Understanding Party Politics in the Former Soviet Union

Authoritarianism, Volatility, and Incentive Structures

MAX BADER

Abstract: Party politics in the former Soviet Union is fundamentally different from party politics in Western democracies in many ways. Since 1991, two crucial aspects of party politics in the less-than-democratic former Soviet republics have been the impact of authoritarian practices on party politics and the volatile nature of party politics. Starting with the observation that the creation and operation of parties in the former Soviet Union is driven by elite actors, the author seeks to better understand these two aspects of party politics by studying the incentive structures for elite actors from both within the political regimes and outside the region.

Keywords: authoritarianism, incentive structures, institutions, models of party behavior, political parties

In the semiauthoritarian and authoritarian states of the former Soviet Union (FSU), political party creation and operation are essentially top-down affairs. With rare exceptions, FSU parties, whether they are the ruling power or the opposition, maintain shallow organizational structures, lack credible roots in society, and are operated by elite actors, including ruling regimes and wealthy businessmen. The high degree of electoral volatility that has been characteristic of party politics in most FSU states results not so much from changes in voter demand as from changes in elite actors’ support for parties. These actors have tended to regard parties as disposable “projects” that can be abandoned when the parties do not deliver the anticipated benefits. Considering the dominant role of elite actors in the development of party systems in Central and Eastern Europe, some argue that “much more emphasis should be put on understanding the incentive structures of elites that encourage or discourage stability [of party systems].”¹ In this article, I study the incentive structures of political party actors in the semiauthoritarian and authoritarian states of the FSU, a part of the post-Communist world where electoral volatility generally has been greater than in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Party politics in the FSU since 1991, compared with party politics in most of Central and Eastern Europe, has a higher degree of volatility and shows the impact of authoritarian practices. These characteristics can in large part be explained by taking the incentive of political party entrepreneurs into account. Volatility in party politics in the FSU is seen as stemming from the fact that elements in institutional design, most notably executive-legislative relations and electoral legislation, provide insufficient incentives for the creation of viable parties, whereas a range of other factors additionally hold back nonregime actors from engaging in party building or affiliating with parties. At the same time, actors within the authoritarian or semiauthoritarian regimes or with ties to the regime often have explicit incentives for creating “undemocratic” parties that distort the electoral playing field.

In the first section of this article, I identify the outcomes, and the scope of these outcomes, of party politics in the FSU since 1991, compared to outcomes in Central and Eastern Europe. In the second section, I look at the phenomenon of “elite ownership” of parties, a factor that greatly reinforces contingency and volatility in party politics in the FSU. In the third section, I discuss the ways the design of political institutions throughout most of the FSU depresses incentives for party building. In the fourth section, I examine the impact of authoritarianism on party politics through a discussion of the party types that dominate party politics in most FSU states. The next section synthesizes the argument about the role of incentives in party politics in the FSU and illustrates that argument by extending Kaare Strom’s “three models of party behavior,” originally conceived for the political systems of industrial democracies, to the less-than-democratic context of the FSU.

The geographical scope in this article comprises all FSU states that, at least formally, both allow multiparty politics and have not consolidated democratic rule. Turkmenistan is excluded because it had a single-party system until 2008. The Baltic states are excluded because they, unlike all other FSU states, made a relatively quick transition to liberal democracy after 1991.

Approaching the Third Decade of Multiparty Politics

Two decades after the monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was lifted, the party “systems” in FSU states can hardly still be thought of as “transitional,” or the parties that are available in these countries as “protoparties” that in time will transform into or be replaced by stronger and more durable democratic forces; by now, the party systems in the FSU should be taken for what they are. As multiparty politics in the FSU enters its third decade, the most common model of party system development features one dominant ruling party (a “party of power”) representing the regime controlling a majority of, or all of, the seats in parliament, typically along with a fragmented opposition consisting of weak and personalist parties that struggle to gain a foothold on an uneven playing field. Examples of this model are found in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Systems in Armenia and Moldova come close to this model, but their ruling parties are faced with stronger opposition. Even less pluralism exists in Russia and Uzbekistan, where the regimes manage not only the core of the party systems but also most of what amounts to virtual oppositions. Genuine opposition in these cases is effectively outlawed or marginalized. It is only in Ukraine where party politics contains a comprehensive degree of pluralism. Finally, Belarus is a special case in that the executive authorities there have not become substantially involved in party building, but meaningful pluralism is nonetheless absent. Naturally, the degree of competition in party politics coincides with the type of
political regime that is prevalent in the FSU states: those with highly circumscribed electoral competition are consolidated hegemonic authoritarian regimes (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) or have in recent years moved in the direction of hegemonic authoritarian rule (Russia).

There are several major differences between party politics in the FSU and Central and Eastern Europe. First, strictly speaking, what exists in FSU states in terms of parties should not be referred to as party systems, because conventional understandings of a party system presuppose a degree of continuity in the supply of parties over the course of several elections and the existence of patterns of interaction among these parties. In the majority of Central and Eastern European countries, one can speak of the gradual emergence of party systems, but in the FSU, the “fluid,” ever-changing collections of parties hardly qualify to be called party systems, although in a few of the most authoritarian states the current composition of the party system may be preserved for the following elections. Cases with a significant rate of party replacement especially should not be referred to as “inchoate” or “weakly institutionalized” party systems but rather as party nonsystems.

