

**Pluralism by Default and the Sources
of Political Liberalization in Weak States¹**

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I. Introduction

Despite the fact that a majority of countries in the world are not democracies, remarkably little recent work has been done on the emergence and persistence of authoritarian regimes.² The creation of authoritarian regimes has mostly been treated as a residual outcome – something that happens when democracy doesn’t rather than as an endeavor that requires state and organizational capacity to accomplish.³ Such a one-sided focus on the democratic end of the transition process has not only blinded us to the wider variety of possible regime types that emerged in the 1990s (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002a) but also, I argue in this paper, inhibited our understanding of why pluralistic⁴ and quasi democratic politics appeared and persisted in so many inhospitable environments such as Africa and the former Soviet Union.

This paper focuses on regime trajectories and the challenges of authoritarian state building in Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, which like many other countries in the developing world suffer from a set of historical and institutional characteristics that would seem to undermine democratic development – a lack of democratic history, weak civil society, weak rule of law, and relative international isolation. Despite such obstacles, all four countries experienced relatively pluralistic politics at the beginning of the 1990s – hovering somewhere between democratic and competitive authoritarian (Levitsky and Way 2002a)⁵ or hybrid rule.

In order to fully understand the development of pluralism in inhospitable environments like the former Soviet Union, we need to broaden our analytic framework beyond an exclusive focus on democratic institution building. Some cases are better understood as failed authoritarian regimes rather than as struggling democracies. In the early 1990s, all four countries experienced varying degrees of *pluralism by default*, a form of democratic political competition specific to weak states lacking a robustly institutionalized civil society and rule of law. Pluralism by default describes cases in which the proximate source of political competition is less a robust civil society, strong democratic institutions or democratic leadership and much more *the inability of incumbents to enforce authoritarian rule*. In the former Soviet Union, elite-level disorientation, fragmentation and state weakness created by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent fiscal crisis helped to undermine incumbent capacity to prevent allies from becoming opponents, control the legislature, impose censorship, manipulate elections successfully, or use force against political opponents. Incumbent

² Recent exceptions include McFaul 2002, Snyder 2001, and Luebbert 1991.

³ The work of Philip Roeder 1994, 2001 is an important exception. See also McFaul 2002, Jones Luong 2002.

⁴ In this paper, I distinguish between “pluralism” and “democracy.” Pluralism (as opposed to monism) refers broadly to the existence of important areas of political competition. By contrast, “democracy” refers more narrowly to a specific set of institutional practices. Democratic regimes meet four minimum criteria: (1) executives and legislatures are chosen through elections that are open, free, and fair; (2) virtually all adults possess the right to vote; (3) civil and political liberties are broadly protected; and (4) elected authorities are not subject to the tutelary control of military or clerical leaders. Regimes may be pluralist even though they fail to meet this definition of democracy.

⁵ In such regimes, civil liberties and political rights are regularly abused; however key democratic institutions such as elections, the media, courts and the legislature continue to shape political competition in important ways. Elections often generate considerable uncertainty, and autocratic incumbents must therefore take them seriously.

weakness created at least a temporary space for pluralism to emerge where structural conditions were otherwise inhospitable for democratic development.

However, in the absence of consistent western pressure via the European Union or other institutions, Soviet institutional legacies characterized by a weak civil society, weak rule of law and the relative concentration of resources in state hands, have over time allowed incumbents to monopolize greater political control. Thus, all four countries became increasingly autocratic by the end of the 1990s – although to very different degrees. Where pluralism has been the outgrowth of elite-level disorientation alone rather than more fundamental elite cleavages – as in Belarus in the early 1990s— liberalization has been relatively short-lived. Where incumbent incapacity has flowed from elite polarization and state weakness (Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine), pluralism has been more robust. Finally, where elite polarization and fragmentation have been the most severe (Moldova), pluralism has been the most robust and lasted the longest.

A focus on the problems of authoritarian state building puts the transition process in a new light. Liberalization and democratic consolidation have generally been understood as part of a single continuum. However in some cases, they may be elements of very different processes. Moving beyond an exclusive concentration on democratic institution building reveals key factors that support greater political competition but *simultaneously* undermine democratic consolidation. State weakness, fiscal collapse, and elite polarization over national territory obviously do not promote democracy. Yet, these are precisely the factors that in the post-Soviet and African contexts have sometimes been key to undercutting authoritarian consolidation and encouraging greater pluralism (Levitsky and Way 2002b).

The second section of this paper reviews regime trajectories in Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine in the 1990s. The third section evaluates standard approaches to regime development in light of the post-Soviet experience and explores the relationship between incumbent capacity and authoritarianism in personalistic or weak states that lack a strong civil society and have a weak rule of law. The fourth section argues that competitive regimes in the area represent varying degrees of pluralism by default. Despite the anti-democratic legacies of Soviet rule, elites in some cases have been too inexperienced and fragmented and the state too weak to consistently impose authoritarian rules of the game. The fifth part explores the roots of different regime trajectories in the four countries. Finally in section six, I discuss the relationship between pluralism by default and effective governance in personalistic or weak states.

II. The Puzzle: Regime Trajectories in the Former Soviet Union

An examination of the development of competitive politics in the region reveals two sets of patterns that require explanation. (1) All four countries, together with other non-Baltic post-Soviet countries, were relatively pluralistic in the early 1990s but became less so over time. (2) At the same time, the four countries emerged from the 20th century with very different regime types.

Moldova: Among non-Baltic post-Soviet countries, Moldova has had the most dynamic and competitive politics throughout the 1990s and has come very close to

meeting standard minimum definitions of democracy. First, elections have been extremely competitive. Over the last ten years, two elected Presidential incumbents have lost power according to democratic rules of the game – more than any other non-Baltic post-Soviet country.⁶ In addition, the Constitutional Court in Moldova has been influential in shaping the balance of power between different branches of government and the media has represented a wide range of views (Way 2002b). Finally, parliament has consistently been very powerful and able to balance the power of the President. In 2000-2001, Moldova became a parliamentary regime.

Yet, like most other countries in the region, there are strong signs of creeping authoritarianism in Moldova. In 2001, the Communist Party of Moldova won an overwhelming 70% of seats in parliament. The Party has made significant efforts to crack down on press criticism and to limit court autonomy (Way 2002b).⁷

Ukraine: Ukraine, in contrast to Moldova, is best described as a hybrid⁸ or *competitive authoritarian* regime. In such regimes, which are common in Africa, East Asia, and to a lesser extent in central Europe and Latin America (Levitsky and Way 2002a), civil liberties and political rights are regularly abused; however key democratic institutions such as elections, the media, courts and the legislature continue to shape political competition in important ways. “Although the electoral process may be characterized by large-scale abuses of state power, biased media coverage, (often violent) harassment of opposition candidates and activists, and an overall lack of transparency, elections are regularly held and competitive” in that major opposition forces usually participate and sometimes win (Levitsky and Way 2002a: 55). As a result, elections often generate considerable uncertainty, and autocratic incumbents must therefore take them seriously.

In Ukraine, despite regular harassment of the media⁹ and electoral manipulation,¹⁰ the media has managed to represent a relatively broad range of views (Nahaylo 1993: 5) and elections have often been highly competitive. In 1994, incumbent President Leonid Kravchuk lost to Leonid Kuchma, a former Prime Minister. Since Kuchma’s election, Ukraine has remained competitive authoritarian at the same time that power has become increasingly monopolized by the executive. Since the early and mid 1990s, the President

⁶ In 1996, incumbent President Mircea Snegur lost power to Petru Lucinschi. Then, five years later, Lucinschi stepped aside after parliament voted in a parliamentary system according to constitutionally prescribed procedures. In addition, parliamentary elections in 1994, 1998, and 2001 all witnessed important shifts in party make-up.

