

PUTIN'S RUSSIA AS A NEOPATRIMONIAL REGIME

Pavel Skigin

University of Pavia, ORCID: 0000-0002-3589-939X

Abstract. Classification of the current Russian regime is an overdeveloped although underperforming area of scholarly debate. The Weberian concept of neopatrimonialism, which is usually employed in the context of Africa and Latin America, offers a promising explanation of the persisting features of Russian decision-making; the latter proves to be independent of its institutional framework, thus rendering the entire democratic-authoritarian dichotomy superficial. Although scholars have employed neopatrimonialism (e.g. Gel'man 2015, Fisun 2012, Robinson 2011) for various research purposes, its specific applicability to Putin's Russia has never been examined in a dedicated work. This case study examines the neopatrimonialism approach and its heuristic prospects (1) by presenting the concept of neopatrimonialism and discerning its key variables of patron-client hierarchy, rent extraction, and conditional property, and (2) by identifying each of these variables with major traits of Russia's contemporary sociopolitical structure, including the "power vertical," Russian Railways' role in the extractive economy, and conditional private property. This study concludes by discussing *pro et contra* arguments

regarding the place and utility of neopatrimonial optics in the academic debate about Russia.

Keywords: neopatrimonialism, conditional property, rent extraction, Weber, Russia, Putin.

Introduction

“Since any order is better than any disorder, any order is established” – this Hobbesian observation by Adam Przeworski captures the current state of certainty about the classification of Russia’s current regime (1991, p. 86). The mere existence of the Russian Leviathan is the only fact beyond doubt, its genus and species being a matter of controversy. Is it an electoral authoritarian regime, a hybrid regime, a managed or defective democracy, an autocracy, a petrostate, or, perhaps, a fascist state, as asserted by Alexander Motyl (2016)? The answer would not only interest scholars, but it also would elucidate the country’s prospects and the probability of regime change (Fisun, 2012, p. 91).

Initially, the majority of researchers perceived the nascent Russian Federation and the other post-Soviet states as a part of Samuel Huntington’s third wave of democratization (1991), and they studied these states within the framework of modernization theory and transitology. However, the euphoria of Fukuyama’s “End of History” (1989) as applied to Russia did not last for long, as the country’s political development fostered skepticism concerning the teleological certainty of its eventual democratic transition. The “theoretical dead-end” of the traditional dichotomy of democracy and authoritarianism has resulted in a plethora of regime definitions “with adjectives.” The disappointment in the post-Soviet transition has also encouraged the application of concepts originally employed in the study of Third World countries—e.g., neopatrimonialism, which emerged in the 1970s under similar methodological circumstances

in African and Latin American Studies (Fisun, 2012, pp. 87–89). Samuel Eisenstadt, one of the authors of the theory of neopatrimonialism, directly connected the theory's development to the “critical attitude [taken toward] some of the assumptions of the first studies of modernization and political development” (1973, p. 8).

The motivating questions of this paper are the following: 1) Is the theoretical framework of neopatrimonialism applicable to Russia under Putin? 2) If yes, how can it be instrumental in enhancing our understanding of this regime? To answer the first question, I will present the concept of neopatrimonialism and discern its key independent variables: hierarchy of patron-client bonds, rent extraction, and conditional property; I will then relate each variable to a key trait of the Russia's contemporary sociopolitical structure, providing background details and descriptions of the considered phenomena. The second question will be addressed by discussing *pro et contra* arguments regarding the place and utility of neopatrimonial optics in the academic debate regarding classification of Putin's regime.

1. Concept of Neopatrimonialism

1.1. Theoretical foundations

The concept of “patrimonialism” was coined by Max Weber in his unfinished magnum opus *Economy and Society*, where he distinguished patrimonialism from both feudal and legal-rational, bureaucratic ideal types of government. Weber describes patrimonial domination as viewing

“all governing powers and the corresponding economic rights as privately appropriated economic advantages.” It is historically rooted in the household administration of princes, who regarded the realm as a *patrimonium* (“paternal estate” in Latin) and granted to clients economic and social privileges, fiefs, tax-farming licenses, etc. (Weber, 1978, p. 236). The essential trait of patrimonialism is, therefore, the lack of distinction between the public and private spheres of society, both being owned by the ruler as a source of personal wealth (*ibid.*, pp. 226–241).