In practically every country that was once part of the “third wave of democratization,” political parties are subject to a “standard lament.” According to this lament, parties lack programmatic distinction, do not genuinely represent people’s interests, spring into action only around election time, are leader-centric, and are ill prepared to take up the responsibilities of governing. These defects, unsurprisingly, are rife throughout both halves of the post-Communist world. A diverse and sophisticated body of literature, much larger than that on parties in the FSU, details the deep-seated shortcomings and growing pains of parties in Central and Eastern Europe. A frequent theme in this literature is the difference between party politics in Central and Eastern Europe and in older democracies. The gap between Western and Eastern Europe, however, appears to have narrowed somewhat: a number of party systems in Central and Eastern Europe have stabilized, electoral volatility has gradually dwindled, and voters have turned out to be less versatile than might once have been expected.

Despite early suggestions that party politics in the FSU are settling down equally to Central and Eastern European states, voters in most FSU states are still confronted with a very different set of parties from election to election, and when they are not, there is little certainty that the parties that still exist in the next election will not be quite different. Rapid changes in parties are the clearest indicator of the fluid nature of party politics in the FSU. Individual parties, however, have been unstable in other respects, too. Parties have been subject to far-reaching internal change resulting from defections or the arrival of new leadership. The degree of change could be such that the affected party essentially becomes a different entity. Furthermore, parties often do not compete as independent political forces but as constituents of larger electoral coalitions that almost invariably prove to be short lived. Sometimes, the line between parties and coalitions becomes difficult to draw, contributing to the low profile of parties as autonomous political forces. Also, in some countries, once parties get into parliament, they tend to disintegrate into several rival factions from which new parties are sometimes formed. As with electoral coalitions, the distinction between parties and factions often becomes blurred.

A second distinction between party politics in the FSU and those in Central and Eastern Europe lies in the context of the political regime in which the party politics evolved. Whereas Central and Eastern European countries outside the western Balkans have become
liberal democracies, the countries discussed here, with the exception of Ukraine after the
Orange Revolution, have remained in the gray zone between democracy and autocracy, or
are under authoritarian rule.

Party politics in a less-than-democratic setting should be expected to display a different
dynamic from party politics in settings in which fair competition can be taken for granted.
This straightforward but crucial assumption is insufficiently appreciated in studies of party
politics in “third wave” states. In less-than-democratic settings, executive authorities
often intentionally distort the electoral playing field to tighten their grip on power or to
reap the benefits that are accessible to regime actors by virtue of holding office. Distortion
of the playing field is achieved both by checking the opposition and by becoming involved
in party building. Some regimes opt to establish a party of power that towers over other
parties in terms of finances, personnel, resources, and exposure. Regimes may also deploy
other types of parties, including satellite parties and spoiler parties, to keep a check on
genuine pluralism.

Competition between parties in less-than-democratic conditions is often less about poli
cies than about the rules of the political game. Elections may become “nested games”: “At
the same time as incumbents and opponents measure their forces in the electoral arena,
they battle over the basic rules that shape the electoral arena.” Moreover, the decisive
fault line in electoral competition is that of support for the regime versus opposition to the
regime, with little room for political accommodation. Opposition parties will often declare
democratic convictions an important motive in their struggle against incumbents, organizing
protests to voice their opposition to the regime. In the process, issue-based appeals,
which are believed to better structure electoral competition in democracies, are pushed
to the background. Finally, the party system configuration under (semi)authoritarianism
mostly lasts only as long as the regime lasts, because regime change often brings about a
radical shake-up of the party landscape. Party system change in less-than-democratic set-
tings is therefore mostly conditioned on the regime’s ability to survive.

Elite Ownership of Parties
The classic sociological account of party politics explains the origin of parties from societal
cleavages. According to the cleavage hypothesis, social conflict is translated into party alter-
natives; that is, different political parties essentially represent different groups in society.
The cleavage hypothesis presumes the existence of definable cleavages (e.g., along religious,
class, ethnic, or linguistic lines), which split up groups of voters. Together with institutionalist
explanations, sociological explanations, of which the cleavage hypothesis is the best-known
example, are dominant in theories about the origin of parties and party systems.

A number of authors argue that the cleavage hypothesis also holds to a considerable
extent in the case of Central and Eastern European countries. Whether or not this is the
case, there is little reason to take cues from the cleavage hypothesis with respect to FSU
states. At the outset of party politics in the post-Communist world, it was hypothesized
that as a result of the “Leninist legacy,” no immediately identifiable cleavages would be
present that could serve as the foundation for strong interest-based parties. Moreover,
post-Soviet states contained weak, embryonic civil societies, had political cultures averse
to the development of programmatic parties, and lacked meaningful experience with pre-
Communist multiparty politics, which in some Central and Eastern European countries has
contributed to the return of political competition after 1989.
For these reasons, the emergence of broad-based political parties with deep roots in society did not seem likely. Instead, the political party landscape in post-Soviet states in many ways resembled a tabula rasa on which a wide variety of players would try their luck catching the votes of a floating electorate. To the extent that parties or other political movements with roots in society did appear, the authorities have taken measures to limit their clout. In FSU states, legislation on the operation of political parties typically prohibits the creation of political parties on a religious, regional, or ethnic basis. In Central Asia, for instance, Islamist parties, with the exception of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, are banned. Regional parties are blocked in FSU states by the requirement that parties must present evidence that they have a certain number of members in regions throughout the country. In addition, party laws also explicitly prohibit the creation of ethnic parties.