⁷ In the spring of 2002, journalists unsuccessfully struck against perceived censorship in the state media. An anchorman who publicized the demands of the strikers was subsequently let go. In late November, the government attempted to shut down the oppositionist *Kommersant Moldovy*. In the fall of 2002, journalists were detained on charges of blackmail and then released – apparently in an effort by the Moldovan government to prevent the publication of compromising material on the State Security Service (RFE/RL Newline October 11, 2002). In addition, the Communists have also made efforts to put the courts under unilateral parliamentary control. By February 2002, more than two thirds of judges had been replaced.

⁸ For a discussion of hybrid regimes, see Fish (2001), Roeder (1994), Karl (1995) and the April 2002 issue of *Journal of Democracy*.

⁹ Thus, in August 1992, the Ukrainian Writers Union complained about “the almost blatant censorship of television and radio programs, and the press, where at all costs, criticism of the government and the situation in Ukraine is avoided” (cited in Roeder 1994: 79). The private television station, Gravis, was forced to reduce its air time during the 194 elections in what was widely perceived to be a response to its pro-Kuchma stance (European Institute for the Media 1994b).

¹⁰ See Democratic Elections in Ukraine 1994.

has managed to grab increasing powers from parliament – including the de facto right to hand pick Prime Ministers. Simultaneously, press freedom became more restricted¹¹ and electoral manipulation has become increasingly systematic (ODIHR 1999).¹² At the same time, Ukraine has not become fully authoritarian – as evidenced by the fact that Kuchma has agreed to step down because of term limits and the continued existence of a vocal opposition in the legislature.

Russia: Like Ukraine, Russia has remained competitive authoritarian since 1991 but has become increasingly autocratic. Throughout the 1990s, despite regular harassment of the media (cf. Fish 2001, Remnick 1997) and notable electoral manipulation and falsification (cf. McFaul and Petrov 1998: 319), the media represented a wide range of views and elections were generally competitive. Yet, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, Putin had managed to concentrate power increasingly in his hands. The main independent television station that had provided important criticism of the government was effectively tamed after being taken over by creditors with close ties to the government. Simultaneously, the legislature became increasingly compliant and less openly oppositionist (cf. Shevtsova 2002: 32).

Belarus': Since 1991, Belarus has developed from a relatively authoritarian variant of competitive authoritarianism in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich into a highly closed authoritarian regime under President Aleksandr Lukashenka, who is in power today. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, political competition and freedom in Belarus significantly increased for several years – culminating in an electoral defeat of the incumbent Prime Minister Kebich in 1994. While the media was censored to a much greater than in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine in the early 1990s,¹³ Belarusian newspapers represented a relatively wide range of views. However, by 1993 and 1994, the parliamentary majority and Prime Minister Kebich had almost entirely reasserted control.¹⁴

The victory of Aleksandr Lukashenka in the 1994 Presidential elections represented a sharp increase in authoritarian rule in Belarus. Lukashenka successfully took on the entire Belarusian elite and concentrated power tightly in his hands. He dissolved parliament in 1996 and successfully changed the constitution to put future parliaments securely under his control.

The deterioration of pluralism in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and to a lesser extent in Moldova is mirrored throughout much of the non-Baltic former Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan, for example, competitive authoritarian elections in 1992 were followed by a coup which eventually brought to power Heidar Aliyev, who imposed highly

¹¹ Media coverage appears to have been more balanced in the 1994 than in the 1999 presidential elections (ODIHR 1999: 21-22). In 2000, Kuchma was accused of instigating the murder of an independent journalist – something that never happened under Kravchuk or in Moldova.

¹² The Voters Committee of Ukraine reported that “the [2002 parliamentary] election was the worse of the three parliamentary ballots in Ukraine since 1992” (RFE/RL 9 April).

¹³ In April 1994, prior to Lukashenka’s election, Belarus received a press freedom ranking of not free (66); while Ukraine and Moldova received scores (XX in Russia, 44 in Ukraine and 41 in Moldova) suggesting increasing levels of press freedom (Freedom House 1994).

¹⁴ In 1992, parliament simply ignored a petition drive by the nationalists to call for a referendum on early elections – even though the government admitted that they had collected the legally required number of signatures. Despite the fact Belarus was a parliamentary republic, parliament was, according to most accounts remarkably weak (Mihalisko 1997: 252).

authoritarian rule. Similar developments took place in Armenia, where political competition became increasingly squeezed in the 1990s (Masih and Krikorian 1999). Central Asian regimes also seem to have become less competitive over the course of the 1990s – although the overall level of pluralism was generally low to begin with compared to the western part of the former Soviet Union.

In sum, this analysis yields two puzzles: (1) What explains the fact Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, together with other non-Baltic post-Soviet countries, were all relatively pluralistic in the early 1990s but became less so over time? (2) Why did the countries emerge with such different regime types by the beginning of the 21st century?

III. Understanding the puzzle of competitive politics in weak states

While the fate of pluralism in the former Soviet Union has not met the more optimistic predictions of the early 1990s, the extent and persistence of political competition in the area is still remarkable given the range of factors arrayed against democratic development. Institutional legacies of the old regime – common to other parts of the world such as Africa – have weighed heavily on the development of democracy that had virtually no history in the region. Specifically, a weak rule of law inherited from the old regime has made it easier for incumbents to use nominally non-partisan state institutions – such as the tax administration¹⁵ and security agencies – to weaken political opposition. In addition, a relatively weak civil society and the concentration of resources in state hands have undercut government opposition and favored non-democratic rule. Today, there are relatively few non-governmental organizations that could survive in the absence of western funding and parties are also extraordinarily weak. Any analysis of political competition therefore needs to explain how such obstacles have been overcome.

So how do we account for the very real if flawed political competition in the region? Recent discussions of regime change have emphasized explanations rooted in elite attitudes as well as institutional design.¹⁶ Such approaches, however, do little to help us understand political competition in the area. First, political competition was not the outgrowth of a democratically inclined leadership. Executives in all four countries were former members of the Communist era elite who demonstrated the willingness to use extra-legal tactics to stay in power and/or reduce their exposure to public criticism. Yeltsin in Russia, for example, bombed a recalcitrant parliament in 1993 and came extremely close to canceling Presidential elections in 1996 that he thought he might lose (Yeltsin 2000: 23-25).¹⁷

¹⁵ Throughout the former Soviet Union, tax audits and fines have been used by incumbents to intimidate and discredit potential sources of opposition. (cf. Darden 2001).

¹⁶ Robert Moser, summarizing a recent collection of essays on Russian politics, suggests that the problems of Russian democracy “arose primarily from poor elite decisions and institutional design” (Moser 2001: 10). On elite attitudes and decisions, see Di Palma (1990), Fish (1998), and McFaul (2002). On institutional design, see Linz and Valenzuela (1994), and Fish (2001).

¹⁷ All of the other leaders exhibited similar tendencies. In Belarus, Kebich severely restricted criticism in the media (see above). There were also problems in Moldova. In the 1991 presidential elections, Snegur faced no competition when supporters manipulated the law on Presidential elections in such a way as to exclude Snegur’s most serious potential rivals. Finally, Kravchuk in Ukraine also made use of extra legal means to reduce criticism and competition. For a discussion of Kravchuk’s behavior, see also Nahaylo 1992.