Guenther Roth applied Weber’s concept of patrimonialism to modern states in 1968. In Weber’s ideal types of rule Roth discerns two distinct components: 1) a foundation of legitimacy and 2) a mode of administration. Roth goes on to argue that, although the traditional legitimacy of Weber’s patrimonialism is mostly absent in the modern world, its “actual operating modes and administrative arrangements” do persist, thereby justifying the application of this framework to modern political systems (Roth 1968, p. 195).

Roth calls these modern forms of patrimonialism “personal rulership,” although they require no particular concern for the ruler’s personality and are based primarily on material stimuli. Elements of modern patrimonialism are by no means absent from Western societies, where they take the form of factions or political machines that grow together with government powers. However, the proportion of personal rulership in underdeveloped countries is dramatically higher, while legal-rational bureaucracy is virtually absent, rendering these societies private

instruments of the powerful— “properly speaking, not states at all” (ibid., pp. 204–206).

In the absence of the economic integration present in industrialized Western countries, patrimonialism plays a major integrative role in underdeveloped countries. The political center or core in patrimonial systems revolves around the patron’s informal distribution of the state’s economic resources and privileges to the lower levels of the clientelist bureaucracy, in exchange for loyalty and support (Theobald, 1982, p. 550).

1.2. The Neopatrimonial System

Samuel Eisenstadt took Roth’s approach further by coining the term “neopatrimonialism.” Eisenstadt uses the term to describe developing countries with a political system wherein modern nation-state structures are interwoven with a patrimonial mode of administration (1973, p. 12). He argues that, being founded on elements of traditional authority, neopatrimonialism is usually perceived as being rooted in the past, as a rudiment so deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of a polity that the legal-rational type of rule fails to eliminate it completely. Hence, neopatrimonialism can become a form of traditionalist reaction to modernization’s failures (Gel’man, 2015, p. 458).

The co-existence of patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic types of domination is the distinctive feature of neopatrimonialism. In contrast to Weberian patrimonialism, neopatrimonialism retains at least a formal distinction between the private and the public realm in the form of a legal-rational bureaucratic framework of a “modern” state. This separation, however, is only observed if the personal interests of ruling groups are not

involved in the bureaucratic framework. Otherwise, two contradicting “systems of logic” would be present simultaneously: the excessive personal relations of patrimonialism would penetrate the bureaucratic legality and twist its “logic, functions, and output,” albeit without suppressing it entirely. In this case, “informal politics invades formal institutions” (Erdmann, Engel, 2007, p. 104).

The informal, neopatrimonial “core” plays the role of a *de facto* constitution for both politics and the economy, as it is encircled by the shell of formal institutions such as official constitutions, legal codes, and electoral systems. However, this shell acts not as mere camouflage for neopatrimonialism, but as a mechanism of power-sharing among ruling groups that increases regime stability by maintaining the balance of power among the members of winning coalitions (Gel'man, 2015, p. 458).

1.3. The Key Variables

The following “core” characteristics can serve as independent variables for classifying a given regime as neopatrimonial. These characteristics correspond to three contextual “variable sets” of neopatrimonialism delineated by Robin Theobald: characteristics of society’s political and economic factors, as well as the specificity of its bureaucracy. In his view, considering these aspects facilitates an understanding of why such regimes exist and helps to “differentiate between bureaucratic structures in societies at different stages of socio-economic development” (Theobald, 1982, pp. 558–559). I will employ the concept of extractive institutions by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson as an additional reference point for my argument below. The “core” characteristics are as follows:

- 1) **Personal rule through a hierarchy of informal patron-client relationships.** Decision-making is concentrated in one center of political power and exercised through personal ties. The rational-legal system is structured as a by-product of the patron-client resource distribution and matters only as much as it is instrumental – directly or indirectly – for securing and maximizing rent extraction¹ (Gel'man, 2015, p. 457). Acemoglu and Robinson define such political arrangements as extractive and point out their strong synergy with extractive economic institutions, which, in fact, “inherently depend on such political institutions for their survival” (2012, p. 92).
- 2) **Rent extraction.** Personal enrichment is the major, rational goal of the political class at all levels of government. The ruling groups consider the public sphere their private domain, using their formal position for the appropriation of public wealth. Thus, the functioning of formal bureaucratic institutions is aimed at the preservation and consolidation of ruling groups' power, in order to maximize the amount of rent and ensure the continuity of its extraction (Erdmann and Engel, 2007, pp. 109-110). Within the framework of Acemoglu and Robinson, this trait of neopatrimonialism would be described as extractive economic institutions “designed to extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset” (2012, p. 86).

¹ It is important to emphasize that the lack of an institutional façade can contradict a polity's classification as neopatrimonial. This aspect raises a substantial methodological question: how does neopatrimonial domination correlate with the other political and economic classifications? It will be addressed further in this paper.

3) **Conditional property.** The autonomy of political and economic actors in a neopatrimonial polity is conditional and can be reduced or abolished by an informal decision, which would be *post factum* formally legalized by the façade institutions (Gel'man, 2015, p. 458). Hence, ruling groups appropriate from not only public but also private spheres of society. Property rights are dependent on the political position and influence of the holder and exist as long as she possesses sufficient personal clout within the informal patron-client network to preserve it. The higher the level of engagement in economic activity, the more the established patronal network is necessary to stay afloat in such extractive institutions, “under which the rule of law and property rights are absent for large majorities of the population” (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2005, p. 397).

2. The Case of Putin's Russia

These key variables of neopatrimonialism can be observed in Putin's Russia as a particular constellation of formal institutional arrangements and informal practices of the political class, both of which are rooted in the country's history and in recent developments of post-Soviet power consolidation.

2.1. The Power Vertical

Henry Hale describes the informal hierarchy of Putin's Russia as a “single power pyramid.” Informal patronal pyramids, or political machines, are complex networks of patron-client relations called “administrative

resource.” They exist at all levels of society and operate via “personal incentives and private benefits made to specific individuals (jobs, contingent opportunities to gain private income, bribes, help with local problems, assistance to relatives, etc.) as well as explicit or implicit threats made to these same individuals” (Hale, 2010, p. 34). President Yeltsin’s “competing-pyramid” system in the 1990s witnessed the rivalry of many regional and corporate patronage pyramids of semi-autonomous regional leaders and so-called “oligarchs,” ushered to power respectively by swift decentralization and privatization.

Gaining control over these political and economic factors that emerged from these two major post-Soviet reforms was the primary task for Vladimir Putin, as he rose to power in the capacity of Yeltsin’s successor in 2000. By the end of his first two terms as president, Putin had transformed the informal patronal power structure into a “single-pyramid” or “power vertical” system wherein the “president has effectively combined the most important lower-level patronal networks into one large nationwide political machine” (ibid., p. 35). Putin controls the informal power vertical by distributing patronage to a network of various rent-seeking clients who all represent their own power pyramids, such as those of “inner circle” cronies, the military and secret services, industrial magnates, or loyal regional elites (Fisun, 2012, p. 92).

The power vertical is therefore divided into smaller, informal patron-client pyramids competing for access to rents, each involved in formal and informal subordination and a web of informal exchanges. The formal presence of competitive elections means that vote delivery also constitutes

a major resource in these exchanges. These power sub-verticals can be observed even within law enforcement structures, educational institutions, private businesses and NGOs (Gel'man 2016, p. 460). However, subordination and control are not the only functions of the neopatrimonial power vertical, as it also distributes selective incentives for increased access to rents that are not available for less loyal actors. Corruption under Putin is therefore not a side effect, but a vital part of Russian neopatrimonial governance, which can use both sticks and carrots to encourage clients to compete to prove their loyalty is highest of all. The most prominent example of such competition in the business realm is the rivalry between the oil and gas giants Gazprom and Rosneft. Russian law enforcement also experiences fierce competition for rent-extracting privileges, e.g., between the Office of the Prosecutor General and its formally subordinate agency, the Investigative Committee (*ibid.*, pp. 461–462).