Regimes also make life difficult for grassroots parties when they become active players in party building. The parties created at the instigation of the executive powers enjoy a competitive edge over other parties by virtue of the fact that they benefit from state resources. Grassroots parties cannot benefit from state resources, so they find it hard to attract voters, and their leaders and activists may be induced to defect to state-sponsored parties. The top-down creation of political parties beyond the party in power (which mainly channels support for the president) has been attempted in a number of FSU states. In the mid-1990s, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan admitted, “The fact that the party system of Kazakhstan was built ‘from above’ is its most specific feature.” Executive authorities under both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin have set up parties, which has resulted in a highly “managed” form of multiparty politics during the Putin administration. In Tajikistan, parties other than the party of power are said to have been created not so much by the central authorities as by local elites.

“The elites who are behind the creation of parties, whether from inside or outside the regime, are rarely tied to a verifiable constituency.”

The lack of a constituency goes hand in hand with a strong position for party leaders, who treat their parties as personal vehicles and whose association with their respective parties is often the parties’ biggest asset. In Armenia, the formation of political groups “centers on certain political figures, acquiring a clannish nature.” Characteristic of Georgian parties is an “excessive role of leaders’ personalities,” and a great measure of
“charismatic linkage” (following a party based on popular individuals) between parties and citizens works at the expense of “programmatic linkage” (following a party because of its positions on issues). With respect to Moldovan parties, Steven Roper notes that they “became election vehicles for individuals in which party ideology was second to the personality of the leader.” In Kazakhstan, “it is difficult to distinguish between [parties] on the basis of their declared platforms. The voters find it much easier to identify them by their leaders.” In Azerbaijan, “the differences among [opposition parties] center more on personalities than on political ideology.” And in Kyrgyzstan, opposition parties “have revolved around leading personalities rather than programs.” Internal democracy in parties with strong leaders and a lack of roots in civil society also suffers. In Georgia, parties’ “structures are democratic, yet this merely hides the real distribution of power inside the parties. More likely than not the leaders and relatively small groups of trusted people wield power.” In Kazakhstan, “parties, while declaring their democratic principles, are merely hierarchical organizations in which decision-making belongs to the leader and where the leader is much more important than the political principles.” The leader-centric nature of parties in the FSU is sometimes reinforced by voters’ preferences: in parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, “the voters went for personalities who represented parties rather than for party programs.” In Georgia, similarly, more than half of voters in a 2007 survey admit to voting for a party primarily because of its leader, and only one-quarter think a party’s program is more important than its leaders.

The Limited Leverage of Parties
Volatility in party supply and volatility within parties, which determine the fluid nature of party politics in the FSU, hinge on the lack of incentives for political actors to invest in the formation and development of viable parties. The absence of strong enough incentives stems from the limited impact of parties in political life. The limited role of parties, in turn, is largely predicated on the institutional makeup of the political systems of the FSU states. The elements of institutional design that are most widely considered to have an impact on party development are executive-legislative relations and the electoral system.

The Perils of Presidentialism for Party Development
On the continuum between regimes with strong legislatures and those with strong presidencies almost all Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) states are located near the presidentialism end of the continuum. As table 1 demonstrates, all CIS member states I discuss, with the exception of Georgia and Moldova, have had semipresidential systems, in which the distribution of power is tilted in favor of the president, for most of their post-Communist histories. These political regimes have been semipresidential according to Robert Elgie’s simple and inclusive definition of a semipresidential regime as “a regime where there is both a popularly elected fixed-term president and a prime minister and cabinet responsible to the legislature.” Because the actual distribution of power varies considerably in the approximately fifty-five regimes worldwide that fit this definition, Elgie distinguishes between different types of semipresidential regimes. Of these different types, the highly presidentialized semipresidential regime has by far been the most common in the CIS, as table 1 shows. Highly presidentialized semipresidential regimes diverge from the other two types of semipresidential regimes in that the prime minister in those regimes is powerless relative to the president.
Elgie’s definition of semipresidentialism and his typology of semipresidentialism are contested by competing definitions and typologies with different implications for what counts as semipresidential and which distinctions exist between different types of semipresidential regimes. The value of Elgie’s typology for the purposes of the current discussion, however, lies in its ability to highlight the strongly presidentialized nature of the FSU regimes. As Elgie points out, highly presidentialized semipresidential regimes “often suffer the same problems as their purely presidential counterparts,” and they may even be more presidentialized than some purely presidential regimes, a state of affairs that is sometimes captured by the term superpresidentialism with regard to the FSU.

There is a reasonable consensus that presidential systems are less conducive to democratic consolidation than arrangements with strong legislatures in states moving away from authoritarianism. Among other things, the “perils of presidentialism” include personalization of power, limited checks on executive authority, the blurring of prerogatives and spheres of accountability of the executive vis-à-vis parliament, and the absence of presidential accountability because of their fixed terms of office. With regard to political parties, it is argued that there is an “inverse relationship” between presidentialism and party strength. From the wealth of arguments linking presidentialism to problems with stable, democratic party development, four arguments have particular relevance to the FSU.