In addition, while studies of institutional design have made important contributions, this approach would seem to be less useful in understanding regime trajectories in the area. In countries such as those in the former Soviet Union with weak or fragile political institutions, constitutional choices often do not “lock in” as is often assumed. The longer-term effects of democratic “crafting” (Di Palma 1990) are often quite meager. Rather, institutions are frequently designed, and redesigned, by incumbents seeking to extend their power (Easter 1997). Thus, autocratic incumbents transformed parliamentary systems into presidential systems in many African countries in the 1960s. Similarly, President Yeltsin imposed hyper-presidential constitutions *after* carrying out a coup in 1993, and Aleksandr Lukashenka had little difficulty transforming Belarus’s parliamentary republic into the most autocratic presidential regime in Europe.

Another approach is to see political competition as the outgrowth of emerging civil society in the area (cf. Lewin 1988; Barkan 1993). While not nearly as developed as in the west (cf. Howard 2002), non-governmental organizations are significantly more developed today than they were in the Soviet era. Yet, civil society approaches would seem to predict *an increase* rather than *a decrease* in pluralism over time in the post-Soviet context. As groups grow and become more institutionalized in the post-Soviet context of greater openness, the strength of democratic institutions should grow accordingly. Democracy should also become more consolidated or institutionalized over time with the experience of more elections. But, as shown above, this is pretty much the opposite of what actually happened.

A much more promising approach focuses on the changing character of the international environment in the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a period of Western liberal hegemony of unprecedented scope that increased the cost of building and sustaining authoritarian regimes in several ways. The evaporation of alternative sources of military and economic support increased the costs of non-democratic rule and created an incentive for elites in developing countries to remain on good terms with Western governments. Other forms of international influence included demonstration effects, direct state-to-state pressure (in the form of sanctions, behind the scenes diplomacy, and in some cases, military intervention), explicit conditionality (as in the case of European Union membership), and the activities of emerging transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that often empowered otherwise weak and ineffective opposition democratic forces. The international environment is clearly a necessary and important part of any explanation for the rise of pluralism in the 1990s.

Yet the international environment alone is inadequate for understanding the development of pluralism in those countries in Africa and the former Soviet Union that have been outside the tight embrace of the United States or the European Union. In such cases, the West’s commitment to democracy promotion has been uncertain at best and has most often been trumped by security and other concerns. Between 1990 and 1998, the total amount of democratic assistance given to *all* post-Soviet countries combined was roughly 400 million (Carothers 1999, 41)—a drop in the bucket compared to the billions provided for economic restructuring. By and large, the IMF and the World Bank have shown extremely little interest in political reform and have instead focused on strictly economic issues.

So why have leaders in these countries been so willing to submit themselves to institutional arrangements that threaten what is most dear to them – their political power?

IV. Incumbent Capacity and Authoritarianism

The maintenance and establishment of non-democratic rule requires a degree of incumbent capacity that has mostly been ignored in discussions of regime transition.¹⁸ Such capacity is required to hold onto allies, limit public criticism, to suppress opposition, and to rig elections. By itself, the failure of incumbents to achieve these goals rarely leads to democracy – but such incapacity is likely to increase the level of political competition in important ways. Governments lacking the necessary organizational, material, and other resources have often been forced to accede to demands for greater liberalization and power sharing that other more effective governments and states have been able to ignore (Levitsky and Way 2002b).

Incumbent capacity can be understood along three different dimensions: (1) know-how, (2) elite-cohesion, and (3) state strength. First, know-how refers broadly to the capacity of leaders or their staff to develop appropriate strategies to translate state goals into reality. To what extent do leaders have the experience and understanding of how to undermine opposition challenges while avoiding international isolation? We would expect know-how to be a particular problem in situations in which actors are relatively inexperienced at confronting such challenges. The speed of the post-Soviet transition created problems of know-how for leaders in the region. Experience with Soviet era façade elections and dependence on central authorities in Moscow gave incumbents little understanding of how to cope with even rudimentary forms of political opposition. The introduction of semi-competitive elections in the early 1990s thus created a fundamentally new set of challenges for which many were ill-prepared. In this sense, incumbents in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes such as Mexico were for a long time better able to cope with opposition than some post-totalitarian regimes for the simple reason that they had dealt with active opposition for many years.

A second component of incumbent capacity is elite cohesion, which refers to the loyalty and cooperation that heads of state can expect from other regime elites, such as Prime Ministers and parliamentary leaders and deputies. Elite cohesion has often been seen as critical to democratic persistence and stability (Linz 1978; Higley and Gunther 1992; McFaul 2002). But elite cohesion is also decisive to the creation and survival of non-democratic regimes (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, Easter 1997, McFaul 2002). O'Donnell and Schmitter contend that “there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – directly or indirectly – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself” (1986: 19). Elite cohesion is particularly important during periods of crisis, when executives are forced to consider high-risk strategies to stay in power – such as extensive election fraud or massive coercion.¹⁹ If incumbents are uncertain about the loyalty of those around them, they may be less likely to risk such non-democratic measures.

Finally, state strength, which encompasses both the domination of state officials over subordinates and the capacity of state agencies²⁰ to successfully implement the objectives of state officials, is key to authoritarian rule. When states are weak, executives have a more

¹⁸ Philip Roeder's work (1994, 2001) is the notable exception.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the particular dynamics of elite choice during crisis in hybrid regimes, see Levitsky and Way 2002b.

²⁰ In line with Keith Darden, I do not see state capacity and legal rational rule as synonymous. For a cogent and innovative discussion of these issues, see Darden 2002.

difficult time utilizing state agencies and regional administrations to intimidate opponents or manipulate electoral process, and governments will be less able to rely on repression to put down social and political protest.²¹

There are at least two different forms of state incapacity that each promote pluralism in different ways. The first type is *institutional balkanization*. Institutional balkanization refers to the appropriation of state resources by competing regime elites for use in political battle. Such resources include a wide range of state agencies – intelligence services, state media, and local level state representatives. Such resources may be used respectively to dig up compromising material on an opponent, publicize criticism of the other side, and manipulate the electoral process. In such cases, the state is not an impersonal arbiter or even an arena of conflict but instead is taken apart like so many bricks stolen from a crumbling building for use in a street fight.

A second form of state incapacity is *vertical breakdown*, which refers to the inability of state leaders to fully control subordinates. In such cases, pluralism arises from failed efforts to control media, local leaders and coercive agencies. Such breakdown may be the result of elite fragmentation (see below), fiscal crisis, a lack of organizational esprit or other causes.

Elite cohesion, state capacity and authoritarianism:

While it is possible to treat elite fragmentation and state capacity as distinct, the two are often closely intertwined in the context of highly personalistic²² state institutions that characterize the former Soviet Union as well as much of the developing world. In such an institutional context, elite fragmentation is likely to undercut state capacity – which in turn undermines efforts by incumbents to monopolize political control through either institutional balkanization or vertical breakdown.