Russian formal institutions are historically consistent with informal neopatrimonial rule. The late Communist regime in Russia demonstrated decay into neopatrimonialism, wherein personalism and clientelism both subverted and helped to maintain the formal bureaucratic party-state system. Thus, socio-political developments in Russia in the 1990s were shaped by Soviet neopatrimonial legacies, as well as by economic pressure and the need to build a new democratic institutional façade to secure legitimacy and fulfill essential state functions necessary for rent extraction under new circumstances (Robinson 2011, p. 441). Yeltsin's 1993 constitution established a super-presidential system with a technocratic

government that had virtually no political role play, as that role fully belonged to the president. This formal organization is also a direct successor of the late Soviet Union and its power distribution between the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of Ministers. It can even be said to echo the administrative scheme of the Russian Empire's entirely subordinate Committee of Ministers, which corresponds to the dynamics of informal neopatrimonialism, in which bureaucracy merely administers the state as the ruler's *patrimonium* (Gel'man and Starodubtsev, 2014, pp. 10–11).

To reiterate, the institutional and legal system of Russia as a modern state – its democratic constitution and division of powers, multiparty parliamentary system, private and public law – can be described as a mere shell, subordinated to the machinery of informal patron-client bonds. For political and economic actors, these neopatrimonial bonds determine their access to various resources based on personal exchanges of loyalty and capital, not on formal laws and contracts (Fisun 2012, p. 92).

2.2. Rent Extraction

Power maximization in politics and rent maximization in the economy constitute a rational goal for ruling groups. Putin and his close associates have achieved this goal by establishing a single-peak hierarchy that has maintained the stability of extractive political and economic institutions and solidified their dominant position in the existing configuration of both political and economic actors (Gel'man, 2015, p. 459).

The inner circle of the Russian president – consisting of his school friends, judo sparring partners, colleagues from the early 1990s, and

personal physicians – was instrumental in creating a network of personally loyal clients to manage key economic assets that previously belonged to independent power pyramids, in private and public sector alike. All the president's men (or, to be more precise, their personal affiliation with Putin and swift rise to wealth and power in the 2000s) came under international scrutiny after being targeted by American and EU sanctions, after the Russian annexation of Crimea and military incursion in other Ukrainian regions (Gardner, 2014). The largest single asset of Putin's cronies is his 1990s country cottage co-operative *Ozero*, explicitly mentioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in its sanctions announcement. One of its members, Vladimir Yakunin, represents an exemplary case of neopatrimonial rent extraction, having transformed the federal Ministry of Railways into a virtual private asset (Heritage, 2014).

Soon after Putin's accession to the Kremlin, Yakunin became the deputy minister of transportation and took over the ministry two years later. In 2003, a presidential decree transformed the Ministry of Railways into the state-owned monopoly Russian Railways (RZD), which was soon to become a joint-stock company under Yakunin's control. Its subsidiary companies could not take the losses from the extremely high tariffs RZD dictated and requested state intervention. In 2011, the federal government transferred coverage of transport operators' losses to regional authorities, who, in turn, did not have sufficient funds and requested them from the federal budget. This scheme effectively transferred taxpayers' money into Yakunin's (primarily offshore) accounts. However, the amount of rent available to Yakunin, according to his position in the power pyramid, could

still be increased. In 2015, upon the request of the RZD, the federal government drastically increased rail infrastructure fees, thus aggravating the public financial burden from commuter train subsidies and causing a complete shutdown of train in some regions. After direct intervention by the president, the trains were reintroduced, but taxpayers still had to pay the bills presented by RZD. Despite criticism of Yakunin in the media and calls for his removal as CEO, the personal patronage of Putin has made Russian railroads Yakunin's private holding, with all its functions subordinate to rent extraction. In sum, a former federal ministry and the state-owned monopoly of Russian Railroads (the largest employer in the country) were appropriated by a presidential crony, who turned it into a tool for rent maximization and left the arbitrary costs to public expense (Gel'man, 2015, pp. 456–458).