First, under presidentialism, the relevance of political parties is diminished as a direct consequence of the way powers are distributed. Most importantly, with the presidency being the main prize of political competition, actors will be inclined to place their bets on securing the presidency. While doing so, they often circumvent parties, especially in places where having party affiliation is considered a liability. Furthermore, whereas a parliamentary majority, typically consisting of one or more parties, is central in forming the government in parliamentary regimes, it is mostly the president, with or without ad hoc approval by a parliamentary majority, who is in charge of forming government cabinets.

### Table 1. Regime Types in Former Soviet Union States

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<tr>
<th>Presidential regime</th>
<th>Highly presidentialized semipresidential regimes</th>
<th>Semipresidential regimes with a balance of presidential and prime-ministerial powers</th>
<th>Parlimentary regime</th>
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<td>Uzbekistan (1992)</td>
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<td>Ukraine (2006–present)</td>
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under presidentialism. Particularly in countries where parties are unpopular and distrusted by the electorate (because the parties are controlled by elites and have no roots in society), presidents prefer nonpartisan, technical cabinets. This circumstance exacerbates the situation by prompting careerist politicians who are interested in taking up government posts not to join parties. Last, given that the legislature is the main platform for parties to manifest themselves, especially when parties are not involved in cabinet formation, legislative weakness reinforces the image of parties as inconsequential organizations.

Second, because of the centrality of the presidency, presidential regimes are more characterized by the “politics of personality” than are parliamentary regimes, in which parties rather than persons—partisan or not—take center stage. The personalization of politics works at the expense of the development of viable party organizations. Most party organizations in FSU countries are dominated by “big men” (rarely women) who personify their parties. Concomitantly, few parties have experienced leadership succession. Furthermore, following in part from the personalization of politics, parties in presidentialized regimes are less often of the programmatic type and tend to have a stronger electoral focus than in parliamentary regimes. Of the broad categories of programmatic, charismatic, and clientelist parties, the latter two types are more widespread under presidentialism. Although neither charismatic nor clientelist parties necessarily obstruct the consolidation of democracy, the effective interest aggregation and typically larger degree of institutionalization of programmatic parties fit with democratization more readily. Third (and related to the diminished leverage of parties under presidentialism), parties in presidential systems tend to be less cohesive, lending support to the suggestion that parties in presidential systems are differently organized than in parliamentary systems. Fourth, executive authorities in presidential regimes may have an interest in checking the development of strong parties that could potentially challenge the regime. Especially in a less-than-democratic setting, the regime might be tempted to block parties from becoming too influential, by amending legislation, detaining party leaders, or rigging elections.

**Electoral Legislation**

FSU countries have three different electoral formulas in national parliamentary elections: single-member districts (SMDs), proportional representation (PR), and a mixed system of SMDs and PR. The breakdown of this system is in table 2. Countries with SMDs tend to have less party development than PR systems. The main reason SMDs depress viable party development is straightforward: individuals, rather than parties, are elected. When parties are unpopular forces, as is the case throughout the FSU, candidates in SMD races have little incentive to join a party, contributing to the limited visibility and significance of parties.
A second reason why SMDs, whether combined with PR districts or not, have the ability to stem the development of a pluralist and competitive party landscape lies in SMDs’ propensity to sustain and strengthen regionalized political bases. In the less-than-democratic conditions of the FSU, however, regimes are reluctant to allow alternative power bases. A more serious threat to democratic development is the emergence of one-party dominance. In mixed electoral systems, the party list result (the outcome for the part of the election in which PR representatives are elected) for a party of power is often inflated by the outcome of SMD elections. State-sponsored parties of power, or other parties with larger resources than their competitors, are disproportionally successful in SMD elections.

Mixed electoral systems also have drawbacks. Such a system “involves the combination of different electoral formulas (plurality or PR; majority or PR) for an election to a single body.” There are at least two reasons why these systems have been detrimental to the development of viable parties in the FSU. The first is similar to the one already mentioned in relation to SMDs: candidates who receive the majority of the votes often refrain from joining parties. As a result, a large share of representatives are likely to be nonpartisan, a situation that decreases the leverage of parties and can accelerate the creation of unstable factions in parliament, which sometimes draw (former) members from party factions. Second, the SMD provides an alternative route for parties and individuals into parliament, holding back parties from merging into bigger, more viable forces and keeping individuals from seeking party affiliation. Individuals with no interest in joining one of the existing parties—as well as parties that see no chance of independently gaining representation in parliament or that, for whatever reason, abstain from joining an electoral coalition—have the opportunity to try their luck in the SMD section of the ballot. Because small parties often concentrate much of their effort on winning seats through SMDs out of strategic calculation, they do not spend as much time and effort on nationwide campaigning or developing a platform and a party organization as they might otherwise.

These arguments make clear that mixed electoral systems in the FSU have not turned out to deliver the “best of both worlds” of PR and SMDs, contrary to the expectations of
mixed-system proponents. In the “best of both worlds” scenario, “the PR system would channel activity into the parties, and the majoritarian section would create strong incentives to party consolidation.” Instead, the mixed system has in most cases revealed itself to be, in Giovanni Sartori’s words, “a bastard-producing hybrid that combines their defects.”