First, in personalistic states, elite fragmentation is likely to undercut state strength. In the absence of a robust and impersonal set of bureaucratic rules, the functioning of the staff hinges a great deal on the character of the leadership. Conflicts between leaders representing different institutions have the potential to undermine hierarchical control of the central government over regional governments and other key government institutions. If the leadership is fragmented, the staff receives conflicting orders and may choose to play it safe and do nothing rather than risk alienating a particular leadership faction. Such a situation is often characterized by the profusion of conflicting and rarely enforced decrees and laws. This is the situation that prevailed in many post-Soviet republics in the early and mid 1990s when competing factions in the executive, legislature, and ministries frequently issued contradictory decrees and laws, creating significant areas of discretion in local-level implementation.²³

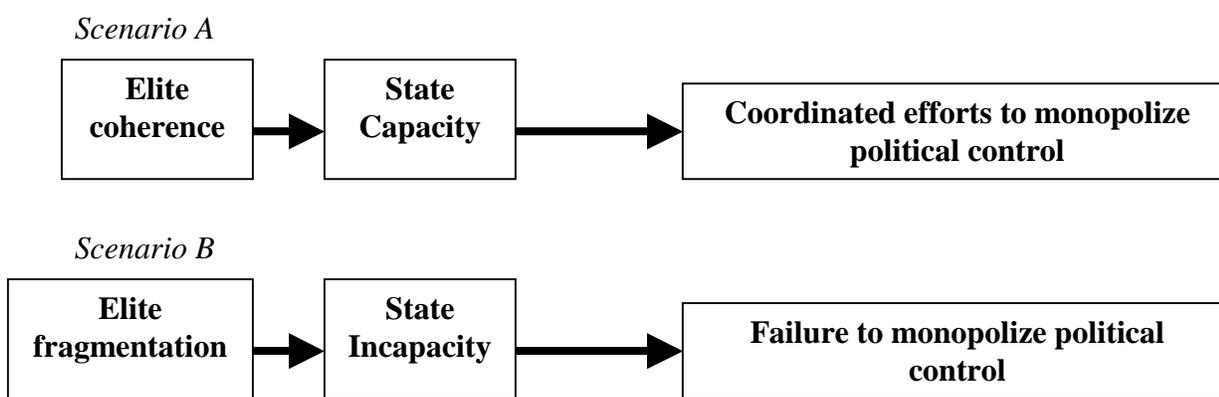
²¹ This perspective contradicts most recent discussions, which have emphasized the positive relationship between state or institution building and democratic consolidation (cf. Moser 2001, O'Donnell 1999). Such discussions have focused on a specific conception of the state as a legal rational entity. Here, I use a broader notion of state capacity rooted in vertical control.

²² States are personalistic when the bureaucratic staff's loyalty to the leader as a person competes strongly with its commitment to an impersonal notion of bureaucratic purpose (Weber 1978: 1028-1031).

²³ In Russia, such fragmentation contributed to a situation in which "ministries at times were not agents of the President or Prime Minister but semi-independent fiefdoms that controlled vital national resources, from arms to energy supplies" (Huskey 1999, 41). Similarly, in Ukraine as in Russia, fragmentation at the top appears to have undermined central control over regional governments. For example, budget officials

Simultaneously, in highly personalistic states, increased state power may directly affect regime type (see figure 1). First, (scenario A) increased elite coherence and state power translates directly into increased personal power of the top leadership – power that the leadership may use to restrict political competition. In such contexts, there are few robust bureaucratic rules to prevent the top leadership from using the bureaucracy to service the leader’s personal goals. Thus, the leader backed by a coherent elite has a great deal of leeway in using the power to limit threats to his tenure. Such a government that is able to control regional elites and prevent territorial secession is also likely to be able to steal votes and to manipulate election results in favor of the incumbent.²⁴ In addition, an elite that is coherent enough to implement a coordinated economic policy is also more likely to be able to prevent elite defection that is an important component of pluralism by default.

Figure 1: Elite coherence, state capacity and regime outcome in personalistic states



On the other hand (scenario B), in a context of international liberal hegemony, a highly divided elite is likely to lead to greater pluralism by undermining the incumbent’s control over subordinate state agencies necessary to impose authoritarian rules of the game. Lost control may occur via institutional balkanization in which case political opponents gain control of key state resources. Alternatively, elite fragmentation may create vertical breakdown. In a context of high competition, subordinates may find it safer to ignore incumbent autocratic demands for fear of offending an opponent who might subsequently gain power. In such a situation, orders to the media to provide biased coverage, to the military to fire on opponents, or to local governments to steal votes are more likely to be ignored.

By contrast, such a relationship between elite cohesion, state capacity, and regime outcome does *not* apply in cases where the bureaucracy is legal rational and/or autonomous. In such cases, prevalent in much of central Europe, the fate of particular leaders does not affect the basic functioning of the state bureaucracy. Fragmentation of the leadership is less likely to affect the day-to-day functioning of the state. Here a strong state will make democracy more possible. As many authors (most notably Guillermo

in eastern Ukraine complained that they regularly received mutually contradictory instructions from the Cabinet of Ministers, and parliamentary committees.

²⁴ In principle, it is possible to imagine that a leader would not use such increased power to limit uncertainty over his tenure or to restrict criticism. However, this capacity makes such actions more likely.

O'Donnell (1999)) have rightly noted, increased legal rational state capacity is critical to democratic consolidation.

V. Pluralism by default in the former Soviet Union:

The pluralism that emerged in the former Soviet Union in the face of anti-democratic legacies and relative international isolation can best be understood as the outgrowth of incumbent failure. Pluralism by default represents a distinctive mode of political pluralism in which competitive politics is primarily the outgrowth, not of an institutionalized civil society or rule of law, but rather of a government that tries but lacks the capacity to impose authoritarian rule and to monopolize political control.

Perceived western dominance in the late 1980s and liberal international hegemony in the 1990s contributed to the creation of the outlines of democratic institutions such as parliaments, elections, and nominally autonomous local governments throughout the former Soviet Union. While legacies of autocratic rule have made it easier for incumbents to ignore these institutions, governments have still often had a difficult time reducing them to façade status. Five key obstacles to authoritarianism can be identified that require know-how, elite cohesion and state capacity to overcome: (1) controlling parliament; (2) limiting defection by high-level members of the government; (3) preventing criticism in the media; (4) controlling and manipulating the electoral process; and (5) achieving unilateral control over the military. Below, I describe the character of these different challenges and the ways in which leaders in Belarus', Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine failed to differing degrees – resulting in pluralism by default.

Controlling Parliament and Preventing Elite Defection

An important consequence of the Soviet collapse was the sudden weakening or elimination of formal and informal mechanisms to preserve elite cohesion and to monopolize political control by any single group. The abrupt disappearance of the Communist Party meant that there was little to prevent elite defection and open challenges to the status quo. Instead, “parties of power” – a term often used to describe the Soviet elite that had managed to hold onto power – functioned in loose and unstable coalitions plagued by rivalries (Kuzio 1997: 21-22; Wasylyk 1994). Despite numerous attempts, successful ruling political parties failed to emerge in the 1990s. The absence of a formally or informally cohesive elite contributed to political competition in two ways: (1) by making it much more difficult for the executive to cope with parliament and (2) by pitting the president and Prime Minister against each other. Only later were more effective mechanisms developed to prevent elite defection.

First, a weakly organized ruling elite contributed to sharp conflicts between the parliament and the executive in Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. In each of these countries, the President was unable to organize a ruling coalition that could implement executive programs and concentrate authority. In Moldova, the parliament blocked the concentration of executive authority at critical moments in 1994 and 1999.²⁵ In Russia

²⁵ First in 1994, Snegur was seemingly powerless in the face of efforts by parliament to create a semi-presidential system – even though the parliament was controlled by a party (the Agrarian Democrats) of which he was leading figure. Five years later, Petru Lucinschi, who as parliamentary leader led efforts to weaken the Presidency, was equally frustrated by parliament when he tried to strengthen the executive after becoming president himself.

and Ukraine in the 1990s, oppositionist and communist dominated parliaments presented some of the few serious checks on executive authority. In Russia, even after Yeltsin successfully bombed parliament and instituted a “super presidential” constitution, the recalcitrant legislature created a much greater check on executive power than the constitution seemed to allow (Shevtsova 1999: 125, 223). However, in both Russia and Ukraine, presidents had by the late 1990s become more adept at gaining support in the legislature and limiting opposition to the executive.

