can breathe if he stays still, but if he starts to move, the arm around his neck tightens. It is possible to exist under the radar, but in the case of political activism, the arsenal of patronal politics is activated, based on the gradual creation of situations of institutional, financial and personal dependency (Magyar & Madlovics 2022: 141–49, 177–79).

Rendering autonomous existence economically unviable in both the public and private spheres undermines both effective and potential opposition, thereby creating an unchallenged autocracy. In other words, the completion of autocratic consolidation eliminates the possibility of comeback to democracy through elections. This is *the fatal combination* for democracy: the monopolization of political power neutralizes limits within the state (such as the separation of powers), while the patronalization of social networks neutralizes limits outside the state (including effective and potential opposition). This is illustrated on the right side of Figure 3, where a single-pyramid patronal network controls all state actors along with the dominant part of civil society.

Figure 3. The structure of multi-pyramid and single-pyramid patronal networks and regime cycles



The fatal combination took shape in Russia, which became a patronal autocracy under Putin. An autocratic breakthrough was achieved after the 2003 parliamentary elections. Having reformed the state to regain strength, Putin's United Russia party secured an absolute majority, which was expanded by the "purchase" of non-party deputies to form a constitutional majority. In this way, the monopolization component of the fatal combination was effectively achieved. In the following years, this was further reinforced by institutional manipulation, electoral fraud, and state violence, escalating after the 2012 post-election protests in Moscow. Among the individuals who mobilized the masses, Boris Nemtsov was assassinated in 2015, while Alexei Navalny was sentenced to prison in 2013, survived an attempted poisoning in 2020, and died in a Siberian penal colony in 2024.

Putin's single-pyramid network took control of most of the politically relevant institutional and financial resources in Russia from 2003 to 2012. The crackdown on oligarchs on the one hand and the repressive measures limiting the room for maneuver of independent media, entrepreneurs, NGOs, and citizens on the other led to autocratic consolidation. The regime also made a sustained effort to counter foreign sources that were independent and the autonomies they might create. This process culminated in 2012, when a series of repressive laws and amendments were passed by the State Duma, most notably the addition of a "foreign agent" clause to the NGO law and the ban on foreign bank accounts and financial assets for legislators and high-ranking officials. As the regime tightened its grip, the autonomies of civil society eroded (Yavlinsky 2019). In

the 2016 and 2021 Duma elections, United Russia's constitutional majority was secured through even more serious vote-rigging than before, reinforcing the sense in society that the regime cannot be replaced through elections.

In Ukraine, the fatal combination was not realized. This is because the structure of a patronal democracy resembles the left side of Figure 3 rather than the right side. There is not one adopted political family that is dominant, but several; and although the state is captured by the adopted political families, none of them controls the entire polity. The fact that none of them has monopoly power, that each can only use a limited range of instruments of public authority, and that each patron's position is dependent on political turns allows actors independent of them to maintain a greater degree of autonomy. Figure 3 schematically depicts on the left side the competing pyramids (two for simplicity: the ruling and the opposition), along with the partly patronalized yet partly autonomous groups in between them. These groups include state actors, administration, and law enforcement on one side, and the four groups of civil society on the other. The fact that they are not subject to a patronal network gives them room for maneuver and the possibility to use their resources in defense against attempts to break democracy. Ukrainian oligarchs too enjoyed considerably more autonomy than Russian ones, and the empowered oligarch-controlled parliament guaranteed that poligarchs could be kept in check (Markus 2017).

Democracy in Ukraine endured because, under such circumstances, the ruling adopted political families could only make autocratic attempts, and even in the cases of Kuchma and Yanukovich, who approached an autocratic breakthrough, true autocratic consolidation was not attainable. Despite their efforts at patronalization, civil society and the opposition networks, and oligarchs maintained a great degree of autonomy and were able to resist. This allowed for the reversal of autocratization through electoral or extra-electoral restitution, such as the color revolutions.