Yakunin's eventual forced retirement after the aforementioned commuter train scandal exposes another important issue of neopatrimonial rent extraction – its inherent limits. Such a weakening of state capacity by personal exploitation of extractive institutions – which, in this case, left millions of Russians without any means of transportation – cannot go so far as to entirely destroy the legal-rational shell of the modern state and drift into full patrimonialism. The rational interests of elites in rent extraction secures the existence of the modern state's basic functionality, which is critical for socio-political stability. The exact minimum is contingent and depends on multiple social and economic factors, which prevent popular unrest. In the case of modern Russia, these factors are mainly state security and the Soviet legacy of social security in the form of

state pensions and some level of free healthcare and education (Robinson 2014, p. 16). While securing the stability of a neopatrimonial polity, the limit of rent extraction also exposes the inherent tension between the traditional appropriation of the public sphere as personal wealth and its legal-rational framework of modern state structure (Robinson 2011, p. 437).

2.3. Conditional Property

One of the most prominent Western scholars of Russian history, Richard Pipes, employs the Weberian concept of patrimonialism to explain the entire history of Russia. He sees its primary cause in the lack of institutionalized property rights and, in the broader sense, in the violation of unconditional human rights by the arbitrary power of the state: “A despot violates his subjects’ property rights; a patrimonial ruler does not even acknowledge their existence.” This patrimonial legacy persisted in the course of modernization attempts by Peter I and the Bolsheviks, for example, because these attempts were undertaken by the same arbitrary methods. Having introduced the façade of the Western political structures while not adhering to the very concept of property rights, these reforms thus entrenched the patrimonial core, laying the foundation for Russia’s undemocratic and ineffective development trajectory (Pipes, 1974, pp. 22–23).

The Russian regime under Putin is an example of an economy based on conditional property instead of private property, meaning that one’s right to the control and use of an asset is dependent on one’s political influence. Façade institutions such as the formally independent judiciary branch function as an instrument of property requisition and redistribution

among members of the power vertical. Informal decisions to cancel one's property right are formally framed as a court ruling (Darden, 2010, p. 70). Apart from multiple negative effects on the economy, the persistence of conditional property raises the stakes for actors who are considering participating in elections or any other form of political activity. The fate of one's economic assets is informally determined by ruling groups, which selectively use formal legal procedures to reward loyal actors and punish disloyal ones (ibid., p. 72).

The exemplary case of arbitrary property redistribution is the "Yukos affair." In 2003, opposition figure, owner of the Yukos oil empire, and the richest man in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was put in jail, while his business was acquired by the state-owned oil company Rosneft – to the personal benefit of its CEO, Igor Sechin, who is another member of Putin's inner circle. Khodorkovsky was twice charged and found guilty of corruption and money laundering and was sentenced to 11 years in prison. He has directly accused Sechin of plotting his arrest and plundering his oil company: "The second as well as the first case were organized by Igor Sechin. He orchestrated the first case against me out of greed and the second out of cowardice" (Franchetti, 2008). In fact, the Yukos affair was a part of a larger Kremlin strategy to cow or confiscate businesses that could potentially be active in politics. In 2000, soon after taking office, Putin met with the leading business owners to warn them that they can count on retaining control of their assets as long as they comply with his wishes in politics. Khodorkovsky broke this "pact" by financing the opposition, thereby precipitating his arrest (Hale, 2010, p. 37).

In a state with conditional property, any uncertainty in political succession or regime change becomes hazardous. For neopatrimonial ruling groups, the costs of dissent, losing an election, or any other political participation are not tolerable, as failure would most likely mean losing all assets and freedom. Elite support for authoritarian rule can *inter alia* be perceived as a natural desire for secure property. This security is, however, unattainable in the long run, since any power vertical will ultimately come to a crisis of succession (Darden, 2010, p. 76).