Besides SMDs, in a number of FSU states the opportunity to form electoral coalitions has provided a second alternative route for small parties and for individuals to gain representation. The fact that parties often team up with other parties in electoral coalitions has been a major driver of party fragmentation. Parties with no chance of getting into parliament on their own can jump on the bandwagon of parties with better prospects and by doing so win a small number of seats, despite their lack of an autonomous support base. For these weak parties, winning a few seats is enough of an incentive to not disband their organizations. Electoral coalitions, furthermore, work against viable party development by allowing movements (rather than parties) and nonpartisan individuals on their lists.

Electoral laws have also had a negative impact on party development when frequently amended or replaced. In most FSU states, electoral legislation has been subject to several major amendments. Consistent with the hypothesis that electoral laws are typically amended to benefit those who control the legislative process, amendments to electoral legislation in the FSU have been mostly driven by the intention of regimes to further tilt party competition in their favor. Abdujalil Abdurasulov views the recent adoption of pure PR in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia as giving the regimes even more opportunities to manage the playing field and to favor one or more state-sponsored parties, rather than as a measure to spur the development of a viable party system. The realization by parties that electoral laws are not fixed and may be subject to amendment in the near future heightens insecurity regarding long-term prospects, which could induce parties to focus on more immediate goals and put off organizational development. Furthermore, changes in electoral legislation also cause shifts in voting behavior, contributing to the party system’s volatility.

The overarching effect of the institutional framework in post-Soviet states on party politics has been the diminishing of “positions of leverage” of political parties. In brief, parties in the FSU are largely irrelevant (or, at best, not crucial) in the presidential contest and in government formation, presidentialism and electoral laws encourage a focus on persons instead of issues in both presidential and parliamentary elections, electoral laws provide alternative routes for nonparty actors and weak parties to gain parliamentary representation, and a number of party functions are substituted by electoral coalitions and factions in parliament. The limited leverage of parties is hardly a coincidence; executive authorities often want to constrain them. In Russia, for instance, parties “are weak because the most powerful politicians in Russia have made choices to make them weak.”

**Party Types in the Former Soviet Union**

Semiauthoritarian and authoritarian regimes throughout the FSU have directly interfered in party politics and, with the partial exception of Belarus, have themselves become “entrepreneurs” in political party building. These parties have invariably contributed to the distortion of the electoral playing field. A number of parties, consequently, are, or have been, unequivocal products of undemocratic practices. The most visible of these parties are the presidential parties of power, which are created at the instigation of the executive branch of government and which dominate party politics in most FSU states. The
less-than-democratic regimes of the FSU and actors with close ties to these regimes have created different types of parties that distort the electoral playing field. This distortion has meant that the political regimes of the FSU have failed to satisfy the minimal criteria of electoral democracy.

Next to the regimes, or more specifically the executive branch of government, a second type of actors—wealthy businessmen—have played prominent roles in party politics in FSU states by creating what are called oligarchic parties. In most semiauthoritarian and authoritarian FSU states, parties of power, satellite parties, and these oligarchic parties have covered all or almost all of the range of relevant political parties. Parties that do not have extensive resources at their disposal and whose primary or exclusive objective does not consist of maximizing votes or gaining office have rarely managed to become relevant forces.

**Parties of Power**

*Parties of power* in the FSU benefit extensively from state resources, are affiliated with the president—irrespective of whether the president does or does not have a formal role in the party—and, unlike other regime-initiated parties, are created with the purpose of becoming a dominant force in party politics. However, the dominant position of a party is presumably reflected in its control of more than half the seats in the legislature. Parties of power do not always succeed in becoming dominant forces, as the examples of Our Home is Russia and the National-Democratic Party in Ukraine show. Parties of power sometimes fail to get more than half of the vote but still succeed in becoming a dominant force because they attract “independent” deputies or win most contests in SMDs. Whereas One Russia (often mis-translated as United Russia), for instance, won only 38 percent of the vote in the 2003 Duma elections, it ended up controlling more than two-thirds of seats in the lower chamber.

Parties of power are designed to fulfill the key functions of amassing popular support, primarily in the form of raw votes, and binding elite actors to the regime. When they are successful in elections, parties of power send a signal of regime strength, which has the dual effect of seemingly conferring legitimacy on the regime and deterring possible contenders from attempting regime change. Binding elite representatives to the regime through a party of power has the effect of curbing the ambitions of the elites, who may oppose the regime’s interests, and of mitigating possible conflict between elites and the groups that they represent. To bind elites to a party of power, the party assumes the features of a patronage network in which jobs, economic gains, and other benefits are distributed in return for loyalty to the party and, by extension, the regime. By uniting otherwise disparate elites, deterring potential contenders, and conferring legitimacy, parties of power can make a crucial contribution to regime survival.

Because they benefit from state resources in electoral campaigns, the operation of a party of power implies an uneven electoral playing field. In this context, state resources can range from *administrative resources* (e.g., office, supplies, mobilization of public servants) to direct monetary transfers from state coffers to the party budget and the distribution of government jobs and other perks to loyalists. Mostly, but not necessarily, parties of power do not propagate a definite political ideology. For example, Nur Otan “purports to represent all sections of society” in Kazakhstan, and the United National Movement in Georgia similarly “claims to represent the whole population.”