Only one element of Figure 3 remains unexplained: the arrows connecting the multi-pyramid and single-pyramid settings. They indicate *regime cycles*, the cyclical alternation between autocratic and democratic movements. The challenge of the color revolutions – the problem that eluded Western observers focused on formal politics – lies here: There was a democratic transformation but no anti-patronal transformation. The ruling network was defeated, yet the opposition networks remained. Political families, oligarchs, the stubborn structures remained. Although revolutionary movements marched under slogans of democracy, transparency, and anti-corruption, behind the masses' democratic aspirations lay the political, financial, and media resources of the to-be suppressed oligarchs and networks. After the revolution, another party came to power, still backed by an adopted political family; it aimed to break down democracy just like its predecessor did; and when its autocratic attempt failed, the regime returned to Square One. The pendulum-like movement of the Ukrainian trajectory illustrates this. Ukraine did not become a patronal autocracy, but it also could not transition to liberal democracy either.

3. THE GOOD NEWS: THE END OF REGIME CYCLES IN UKRAINE

What is the impact of the war on the Ukrainian regime? Can such an external shock break decades of regime cycles? In fact, there were anti-patronal attempts even before the full-scale invasion, especially after the Revolution of Dignity. First, the revolution brought a change in the role of the people and civil society in Ukraine's political system. While they had been overshadowed by the adopted political families before, they now wanted "a seat at the table," that is, to be involved in decision-making. Increasing social activism manifested in the mushrooming of anti-corruption NGOs in Ukraine, yielding initiatives like ProZorro, a digital platform developed by non-governmental actors and businesses providing radical transparency in public procurement (Huss 2023). Second, the decentralization reform of 2014 empowered local self-government and reinforced the autonomy of *oblasts* and regional power networks in relation to the central government. Third, the anti-patronal agenda was elevated to the rank of central politics with the landslide victory of Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019.

Zelensky is the first anti-patronal president of post-communist Ukraine. Although he was supported by an oligarch, Ihor Kolomoyskyi, he rose to power without being a chief patron himself or backed by an adopted political family. He introduced an anti-oligarch law in 2021 and pushed for several restrictions on oligarchs, such as prohibiting them from financing political parties, acquiring large-scale privatization assets, submitting e-declarations, and facing increased taxes. However, the battle was far from over at this point. Zelensky's anti-patronal efforts resulted in conflicts with oligarchs and other representatives of the stubborn structures of Ukrainian patronalism. Before 2022, the success of the anti-patronal attempt was highly uncertain.

The full-scale invasion brought terrible human and material damage, but it also tipped the balance in favor of anti-patronal forces in Ukraine. First, the oligarchs suffered heavy losses in the war, losing a significant part of their wealth, assets, and markets. Some of them, like Rinat Akhmetov, the country's wealthiest man, even support defensive efforts by launching lines for the production of military goods, acquisition and supply of military equipment and disbursing hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of aid to the Ukrainian military and civilian residents (Burakovsky & Yukhymenko 2023). The oligarchs choose wisely: even an anti-patronal president is better for them compared to Putin, a patronal autocrat whose oligarchs occupy a subordinate position (not to mention the mysterious deaths of several Russian oligarchs over the past three years (Petrov 2023: 8).

Second, as the state shifts into war mode and power is centralized, Zelensky introduces more severe anti-oligarch measures than before, including the nationalization of key assets formerly in the hands of oligarchs. The full-scale invasion brought a significant increase in Zelensky's popular legitimacy: according to the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index, the average trust of the Ukrainian population in the President, on a scale of 1 to 10, rose from 3.3 to 7.9 between 2021 and 2022, respectively.¹

¹ Data from the polls of Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD). Available at <https://www.scoreforpeace.org> (accessed: 25 January 2025).

By 2024, this number has dropped to 4.4, which indicates war fatigue but is still higher than the population's pre-invasion level of trust in Zelensky.