In Belarus in the early 1990s, parliament was (by Belarusian standards) an important source of pluralism even though it was overwhelmingly dominated by Communist deputies. The relative disorganization of the dominant group meant that while nationalists in Belarus never attracted significant support either in parliament or the country as a whole, they were able to dictate the reform agenda to a remarkable extent in the early 1990s. When the Soviet Union collapsed in Moscow, completely unprepared elites in Minsk accepted nationalist demands for independence and an indefinite ban on the Communist Party.²⁶ Most critically, the situation allowed Aleksandr Lukashenka, the Chair of a Parliamentary Anti-Corruption Committee, to become famous for his open attacks on alleged government corruption. He subsequently used this platform to make a successful run for the Presidency.

Second, as in many authoritarian regimes (Tullock 1987), the most serious challenge to national incumbents in most cases of pluralism by default have come not from civil society or regional elites but instead from inside the president’s own entourage. High level members of government such as Prime Ministers or other regime elites have benefited from easy access to media as well as other resources to build up patronage networks that may convince other members of the autocrat’s staff to defect to an opponent. Such second-in command figures have often found existing democratic institutions to be an attractive mechanism to challenge the incumbent President.²⁷ In this sense, the former Soviet Union is very similar to countries such as Kenya, and Tanzania, where the main opposition leaders have come almost entirely from within the ranks of the ruling party. In both Africa and the former Soviet Union, there are few resources and avenues outside the state that opposition leaders can use to gain power and recognition.

The potential threat created by a successful Prime Minister in the former Soviet Union helps to explain why post-Soviet Presidents in the 1990s often seemed intent on undermining government programs.²⁸ In the context of pluralism by default, the *success*

²⁶ The conservative Belarusian Communist Party first secretary Anatolii Malafeyeu complained that “86% of deputies are Communists. But our influence is hardly felt. The opposition ... with lesser numbers has demonstrated considerably more initiative” (Zaprudnik 1993: 154).

²⁷ In Ukraine, President Kravchuk was challenged by his former Prime Minister (Kuchma). Kuchma’s most serious opposition subsequently came from the former head of parliament (Moroz) and Prime Ministers (Marchuk, Yushchenko, and Lazarenko). Similarly, in Moldova in 1996, the two primary Presidential opposition contenders to Snegur were the head of parliament (Lucinschi) and the Prime Minister (Sangheli). In Belarus, Kebich was challenged and then defeated by the Chairman of the parliament’s anti-Corruption Committee (Lukashenka). The most serious challenge to Yeltsin’s rule in Russia came in the early 1990s from the head of the Russian parliament and his Vice President.

²⁸ In late 1999, Moldovan President Petru Lucinschi helped to overthrow Prime Minister Ion Sturza – a move that was widely interpreted as a response to the Prime Minister’s relative success and growing popularity. Similarly, Yeltsin fired Primakov in part because he was getting too popular in 1999. In Ukraine, Kuchma fired Evhenii Marchuk in 1996 explicitly for “concentrat[ing] his time on building an independent political image.”

of government programs may more dangerous than failure insofar as such success empowers a future challenger.

Controlling the electoral process:

Third, know-how, elite coherence, and state capacity are required to eliminate uncertainty during elections. In particular, efforts at electoral manipulation have been undermined by institutional balkanization. The degree of electoral competition has hinged to an important extent on the degree to which key institutions involved in elections have been monopolized by a single political force or controlled by competing ones. Accordingly, the most competitive period of politics may have been in 1991 when Soviet and republican-level (i.e. Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan) institutions operated simultaneously on the same territory. McFaul and Petrov (1998: 319) argue that the 1991 March referendum for the preservation of the Soviet Union was one of the freest votes in Russia's history because two competing electoral commissions – a Russian one and a Soviet one – operated simultaneously.

Even after the Soviet Union disappeared, institutional balkanization continued to promote greater competition in Russia and Ukraine where incumbent domination over the electoral process was hindered by fragmented central control over regional governments. As a result, elections in the 1990s were often characterized by what M. Steven Fish (2001) has referred to as a “pluralism of falsification” whereby competing forces used their allies in different regions to steal votes and manipulate the electoral process.

One of the most striking examples of institutional balkanization and a pluralism of falsification came in the defeat of Ukraine's President Kravchuk to his former Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma in 1994. In the Eastern part of the country, election Commission workers and Presidential appointees (*appointed by Kravchuk*) openly opposed the incumbent President and influenced the voting process in Kuchma's favor: preventing Kravchuk supporters from monitoring the vote, and campaigning actively against the incumbent (Kuzio 1996, 132-133; FBIS-SOV 3 August 1994 p. 38; Democratic Elections in Ukraine, 1994, 14). At the same time, Kravchuk received important support in the smaller western regions where there is evidence of manipulation in Kravchuk's favor (Democratic Election in Ukraine 1994: 16). In sum, Kravchuk's inability to control his own officials contributed to greater political competition in the 1994 elections.

Kuchma learned from Kravchuk's mistakes and reestablished vertical political control over regional governments²⁹ based in part on an increasingly effective system of blackmail (Darden 2001). Kuchma's increased control over state agencies in turn greatly facilitated his ability to manipulate the 1999 Presidential election via “widespread, systematic and coordinated” action by “State officials and public institutions at various levels” (Darden 2001; ODIHR 1999: 18).

In Russia as well, institutional balkanization promoted competition through pluralism of falsification in the 1990s. Like Kravchuk in Ukraine, Yeltsin in Russia had weak control over regional governments in the early 1990s. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin needed to pass a referendum on an extremely pro-Presidential constitution that took place on the same day as elections to the Russian parliament. On the basis of statistical and

²⁹ Within two months of the 1998 parliamentary elections, Kuchma dismissed 14 governors, and 18 district state administration chairmen in areas where his supporters had not done well (Rodenko 2002).

other evidence, observers have argued that “Yeltsin and his entourage entered into a Faustian bargain with the regional heads of administration: those officials would guarantee a fifty percent turnout (the required minimum) for the vote on the [Yeltsin] constitution ... For their part, the heads of administration would be given a free hand to rig the election results ... in favor of those [legislative] party lists which they personally supported” (Dunlop 1999; Sobianin and Sukhovol'skii 1996; Liubarskii 1994). Perhaps as a result, opposition forces did particularly well in these elections – creating an important source of opposition to the President. Legislative elections since then have been marked by similarly fragmented voter manipulation. In 1999, for example, Moscow Mayor Luzhkov's party was apparently able to manipulate votes in certain regions such as Moscow – which was in turn countered by similar efforts on the part of pro-Kremlin parties (Fish 2001).

Finally, we find a similar dynamic in Moldova in the mid 1990s. In the 1996 Moldovan Presidential elections, competition between the Prime Minister, parliamentary head, and incumbent president undermined efforts to enlist local governments solidly behind any single candidate.³⁰ Partly as a result, the incumbent President Snegur lost.

In this context, the Kebich's loss to Lukashenka in the 1994 Belarusian presidential elections is quite puzzling. In contrast to the situation in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, there were few signs of state weakness in Belarus in the mid 1990s³¹ and Kebich, in contrast to Kravchuk in 1994 and Moldova's Snegur in 1996, was able to completely dominate the media during the elections (US CSCE 1994: 5).³²

So why did Kebich allow himself to lose the election?