In the rare event that executive power is split, multiple parties of power may simultaneously exist. During the latter years of Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency in Georgia, for
instance, a second party of power, based in the Adjara region, operated throughout Georgia alongside Shevardnadze’s main party of power, the Citizens’ Union of Georgia. Dominant parties of power currently exist in Azerbaijan (Yeni Azerbaijan), Georgia (United National Movement), Kyrgyzstan (Ak Zhol), Kazakhstan (Nur Otan), Russia (One Russia), and Tajikistan (People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan). The Republican Party in Armenia contains several characteristics of a party of power, but it fails to achieve uncontested dominance among Armenian parties. The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, which controls more than half of the seats in the legislature, despite being a Communist successor party, has also acquired some features of a party of power since Vladimir Voronin won the presidency in 2001.

**Satellite Parties**

In addition to a dominant party of power, or, more rarely, in place of a dominant party of power, undemocratic regimes may also engage in setting up satellite parties. Like parties of power, these parties are created at the instigation of the executive branch and benefit from state resources. However, satellite parties, although they do support the government, are less directly associated with the president and are not supposed to grow into dominant forces. The creation of satellite parties is testimony of a regime’s desire to keep all or large parts of the party system under control. Regimes that succeed in creating successful satellite parties next to a party of power are among the least pluralist and the most effective regimes in the FSU. Satellite parties are not always easily recognizable because their role in party politics is less obvious than that of parties of power and because their operation is similar to that of pluralistic parties. Regimes use satellite parties principally to appeal to parts of the electorate that, for whatever reason, are not prone to vote for the dominant party of power. If voters are induced to vote for satellite parties, the effect is that a larger part of the electorate ends up giving its vote to parties that are controlled by the authorities.

Often the simultaneous presence of multiple propresidential parties indicates the presence of satellite parties. The five parties that are registered in Uzbekistan are all satellites, since they “hardly differ from one another and are ‘government-friendly’ parties, which have been created on the President’s initiative.” Although one of these parties, the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, receives the president’s official backing, it is not the dominant party. All five parties, instead of being independent forces, are “support institutions of the new regime,” with each of them promulgating “some area of its activity which coincides with the president’s declarations.” As in Uzbekistan, the ruling regime instigated the creation of satellite parties in Russia to cover parts of a quasipluralist political spectrum. Thus, Just Russia should appeal to left-leaning voters (and drain away support from the Communist Party), whereas the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia mainly targets the protest vote, and the now-defunct Rodina party targeted the nationalist vote. In a few cases, the president’s relatives are placed at the heads of satellite parties, as is the case for the Asar party, headed by Dariga Nazarbayeva, daughter of the president of Kazakhstan, and Alga, once headed by the daughter of former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev.

A subcategory of satellite parties are spoiler parties, which are created with the sole and explicit goal of spoiling the electoral chances of opposition parties. Spoiler parties can fulfill this function first by enforcing schisms within the opposition, thereby weakening the genuine opposition, and, second, by confusing voters, some of whom may not vote for a genuine opposition party as they normally would have as a result.
Spoiler parties have been reported in Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries. Spoiler parties come in two forms. The first, which Andrew Wilson referred to as “clones,” copy outward features of existing opposition parties, such as party symbols and party names. The 2002 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, for instance, witnessed the sudden appearance of the Rukh for Unity party, which copied the Rukh party, and a “Renewed” Communist Party, which, its creators hoped, would drain away support from the major Communist successor party. The second type of spoiler party is designed to crowd the space in one part of the ideological spectrum in a given country, by assuming a stated ideological position similar to that of existing opposition parties. An example is the party Russian Civic Power, which advocated liberal values during the campaign for the parliamentary elections in Russia in 2007, imitating the more genuine liberal parties Yabloko and SPS. The intended effect was the division of the liberal vote among at least three parties, rather than two.

Oligarchic Parties
In a number of FSU states, wealthy businesspeople (oligarchs) have surfaced as prominent actors in party building. The principal incentive driving the participation of these oligarchs in party politics is to reap the economic benefits associated with holding office. Oligarchic parties in the FSU are reminiscent of the business-firm party type (a party led by a businessperson and operated as a corporate subsidiary) that exists in Western democracies. Like business-firm parties, the oligarchic parties in the FSU have shallow organizational structures and in electoral races strongly rely on charismatic linkage to party leaders at the expense of programmatic linkage. These parties are relatively successful because they can compete with regime-initiated parties in terms of resources. Coming from the pockets of wealthy individuals, these resources are private, unlike the state resources that feed parties of power and satellite parties. Like regime-initiated parties, oligarchic parties pursue the particular interests of their creators rather than the common good. Depending mainly on which position best serves their interests, they may or may not be in opposition to the ruling regime. The presence of oligarchic parties that are in the opposition indicates the inability of the regime to bind influential elites to the regime; it thus implies regime weakness.

Oligarchic parties were particularly visible in Ukraine before the Orange Revolution, when elites, tied to different regions and business empires, competed against each other. The two biggest parties in Ukraine then, the Party of the Regions and Yulia Tymoshenko’s Batkivshchyna, were, at least originally, oligarchic parties. In Kazakhstan, the preregime Agrarian and Industrial Union of Workers (called AIST) electoral coalition, which received the second-largest vote share in the 2004 parliamentary elections after the party of power, was a vehicle of the Eurasia industrial group, a major business conglomerate in Kazakhstan. The newly created Prosperous Armenia of Gagik Tsarukian, one of the wealthiest persons in Armenia, was equally supportive of the regime and came in second in the 2007 parliamentary elections. In Tajikistan, “business circles,” along with other elite groups, “are merely using political parties as a tool to gain or retain power.”