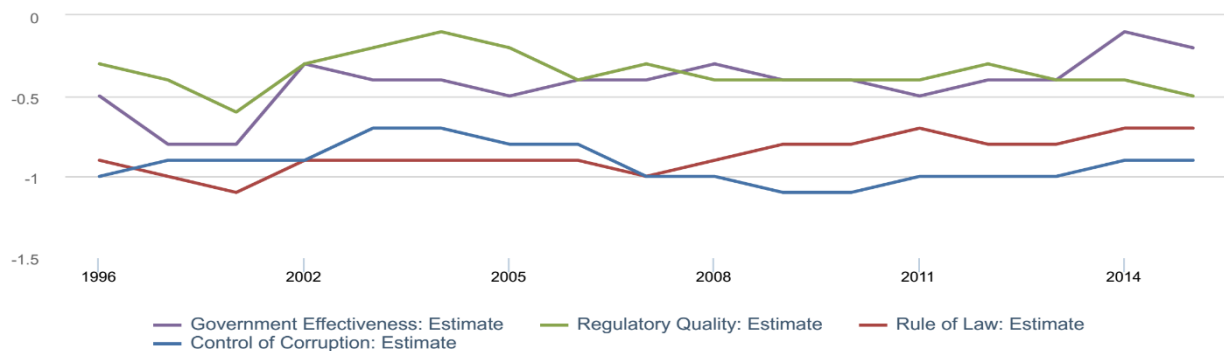
Another effect of the neopatrimonial fusion of economic and political power and the resulting conditional property regime is that Russian business activity abroad necessarily produces a certain degree of involvement in the domestic politics of foreign countries. Since being in control of any significant economic assets implies political influence within the informal patron-client framework, the presence of Russian companies means that they can use their patron's government connections to promote their business interests using state power, including military force, as it happens in many post-Soviet countries (*ibid.*, p. 78). Ukraine, with its strategically important gas pipeline and production of crucial aerospace and defense industry parts, represents the most striking example. In 2013, just before the Russian annexation of Crimea, 24% of Ukrainian exports went to Russia (Dunnett, 2015). Its banking, energy, and metallurgy sectors are still heavily dominated by the major Russian companies controlled by influential members of the Russian power vertical, despite three years of a *de-facto* state of war between the two countries (Yakimenko, 2016).

3. *Pro et Contra* Discussion

The primary argument for studying Putin's Russia as a neopatrimonial state is the heuristic potential. While the usual classifications of Putin's Russia as the hybrid regime of Diamond (2002) or the competitive authoritarianism of Levitsky and Way (2002) describe a polity primarily in terms of electoral politics, levels of democracy, or formal institutions, neopatrimonialism examines a deeper level of societal relations (Robinson, 2014, pp. 6–7). The focus on Weberian legal-rational institutionalization and the role of informal patronal relations offers an explanation as to why regimes with different political structures perform similarly on the level of decision-making and governance, and thereby render the democratic-authoritarian dichotomy a relatively superficial framework of political analysis. Any formal constitutional arrangement could be a mere “by-product of neopatrimonialism in the political arena” (Gel'man, 2015, p. 459).

For instance, notwithstanding a significant increase of centralization and a departure from democratic standards during Putin's rule, the data shows no significant change in the governance-related variables from 1996 to 2015 (Figure 1). The country's seemingly radical departure from the 1990s affected only the formal political façade; there was no impact at the level of actual institutionalization, since the prevalence of informal patronal relations has persisted. Russia remains within the neopatrimonial space of these variables as defined by Neil Robinson (2011, p. 444).

Figure 1: Governance in Russia (selected World Bank Governance Indicators)



Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators
Country : Russian Federation

Neopatrimonial optics enable us to explain such data by covering both the formal political regime and its underlying model of governance; the data cannot be reduced to either of these elements alone (Gel'man, 2015, p. 458).

On the other hand, neopatrimonialism is widely criticized as a catch-all concept attempting to explain too much and thus failing to explain anything at all. The relationship between the elements of patrimonial rule and legal-rational bureaucratic rule is never clearly defined, thus allowing virtually any regime to qualify as neopatrimonial, with far-reaching conclusions. Being, in fact, a hybrid of two Weberian ideal types of domination, neopatrimonialism shares all the usual criticisms of hybridism, including inherent vagueness and serving as a *deus ex machina* to support any claim or even contradictor claims (Erdmann and Engel, 2007, pp. 96, 114).