A likely explanation is the lack of experience manipulating elections after the fall of communism. The collapse of the Soviet state and the abolition of the Communist Party created fundamentally new challenges and the need for new skills in manipulating the electoral process. In addition, in contrast to his counterparts in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, Kebich had virtually no experience with competitive elections – his only electoral experience being the highly closed 1990 elections. Finally, the 1994 elections were one of the first elections after the collapse – meaning that Kebich would have had difficulty drawing on the experience of leaders in other neighboring countries. Kebich seems to have assumed that his monopoly control over the media would be sufficient to win the election and therefore made little effort to set up an effective system of vote-rigging or at least one large enough to cope with a popular opposition candidate as

³⁰ Many predicted that Prime Minister Sangheli would use his power over local governments to utilize “administrative” measures that seem to have been successful in 1994. While local leaders often promised “100% support” for Sangheli, one person working with the Prime Minister reported that “it was very difficult to follow up on such promises and to know if they would keep their word” (interview Sangheli official). The results, which gave Sangheli just 9% of the vote, clearly suggest a low level of cooperation. At the same time, the high positions enjoyed by all competitors in the election facilitated widespread access to media. Weak central control and elite fragmentation in this context undermined efforts to rig the election and allowed public opinion to play the decisive role.

³¹ There were no regional rebellions and Kebich was able to attract active support from state officials throughout the country in collecting signatures to put his name on the ballot (FBIS-SOV 2 May 1994, p. 75).

³² In addition, given Kebich's background and rather rough-handed treatment of the opposition, it seems unlikely that Kebich suffered from any democratic proclivities. Finally, it is not likely that fear of international isolation was the key factor – foreign aid represented less than 1% of gross national income in 1993-1994 and Kebich had reason to expect support from Russia.

Lukashenka turned out to be. Thus, the US CSCE report released after the election reported that “complaints ... were infrequent; assertions of fraud negligible” – an assessment seconded by the Helsinki Commission (US CSCE 1994: 16, 17).³³

Obstacles to censorship:

Institutional legacies from the Soviet era greatly facilitated government control over the media – television in particular. In all four countries, the government controlled virtually the only television stations in the country that reached the entire population. The physical infrastructure of Soviet era television technology also greatly facilitated centralized state influence over independent stations.³⁴ Simultaneously, the ability to abuse libel laws and other techniques facilitated government efforts to harass the print media (Levitsky and Way 2002a).³⁵ So why did the government have such a difficult time in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine limiting criticism?

Incumbent control over the media was undermined by vertical breakdown as well as institutional balkanization. In the first place, the failure to collect taxes and the resultant fiscal crisis greatly hindered vertical control over even nominally government controlled media. For example, Russia’s main government controlled channels that covered the country’s eleven time zones were severely under-funded throughout the 1990s (Mickiewicz 1999: 281). The situation gave tremendous influence to anyone able to provide the stations with cash. Thus, businessman/“oligarch”³⁶ Boris Berezovsky controlled just 17% of Russia’s channel 1 as compared to the state share of 51%. Yet, his ability to provide the station with much needed cash meant that he was able to effectively use the station for his own purposes even when they contradicted those of the government. This increased the vulnerability of the government in important ways. In 1999, he began a “media war” against Prime Minister Primakov (Mickiewicz 1999: 276, 279, 289).

Further, more powerful foreign powers have also reduced the capacity of governments in smaller countries such as Moldova to limit the influx of alternative views. Despite trying³⁷, the Moldovan government was unable to limit access to anti-Moldovan Russian press during a civil war in the breakaway region of Transnistria in the early 1990s. Similarly, in late November 2001, the government failed to successfully stop *Kommersant Moldovy*, a stridently anti-government weekly financed by Transnistria

³³ By the time that the results of the first round were released showing Lukashenka strongly in the lead, it may have become much harder for Kebich to get cooperation from state agencies who did not want to alienate Kebich’s likely successor.

³⁴ In Russia in particular, national television stations, which must cover Russia’s 11 time zones, have been dependent on state-owned satellites to transmit their signals. Simultaneously, the millions of rooftop antennas throughout the former Soviet Union were constructed to point *exclusively* at the state-owned broadcast tower in each town. In the United States, by contrast, there are usually several transmitters that carry signals to individual households. As a result, the only way that private television in Russia could avoid using state-controlled transmission facilities would be to replace the millions of individual antennas at considerable cost (Mickiewicz 1997, 217-18).

³⁵ In addition, some laws on the books have been extremely anti-democratic. For example, in Moldova, a law passed in January 1992 and suspended in 1996 dictated a steep fine and up to two years in a corrective labor camp for slandering the President or chairman of parliament.

³⁶ This term is used to describe businesspeople who have become very rich by taking advantage of connections in government.

³⁷ ITAR-Tass 2 September 1992; Krasnaya zvezda 9 September 1992.

leaders that was shut down by order of the Moldovan court.³⁸ The journal reopened within a couple of weeks under a slightly new name (*Kommersant Plus*) and a new registration.

In addition, institutional balkanization of state media has also promoted a plurality of views. In all four countries in the 1990s, there were competing publicly funded newspapers put out by the legislature and executive that presented alternative views of the executive-legislative conflicts in the different countries. In other cases, institutional balkanization was more informal. While President Snegur in Moldova was able to appoint “his” people to key positions in the state radio, television, and press, others were able to poach Snegur’s appointees. Thus, the head of state television and radio who owed his job to Snegur nevertheless openly supported the president’s opponent, the head of parliament, in the 1996 elections. In both Ukraine and Russia, the media both benefited and suffered from what one Ukrainian commentator has called a “pluralism of dependence” (Tychina 2002) whereby competing “oligarchs” with different connections to the government have used their own media outlets to support their interests and criticize government policy when necessary. In the late 1990s, however, the governments in Russia and Ukraine gradually consolidated greater control over the “oligarchs” – thus reducing the political competition that resulted from the pluralism of dependence (Lipman and McFaul 2001; Tychina 2002).

Kebich in Belarus, by contrast, was from the beginning significantly more successful than his counterparts in Moldova, Russia, or Ukraine in subordinating the state media to his interests in the 1990s. Yet, the Belarusian case provides a particularly stark example of the ways in which perceived incumbent weakness and elite competition can undermine formal state hierarchies and promote greater pluralism. Despite overwhelmingly favorable coverage of Kebich prior to the first round of the 1994 election, the picture changed radically following Lukashenka’s powerful showing in that first round. At that point, the media coverage became significantly more balanced even though the formal dependence of the media on the government remained the same (European Institute for the Media 1994a: 52-54). Apparently, members of the media did not want to risk antagonizing Lukashenka, who suddenly appeared to be a serious competitor. Thus, for a very short period of time, Belarusian media, like its Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Russian counterparts, was relatively unbiased due to incumbent weakness.

Control over coercion

Finally, vertical breakdown was perhaps most important in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine in reducing incumbent capacity to utilize coercive force against government opponents. By 1991, the KGB, Police, and military, like the rest of the Soviet state, were significantly weakened by cynicism and a significant loss of cohesion and esprit de corp (Odom 1998: 345). Further, in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, governments had rather uncertain control over coercive agencies that had only recently been transferred to them. All of these factors made the use of coercion against political enemies especially difficult.