Incentive Structures and Models of Party Behavior
Parties in the FSU seldom have societal origins and are typically initiated by elite actors without an immediate constituency. Because these elite actors “own” their parties entirely,
an investigation into the incentive structures of these elite actors should provide insights into the dynamics of party creation and operation in the FSU.

Especially in the early stages of multiparty politics, party building in the FSU has involved much “small-scale political vanity, fanaticism, and whimsy, which have generated a penumbra of tiny ‘divan’ or ‘taxi’ parties.” The persistence of these weak and largely irrelevant parties in some FSU states is not easily explained from an inquiry into the motives of their leaders. Nonetheless, a key premise in rational choice approaches is that the more relevant political party actors largely behave purposefully. The principal rationale for the activity of these actors is the benefits that they anticipate receiving from electoral success. Borrowing from the terminology of political economics, they may be defined as political party “entrepreneurs.” These entrepreneurs may be divided into those who operate separately from the regime and do not have access to state resources, and those who belong to the inner circle of the regime and therefore have access to state resources that can be employed in party building.

Because of the limited leverage of political parties in FSU states and elements of institutional design, nonregime actors have had few compelling incentives to invest in party building. Moreover, incentives to create and sustain viable parties, to the extent that they did exist, have been offset by a number of other factors that have discouraged political actors from investing in parties. In some FSU states, for example, potential party entrepreneurs anticipate repression from the authorities when they engage in oppositional activity. Furthermore, in effective authoritarian systems, party entrepreneurs refrain from party building because they do not expect to gain electoral success in an uneven playing field. Also, alternative types of organization, such as financial-industrial groups or clan structures based on kinship, can act as parties with respect to aggregating and defending the interests of elites. A number of additional factors discourage individual actors who would likely be party entrepreneurs under different conditions from joining parties or from engaging in party building, including the poor career prospects in political systems in which executive posts flow to nonpartisan actors only, the poor electoral prospects for partisan candidates in SMDs in which parties are unpopular, the availability of “substitute” organizations with more effective mechanisms of interest aggregation, the likelihood of repression, and the limited chance of electoral success in an uneven playing field.

Despite the generally weak incentives to invest in parties for actors not intimately connected to the regime, parties have fulfilled at least the procedural functions that make parties indispensable in elections with more than one party. Many of these parties are steered by the executive powers in the FSU states or by oligarchic forces and were driven by stronger and more specific incentives, and incentives of a different type, than those of actors from outside the regime. Parties of power mainly serve the purposes of checking the opposition and providing a patronage network for elite actors. Satellite parties equally serve to pull in elite actors and keep the opposition small by winning as large a share of the vote as they can, whereas spoiler parties serve to drain away votes from the opposition. A more remote intended effect of these regime-initiated parties is to contribute to regime survival. Next to the regime-initiated parties, self-interested businessmen in some countries create “oligarchic parties” to win office and reap the benefits related to holding office.

A way to picture the incentives that drive party creation and operation in the FSU is by extending Kaare Strom’s “three models of party behavior” (policy-seeking, vote-seeking, and office-seeking) to the less-than-democratic context of the FSU. According
to Steven Wolinetz, “a policy-seeking party is one which gives primary emphasis to pursuit of policy goals, a vote-seeking party is one whose principal aim is to maximize votes and win elections, while an office-seeking party is primarily interested in securing the benefits of office—getting its leaders into government, enjoying access to patronage, etc.”

It should be evident that the regime-initiated parties of power and satellite parties are overwhelmingly vote-seeking. Winning votes has both a direct use (ensuring dominance in the legislature while marginalizing the opposition) and a more indirect use (signaling regime strength and binding elites) for the regime. Oligarchic parties are first and foremost interested in acquiring political influence through winning office. Regime-initiated and oligarchic parties in most FSU states are the only relevant political parties. Parties that are more policy-seeking than vote-seeking or office-seeking are active in the FSU, but few of them have gained a serious degree of relevance. A simple graphical illustration, after Wolinetz’s example, would situate these party types, which are the most relevant in many FSU states, as in figure 1.

Many actually existing parties in the FSU are, of course, functional hybrids with combinations of different incentives, and they would therefore rarely be found in an extreme corner of the triangle.

Vote-seeking and office-seeking behavior do not militate against democracy per se, as the presence of vote-seeking and office-seeking parties in many Western democracies demonstrates. The incentives underlying the office-seeking and vote-seeking behavior of parties in the FSU, however, are indicative of the impact of authoritarian practices in party politics in the region. Provided that there is indirect but positive relation between democratization and the weight that parties give to issue-based programs, the absence of relevant policy-seeking parties in the FSU would be problematic if competition between

![FIGURE 1. Party types and models of party behavior in the former Soviet Union.](image-url)
parties would not be *ex ante* skewed to the detriment of democratic and programmatic parties. Herbert Kitschelt anticipated that the political legacy from the type of Communist rule that was prevalent in the Soviet Union after Stalin—patrimonial Communism—would be more adverse to the emergence of programmatic parties than the types of Communist rule in most of Central and Eastern Europe. The reappearance, or continuation, of authoritarian regimes in the region further constrained the prospects of programmatic parties with roots in society, because the authoritarian regimes had an explicit interest in checking these parties. The impact of patrimonial Communism’s legacy on party development in the FSU therefore should be seen in connection with the political trajectory that these states went through after 1991.