As an example, we shall employ the question mentioned at the beginning of this paper: the prospects of the current Russian regime. Scholars offer diametrically opposed assessments of this issue within the same neopatrimonial framework. Vladimir Gel'man contends that the regime's established neopatrimonial system is inherently stable, since its rational logic dictates that elites ensure "the preservation of a stable economic and social order, in which the ruling group runs unchallenged and maintains the relative well-being of the population at large" (2016, p. 461). The low level of institutionalization suggests that even an abrupt change of leadership and liberal reforms of the formal institutional shell would not be able to affect the informal patron-client relations at the core of the Russian political system. Any intentions of democratization would be eventually "emasculated and perverted by rent-seekers, who are interested in the privatization of gains from policy reforms and in the socialization of their losses" (ibid., p. 463). On the other hand, Oleksandr Fisun argues that the system is prone to intra-elite conflicts which may eventually lead to a "color revolution" similar to those in Ukraine and Georgia, understood as a "response by some influential elites to the enhanced enforcement and coercive functions of the neopatrimonial state." In the situation of economic recession and diminishing supply of rents, the competition of patron-client interest groups can subvert the stability of the established power vertical (Fisun, 2012, pp. 94–95). This criticism calls for a greater level of operationalization and delimitation of neopatrimonialism against cognate but weaker concepts like clientelism or patronage, but it does not refute the interpretative value of neopatrimonialism as such.

Finally, the neopatrimonial interpretation of the Russian political system provides a promising framework for explaining features such as persisting authoritarian tendencies by putting it not only in the post-Soviet and Eastern European context, but comparing it to a variety of regimes in Africa and Latin America, as well. As these regions have been studied through the neopatrimonial lens since the 1970s, a broad perspective offers more data for comparative analysis. Discerning neopatrimonial patterns in the political systems of countries with a high degree of dissimilarity also provides a wide range of opportunities for applying the Most Different Systems Design.

4. Conclusion

The concept of neopatrimonialism is derived from the works of Weber and used in the analysis of modern political domination. It interweaves patrimonial administrative practices with the legitimacy and formal institutional façade of the modernized bureaucratic state.

Vladimir Putin's governance of Russia serves as an example of neopatrimonial rule and contains all of its key traits. His personal rule through informal patron-client hierarchy takes the form of a consolidated power vertical, with different interest groups competing for access to public and private assets as sources of privately appropriated rent. The maximization and perpetuation of this rent is the driving force for decision-making at all levels of the Russian ruling class, resulting in a rational limitation of appropriation to ensure maintenance of essential public services and military capabilities. The destructive economic effects of

extractive, neopatrimonial institutions and conditional private property are aggravated by a vicious circle of political effects – i.e., elites' reluctance to take any political actions. The Russian neopatrimonial system presents the ruling groups with a “thoffer,”² the offer part being increased access to rent extraction in the case of compliance, and the threat being the loss of assets and possible risks for life and freedom.

Although the neopatrimonial approach may need some methodological refinement, it proves useful in identifying the administrative patterns behind the formal political structure of the modern Russian regime. It offers a glimpse into a deeper, informal level of governance, which is not covered by analysis within the traditional democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy or offered by concepts like hybrid regime and competitive authoritarianism. Ultimately, the neopatrimonial perspective on Russia's current regime opens a broad horizon for comparative research.

That said, it is important to appreciate that no conceptual framework can grasp the social reality in its entirety. Some approaches, like neopatrimonialism, are more instrumental in organizing the comparative analysis and enhancing understanding, some are less. Since a tendency towards conceptual unanimity or even lasting consensus would be counterproductive, definitional pluralism of multiple competing frameworks that amplify each other is not just inevitable, but desirable.

² A term coined by political philosopher Hillel Steiner. It is a portmanteau word, which blends “threat” and “offer”.

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