First, the Soviet collapse itself can be partially traced to a breakdown of the control over the military, police and KGB that thwarted the 1991 Soviet coup attempt (Odom 1998, chapter 14; Dunlop 1995, chapter 5). Weak control over coercive agencies

³⁸ *Kommersant Moldavy* 7 Dec. 2001.

also appears to have helped undermine efforts at authoritarian crackdown in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. In Moldova, the inability of either parliament or President to dictate unilaterally military policy appears to have prevented the military from playing a proactive role in a fierce dispute between President and parliament in the mid 1990s.³⁹ In Ukraine, Kravchuk also faced problems subordinating the military.⁴⁰ Almost certainly inspired by Yeltsin who had just dissolved the Russian Supreme Soviet, Kravchuk prepared plans to break up parliament in 1993 when it forced early Presidential elections (Kravchuk 2002: 227; FBIS-SOV 1 October 93: 25). However, according to his own account, the President changed his mind and decided not to take action against parliament when the heads of the SBU (Ukrainian KGB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs rejected the idea. “Taking such a step without the support of the Ministry of Internal Affairs would have been risky” (Kravchuk 2002: 228).

Yeltsin in Russia had similar difficulties but was barely able to convince the military to take the legislature by force in 1993 in the midst of a sharp battle for power in Russia.⁴¹ Such difficulties apparently greatly affected his subsequent attitude towards coercive action (Dunlop 1999). A few years later, Yeltsin chose not to postpone or cancel the 1996 Presidential elections in part, apparently, because of resistance from the military and police who felt they could not guarantee the loyalty of troops and would be unable to deal with the unrest that would result from such an action (Remnick 1997: 332; Shevtsova 1999: 172; Yeltsin 2000: 24).

In Belarus, there also existed some initial problems of effective control over Soviet era coercive agencies (Lukashuk 1992b: 18; Mihalisko 1997: 252). However, by early 1994, the Council of Ministers headed by Kebich had successfully subordinated both the Police and the KGB and replaced them with loyalists (FBIS-SOV 21 January 1994: 55; FBIS-SOV 26 January; FBIS-SOV 15 April 1994: 544-55). The loyalty of these agencies to the executive was directly tested in 1996 when Lukashenka successfully suppressed parliament (Marples 1999, chapter 5).

Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine all experienced various degrees of pluralism by default in the early 1990s. In all four cases, the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, fiscal crisis, and weak Soviet institutions undermined incumbent capacity to impose authoritarian rule. In Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, significant elite fragmentation and state weakness – manifested by institutional balkanization and vertical breakdown – combined to create important areas of pluralism in the 1990s. In Belarus, by contrast, the state remained relatively intact through the early 1990s enduring almost

³⁹ As the Presidential election approached in 1996, relations between Prime Minister Sangheli and President Snegur became extremely tense. Two former insiders in the Snegur administration claim that Snegur wanted to make sure that the military was under his control “just in case he needed [it] in political battle.” (Interview former National security advisor to Snegur; Cibotaru interview) Snegur tried to fire the head of the head of the military. However, the head of the military ignored this order and received backing from parliament – thus undermining Snegur’s apparent hope of involving coercive forces in his dispute.

⁴⁰ In the early 1990s, there was tremendous uncertainty concerning the loyalty of troops and especially officers who were overwhelmingly Russian (Foye 1993b: 62, 63). Simultaneously, Ukrainian nationalist officers were extremely dissatisfied with Kravchuk in late 1993 and coup rumors abounded (Kuzio 1993). Such weak control significantly reduced Kravchuk’s options during the 1993 crisis with parliament.

⁴¹ According to Yeltsin’s own account, he had an extremely difficult time finding the forces willing to undertake this task: “the army, numbering two and a half million people, could not produce even a thousand soldiers, not even one regiment could be found to come to Moscow to defend the city.” (Yeltsin 1994: 276).

no elite turnover and maintaining core authoritarian institutions including press control and the KGB. Here, lack of know-how as well as elite disorientation and mild elite fragmentation created small but important political openings in the early 1990s before they were shut down by Lukashenka in the mid and late 1990s.

Incumbent capacity and learning

In addition to revealing why some countries may be pluralistic in the face of highly undemocratic structural conditions, my focus on incumbent capacity provides a more dynamic understanding of the transition than do some other approaches. Specifically, a focus on incumbent capacity incorporates the important role of learning by incumbents during the transition. As noted in the previous section, each of these four countries as well as most other non-Baltic post-Soviet countries have become increasingly autocratic since 1991. In part, this trend may be explained by the fact that many incumbents learned on the job while new executives learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. The institutional upheaval accompanying the sudden collapse of the state and regime created tremendous disorientation among elites. Mechanisms of rule enforcement had not been tested. However, as the institutional shock of Soviet state collapse subsided, central governments institutionalized more effective control over regions and borders, and became more effective at manipulating the political environment. Experience with semi-competitive elections in fact often *undermined* pluralism by providing valuable lessons to those in power (or those who gained power as a result of others' mistakes).

V. Elite polarization and the maintenance of pluralism by default:

In all four cases, incumbent weakness helps to explain the emergence of pluralism in the 1990s. Yet by the end of the early 2000s, the countries had quite different regimes: Belarus had a fully closed authoritarian regime, Moldova was very close to a liberal democracy and Russia and Ukraine were competitive authoritarian. How do we account for differences in the longevity of pluralism by default and regime outcomes in different cases? Why have Moldovan incumbents had such a difficult time adapting to the new post-Soviet environment, while their Belarusian neighbors have had a much easier time?

The answer lies in the extent to which the elite is divided by fundamental cleavages over core national issues such as state borders, ethnic issues, or the character of the social system. Such issues provide powerful and meaningful sources of elite division that make it much harder for an incumbent to create a unified authoritarian coalition. In particular, tensions over national identity have often been severe enough to undermine efforts by any single group to monopolize political control. Alternative national conceptions have offered ready-made "viable alternatives" that can be critical in undermining support for an authoritarian regime (Przeworski 1986).

Differences in the depth of polarization and the extent of fragmentation help to explain the very different regime outcomes that emerged in the western part of the former Soviet Union. First in Moldova, the polarization and severe fragmentation over national identity made it especially difficult for incumbents to build an authoritarian coalition and created the basis for strong pluralism. Next, elite polarization but lower degrees of fragmentation in Russia and in Ukraine led to the persistence of a competitive

authoritarian regime. Finally, the absence of serious cleavages in Belarus contributed to the relatively rapid and complete demise of pluralism there.

Moldovan polarization, fragmentation and pluralism

It is accepted wisdom in Political Science that serious conflicts over national identity undermine democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996, chapter 1; Rustow 1970: 350, 359). Yet the most democratic non-Baltic country in the former Soviet Union, Moldova, has also been one of the most fragmented over national identity. Moldova was formed out of Romanian territory captured by the Soviet Union as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In the post-Soviet period, this resulted in polarization and fragmentation between three groups: those wanting to unify with Romania, those supporting an independent Moldovan state, and those wanting closer relations with Russia. While explosive, this fragmentation has been an important source of the country's pluralism insofar as it has undermined efforts by incumbents to concentrate autocratic rule. It has created a situation in which leaders have found it difficult to consolidate *either a democratic or authoritarian regime*.

During Perestroika, ethnic and language issues, as in other republics, became a central in the emerging anti-Soviet national movement in Moldova. The Popular Front of Moldova was founded in 1989 to make Romanian Moldova's official language. The Front, which had been relatively successful in the 1990 elections⁴², openly pressed for Moldovan ethnic rights⁴³ and unification with Romania. Opposition quickly appeared among local Russians and Ukrainians in the Transnistria region in the east and Gagauzia in the south – leading ultimately to the outbreak of civil war in the summer of 1992 (Crowther 1996).

These events and the extreme elite polarization that resulted created a situation in which Moldova's first President, Mirceau Snegur, had difficulty imposing any kind of order – authoritarian or otherwise. During this time, a plurality of views was in part maintained because pro-Romanian intellectuals continued to dominate the press and use it to promote unification with Romania that Snegur strongly opposed (Socor 1992). At the same time, Snegur's association with the destruction of the Soviet Union and his involvement in the civil war set him against a large portion of the pro-Russian leadership and population. Partly as a result, Snegur was defeated in 1996 Presidential elections to the head of the legislature, Petru Lucinschi.