**Conclusion**

With the exception of publications on Russia and Ukraine, not much has been written about party politics in the FSU, and very little of that takes a crossnational perspective. The paucity of scholarly research on political parties in the FSU should probably be explained by the fact that parties in the FSU have been starkly different from parties in Western democracies. In Georgia, for example, parties “were fundamentally different sorts of organizations from their western counterparts.” In Armenia, “no party fulfills the fundamental roles of aggregating the public’s interest, offering policy alternatives, or organizing meaningful debate over public concerns.” The inherent unpredictability of party politics in countries such as Kazakhstan, where parties “have been in a constant process of creation and dissolution,” has made the study of party politics in the FSU even more difficult.

Leaving aside more particular outcomes, party politics in the FSU has been characterized by a great degree of contingency and volatility, reflected foremost in party replacement, and by the impact of authoritarian practices. In this article, starting from the observation that parties in the FSU lack roots in civil society and are almost entirely driven by elites, I have sought to understand these outcomes by analyzing the incentives of political party actors. Different types of party actors, divided primarily by their position vis-à-vis the ruling forces, are driven by different incentives. Actors who do not belong to the inner circle of a regime have insufficient incentives to invest in party building, because the specific design of institutional arrangements (e.g., executive-legislative relations and electoral legislation) have limited the leverage of parties in the FSU. The cost of party building is furthermore elevated by the circumstance that independent party entrepreneurs in an uneven electoral playing field face high hurdles to becoming electorally successful. However, actors from within the regime, or otherwise with powerful connections, create parties that serve either explicitly undemocratic or strictly self-interested purposes. These parties contribute to distorting the playing field by benefiting from resources—either state resources or almost unlimited private resources—from which other actors cannot benefit. Often, it is only these parties that are truly relevant in the political life of the FSU states.

Regime-initiated parties are primarily interested in maximizing their vote share, whereas oligarchs engage in party building to assume office or to get close to office. The dominant models of party behavior in the FSU are vote-seeking and office-seeking; the third model of party behavior, policy-seeking—the most conducive to democratization—is virtually absent among relevant political parties.

Research on political parties in general is said to be infected with a “Western bias,” because most concepts that are applied in literature on party politics were conceived for...
a study of party politics in Western countries and do not readily travel to non-Western settings. A response to this bias for those who study parties outside of Western democracies should be to study aspects that are more pertinent to non-Western settings, such as informal practices and the impact of authoritarianism, and to take cues from other studies of party politics in non-Western settings. With regard to the FSU, studies of party politics should specifically pay heed to the elite-driven nature of party politics and the less-than-democratic political context there, which has a crucial impact on what parties are created and what purposes these parties serve. Considering the elite-driven nature of party politics in the FSU, investigating the incentive structures of those who are behind the creation and operation of parties is one approach that can produce greater insight into the dynamics of party politics in these settings.

NOTES

3. The term hegemonic authoritarianism is used here in line with Philip G. Roessler and Marc M. Howard’s use of the term in their classification of regime types. Roessler and Howard, “Measuring and Analyzing Post-Cold War Political Regimes” (paper, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, August 30–September 2, 2007).


50. Herbert Kitschelt, “Party Systems in East Central Europe: Consolidation or Fluidity?” (SSP 241, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1995).
52. Kitschelt observes that “clientelist democracy has proved durable and has commanded sufficient support to institutionalize and entrench itself for long periods in a variety of polities.” Kitschelt, “Linkages between Citizen and Politicians in Democratic Politics,” 872. Zsolt Enyedi suggests that charismatic leadership in parties at the expense of the visibility of a party program, common to party politics in Central and Eastern Europe, can strengthen party systems. Enyedi, “Party Politics in Post-Communist Transition,” in Katz and Crotty, Handbook of Party Politics, 230 (see n4).
53. John M. Carey, “Getting Their Way, or Getting in the Way? Presidents and Party Unity in Legislative Voting” (paper, American Political Science Association, Boston, August 2002); and
60. D’Anieri, *Understanding Ukrainian Politics*, 159.
74. Yalcin, “The Formation of a Multiparty System” (see n24).
82. Mullojanov, “Party Building in Tajikistan,” 88 (see n26).
84. Wilson and Birch, “Political Parties in Ukraine,” 54 (see n27).
86. Strom, “Behavioral Theory” (see n2).
87. Henry Hale provides a comprehensive account of how the existence of substitute organizations to political parties has contributed to the weakness of political parties in Russia. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
88. Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair divide political party functions into representative functions and procedural functions. Bartolini and Mair, “Challenges to Contemporary Political Parties,” in Diamond and Gunther, *Political Parties and Democracy*, 332 (see n21).
89. Strom, “Behavioral Theory.”
91. Ibid., 161.
92. Croissant, “Electoral Politics in Southeast and East Asia,” 346 (see n14).
93. Kitschelt, “Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies” (see n21).
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