Third, Zelensky's wartime governance, unlike Putin's regime in Russia, faces autonomous feedback from two sources: Ukrainian society and Western donors. Both parties urge the regime toward anti-patronal transformation, as they need assurance that their efforts will not ultimately serve corrupt, oligarchic ends. Without social trust, there can be no sacrifice, voluntarism, or creativity; and without the support of Western public opinion, Western governments cannot sustain support for Ukraine, and credibility would be undermined if it were revealed that funds were being dissipated through corrupt channels. Alongside Zelensky's broader anti-patronal agenda, this also explains why corruption scandals are followed by severe personal consequences, such as the dismissal of Kyrylo Tymoshenko, Deputy Head of the President's Office, and Ruslan Dziuba, deputy commander of the National Guard responsible for the logistics division, in 2023.

At this point, we can answer the question posed at the beginning of the article: Zelensky's concentration of power and crackdown on the oligarchs is not the same as what Putin did in the mid-2000s in Russia. On the one hand, his emerging power network shows certain similarities to patronal networks. It is a pyramid-like hierarchy with personal loyalty of clients, such as Andriy Yermak, a film producer and close friend of Zelensky's who became his chief of staff. It is also based on increasing executive power at the expense of the parliament, a trend that Zelensky had started even before 2022 (Minakov 2023). On the other hand, three factors typically indicative of a patronal president are absent: (1) centrally-led corporate raiding, i.e., the takeover of rivals' companies using illegitimate state coercion; (2) the creation of an own oligarchy; (3) being or becoming a wealthy oligarch himself.

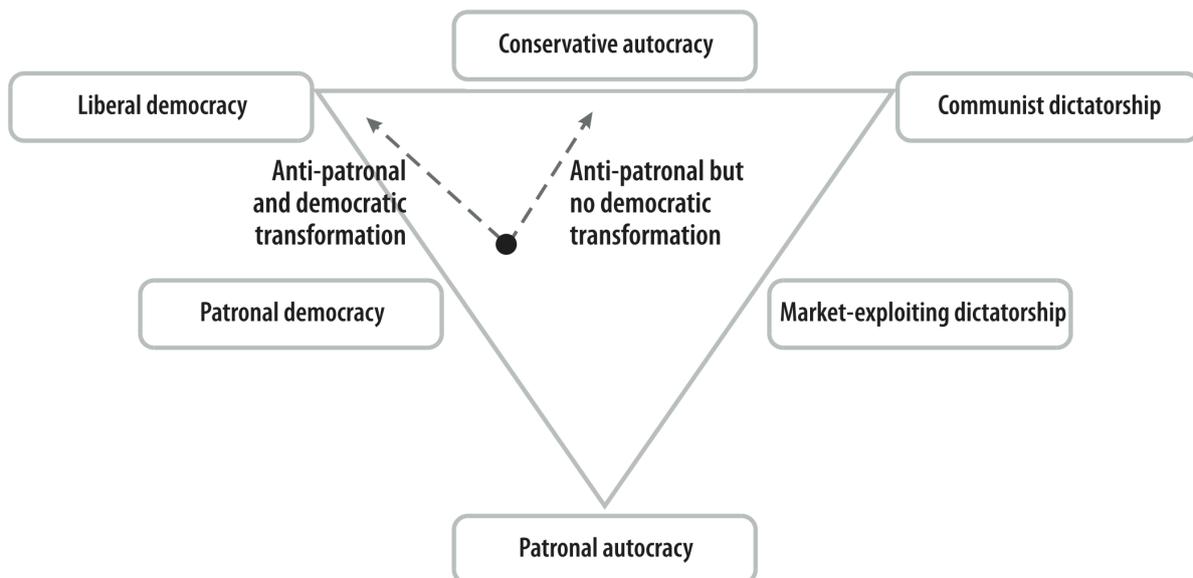
These three factors were signs of the patronal politics of former Ukrainian presidents. Ministries under Yanukovich became, in the words of a tax official, "weapons of the Presidential Administration against any business" (Rojansky 2014: 427) routinely forcing companies to the ownership orbit of his adopted political family. New oligarchs constantly emerged since the privatization period, among them presidents' family members like Oleksandr Yanukovich or Viktor Pinchuk, Kuchma's son-in-law. Finally, the presidents were typically rich poligarchs, using their informal ties to amass large wealth before and during their terms. In the case of Zelensky, we can see neither of the three factors. Wartime nationalization of oligarchic assets is not followed by targeted re-privatization to his clients, as it is often seen in patronal autocracies ("transit-nationalization") (Magyar & Madlovics 2022: 121–27). Unlike a chief patron, he does not dispense targeted rewards and punishments to loyalists and opponents; instead, he implements normative anti-oligarch measures, affecting even his former supporter, Kolomoyskyi, who has been placed under pre-trial arrest on charges of money laundering and fraud. Additionally, Zelensky has not enriched himself or his closest circle. With such forces in charge, the conditions are favorable for an unprecedented anti-patronal transformation in Ukraine.

4. THE BAD NEWS: EMERGING DICTATORSHIP IN RUSSIA AND THE THREAT OF AUTOCRACY IN UKRAINE

On February 24, 2022, a patronal autocracy attacked a patronal democracy. Three years into the war, both regimes have moved from their previous equilibria. However, while Ukraine breaks free from regime cycles, Russia is increasingly moving toward a more open dictatorship. The war brings formal organizations and chains of command (e.g., military, secret services, and state bureaucracy) to the fore, parallel to the devaluation and increasing vulnerability of oligarchic elements. Just hours after the invasion started, Putin repeated his 2003 meeting with the oligarchs by summoning 37 of them to the Kremlin. This time, however, the meeting was not about reversing patron-client roles but delivering a threat in a war situation to curb possible critical dissent. As in 2003, Putin’s words were backed by actions: retribution against critical oligarchs like Oleg Tinkov (who was forced to sell his bank at 3 percent of its value) and disciplinary measures within the patronal network signal the removal of even limited bargaining power of informal power-holders. Simultaneously, political repression has intensified in Russia: as Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski pointed out, there are more political prisoners in Russia today than during the Brezhnev era in the USSR (*Odessa Journal* 2024; cf. Reznikova & Korostelev 2024).

On the other hand, the possibility of anti-patronal transformation in Ukraine should not be confused with a straightforward progression toward liberal democracy. The development of a Western-type, ‘free and fair’ regime of political competition with separated spheres of social action is just one possibility that can emerge in the wake of de-oligarchization. Alternatively, it may lead to the development of a conservative autocracy: a regime that is non-patronal yet also non-democratic (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Possible trajectories of the Ukrainian regime after the war



In the post-communist region, we have so far seen two trajectories towards conservative autocracy. The first started in a liberal democracy, Poland, where after 2015 Jarosław Kaczyński began an autocratic attempt on ideological grounds. The other attempt happened earlier, and it started in a patronal democracy, Georgia. The latter was also similar to Zelensky's situation in that the president in question, Mikheil Saakashvili, enjoyed enormous social legitimacy after the Rose Revolution of 2003 and implemented a vigorous anti-patronal program of arrests, imprisonments and the trimming of corruptible state bodies (Mizsei 2019: 546–60). However, the accompanying autocratic attempt was reversed by electoral means. Kaczyński was also defeated in the Polish elections of 2023. For in these regimes there was no autocratic consolidation: since political actors in Georgia and Poland did not seek to patronalize the economic and communal spheres, competing autonomous structures were not abolished and elections were not emptied in the absence of an effective opposition.

In Ukraine, elections were suspended due to the war, and it is difficult to imagine them taking place before the invasion ends. Approximately a third of the population has fled the country, a significant portion of voters and potential elected officials are in the trenches, and election rallies and polling stations would be obvious targets for the Russian aggressor. While these factors make the absence of elections understandable, the longer the war drags on and the longer political competition remains suspended, the more the structures of pluralism are eroded and the inertia of the single-pyramid rule increases.

At the same time, the government was also empowered to violate various autonomies of civil society, citing the war and the prevention of Russia's hybrid influence. In the media field, a law was adopted on 29 December, 2022 under which the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NRADA, the members of which are appointed by parliament and the president) is able to temporarily ban the work of online mass media without a court hearing, issue binding orders to editorial offices, regulate the work of cable and online television operators, and cancel the registration of print media. For similar, war-related reasons, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which is seen by many as a Russian agent, has become an essentially persecuted church, with its activities banned in a number of cities, several of its priests stripped of their citizenship, and a presidential decree restricting its religious activities adopted in December 2022. With martial law being in effect, civil liberties have been curtailed, especially the freedom of assembly and expression with the ban on mass protests.

It can be argued that these are just temporary measures and represent a provisional suspension of the logic of democratic competition in times of war. However, in Georgia in the Saakashvili era, it could be seen that measures there were believed to be temporary, such as “cutting corners” (i.e., arbitrariness) in anti-corruption justice, can indeed become permanent (Mizsei 2019: 555–59). If we look at the history of “temporary” measures introduced in response to war emergencies, we can see that even in Western democracies, they were often not phased out once the danger had passed – they became part of the new normal (Higgs 1987).

The problem of democracy in post-war Ukraine is the opposite of that of the regime cycles. During the regime cycles, democratic transformation was not accompanied by anti-patronal transformation; now, after the war, anti-patronal transformation may not be accompanied by democratic transformation or the return to pluralistic competition.

5. THE HOPE: WHY DEMOCRACY IN UKRAINE MAY SURVIVE

Ukrainian democracy has a chance to survive the war. This is precisely what the comparative analysis with the Russian example shows. In the Russian case, the development of this fatal combination was a long, decades-long process. Putin's single-pyramid rule is the result of a systematic erosion of social autonomies, where an autocrat deliberately and incrementally subjugated, eliminated, and/or marginalized groups that were or could have been politically and economically relevant alternatives. In contrast, in Ukraine, single-pyramid rule arose from a historical moment: the full-scale invasion. Political competition is frozen but potentially "defrostable" because its sociological foundations remain in place.

Civil society groups are not oppressed but take an active role in Ukraine's patriotic war. As Hungarian military expert András Rácz put it, Zelensky's strategy is "socially inclusive warfighting" as opposed to Putin's "socially exclusive warfighting" (Rácz 2023). The level of commitment to democracy in the society is growing as well: in May 2023, a national average of 94% of Ukrainians said that it was important for them that Ukraine becomes a fully functioning democracy (as opposed to 76% in December 2021), and by this the three most important things they meant were equal justice for all, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections (Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition 2024).

Additionally, the Zelensky administration fails to pursue the systematic abolition of social autonomies. The fact that Zelensky is not inherently anti-democratic is also indicated by his electoral reform adopted in 2019. While the direction of such reforms in patronal autocracies (as observed in Russia, Moldova, or Hungary) has always been a majoritarian system to facilitate the incumbent chief patron's retention of a constitutional majority, Ukraine's mixed-member majoritarian electoral system was replaced with a type of open-list proportional representation. Indeed, Zelensky's concentration of power is partially a necessity due to the war and partially, before 2022, a paradoxical situation: to break the state capture by informal patronal networks, strong presidential power and the ability to act are needed.

Finally, the democratizing effect of integration into the Western international alliance system should be mentioned, in particular Ukraine's status as a candidate for membership in the European Union. As long as Ukraine actively tries to meet the criteria for entry, the EU's rule of law criteria can act as a brake on autocratic tendencies.

Of course, Ukraine's future is uncertain. It depends to a large extent on the outcome of the war and the country's ability to preserve its sovereignty. However, the current trends offer reasons for hope. For democracy in Ukraine to endure, we need to focus on these factors: the continued engagement of civil society (and thus the creation

of accountability, as it is possible, under war circumstances), the absence of self-serving autocratic decisions, and the democratizing influence of Western actors. With anti-patronal transformation underway, these factors have the potential to turn Ukraine's trajectory from conservative autocracy and, in the long term, make way for a transition from patronal democracy to liberal democracy.

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