Alienated from both pro-Romanian and pro-Russian forces, Moldovan Presidents in the 1990s were extremely isolated in their efforts both to win reelection and concentrate executive authority. In 1994 during the debate over the Moldovan constitution, pro-Romanian nationalists saw no reason to help Snegur in his fight for greater Presidential power.⁴⁴ President Lucinschi, who followed him, was similarly isolated in his efforts to concentrate power in the late 1990s. He faced strong opposition from both nationalists and Communists, who in 2000 combined efforts to transform

⁴² The Front captured 27% of seats in the legislature.

⁴³ Although not as extreme as their counterparts in parts of central Europe, nationalists explicitly argued for restrictions on Russian migration into the territory and for increased employment opportunities for Moldovans.

⁴⁴ Instead, the nationalists focused exclusively on divisive ethnic issues Andronic interview; *Nezavisimaia Moldova* 12 July 1994.

Moldova into a parliamentary system. Simultaneously, the inability of any single side to gain dominance in the 1990s led to joint control over key state resources such as the military, intelligence services, and the state-run media.

More recently, pluralism has come under threat since the unreconstructed Communist Party gained a strong majority in the legislature in 2001. Nevertheless, polarization over cultural issues and continued state weakness have undermined the capacity of the ruling Communist Party to unilaterally dictate policy. In the winter of 2002, the nationalists were able to mobilize thousands of protestors on the streets to fight a Communist decision to expand Russian-language teaching in the schools and to create a more pro-Russian textbook. As a result, the Communists appear to have backed down from efforts to impose these policies.

Russian and Ukrainian polarization and competitive authoritarian rule

Elites in Russia and Ukraine were also highly polarized – a fact that helped to promote pluralism in these countries. Yet, the lower degree of fragmentation has made it significantly easier for Presidents to gain the support of one side for increased Presidential power. The result has been competitive authoritarian rule.

In Russia, elite polarization was between Communists and anti-communist reformers. In Ukraine, the polarization was between pro-Russian Communists and anti-Russian nationalists. In both cases, high level members of the Soviet elite (Yeltsin in Russia and Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine) made alliances with anti-Communist forces to gain power. The polarization between Communists and anti-Communists that resulted promoted pluralism in important ways. In the first place, ties to anti-Communist forces brought the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents closer to the west. At the same time, as discussed above, these alliances stimulated the formation of united and relatively well-organized Communist oppositions in the legislature. In both countries, this Communist opposition presented one of the few serious checks on executive authority in the 1990s.

At the same time, the lower degrees of elite fragmentation in Russia and Ukraine relative to Moldova facilitated Presidential efforts to concentrate authority. Yeltsin in Russia and Kravchuk and Kuchma in Ukraine were both able to convince anti-Communist forces in their countries to back efforts to take power away from Communist-dominated legislatures. In Russia, Yeltsin was able to gain anti-Communist support for a “super-presidential” constitution as well as the bombing of the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1993 (cf. Dunlop 1999). Similarly, Ukrainian presidents in the 1990s successfully drew on important support from anti-Communist nationalists, who until very recently felt that strengthening centralized presidential rule was critical to preserving independence against threats from a communist legislature (cf. Kuzio 1997). As a result, governmental power in both countries was heavily concentrated in the President. In a context of a weak rule of law, this led to a significant weakening of pluralism and a persistence of competitive authoritarian rule. In Moldova, by contrast, anti-Communist nationalists, who resented efforts by Moldovan Presidents to block unification with Romania, were unwilling to support executive efforts to concentrate authority. The result was strong pluralism and parliamentary rule.

Belarusian lack of polarization and “deer in headlights pluralism”

To a remarkable extent, Belarus represents a case in which the transition from authoritarian rule was not “the consequence ... of important divisions within the authoritarian regime” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 19). In contrast to Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, there was virtually no division of the Communist elite between reform and anti-reform wings. Political liberalization in Belarus arose much less from elite cleavages and much more from elite disorientation brought about by the collapse of Communism in Moscow. The failed coup and collapse of the Soviet Union initiated what may be referred to as the *deer in headlights* period in Belarusian history – whereby a dominant communist-era majority with access to almost all key state resources demonstrated surprising weakness in the face of a determined nationalist minority because of disorientation due to radical changes in the external environment. In the early 1990s, an extremely small anti-Communist nationalist movement that had at most 8% of legislative support (Wilson 1997, 120) gained disproportionate power – forcing through independence and a ban on the Communist Party. Yet within a couple of years, the elite, which was not strongly divided along ideological lines, was able to coalesce and eliminate most forms of pluralism. In the absence of other factors, inexperience and lack of know-how are extremely weak sources of pluralism. It is thus not surprising that Belarus’s “deer in headlights” period of political pluralism was relatively short-lived.⁴⁵

It needs to be emphasized that the argument presented here is quite different from one that simply equates pluralism with a stronger democratic movement. While pluralism in Moldova has been much stronger than in Russia and Ukraine, the strength of the three anti-Communist movements was about the same as measured by their shares of seats gained in the 1990 elections.⁴⁶ The anti Communist movements in Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine promoted pluralism not by imposing western democratic values, but instead by generating fragmentation within the older *nomenklatura* – which in turn generated conflict and weakened the state. Ironically, Communist forces, rather than “democratic” anti-Communist ones were the strongest supporters of institutions to counter presidential hegemony. Thus the left in Russia and Ukraine and the *nomenklatura* center in Moldova were the forces that fought against stronger presidential power in 1993, 1996 and 1994 respectively (cf. Dunlop 1999; Way 2002b; Haran’ et al. 2000, 102-107). In both Ukraine and Russia, leftist dominated parliaments provided some of the only checks on presidential authority while the “democrats” often supported greater concentration of executive power. In Russia, most reformers saw themselves as revolutionaries whose

⁴⁵ At the same time, there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of Lukashenka’s highly concentrated form of autocratic rule. If Kebich had won in 1994, we might expect his form of low-level autocracy to have continued. Lukashenka’s political skill and popularity need to be taken into account in order to understand his ability to successfully attack Belarus’s political establishment in 1995-96. Simultaneously, Lukashenka was able to utilize key authoritarian state institutions that had remained almost fully intact since the collapse of the Soviet Union – including censorship and the KGB, which Kebich had just recently subordinated to his control. Lukashenka’s reliance on existing institutions is indicated by the number of high level officials from Kebich’s cabinet that Lukashenka brought onto his team – including Mikhail Miasnikovich, Kebich’s former First Deputy Prime Minister who became the head of Lukashenka’s Presidential administration, Sergei Lin, Kebich’s former Deputy Prime Minister, who was Lukashenka’s Prime Minister from 1997 to 2000, and Vladimir Zametalin, Kebich’s “press curator” (FBIS-SOV-95-058 - 24 March 1995) who orchestrated the Prime Minister’s complete domination of the media (Belova 2001: 16).

⁴⁶ Anti Communists obtained about a third of parliamentary seats in 1990 (Wilson 1997, 120).

main objective was to destroy the Communist system – even if it involved the use of extra-constitutional methods.⁴⁷ The point is not that the left or the *nomenklatura* center has greater democratic proclivities than the anti-Communist forces (on balance, the opposite is probably the case). Rather, my argument is that the degree of pluralism in these countries occurred primarily as a result of clashing interests rather than the imposition of western democratic values by anti-Communist groups.

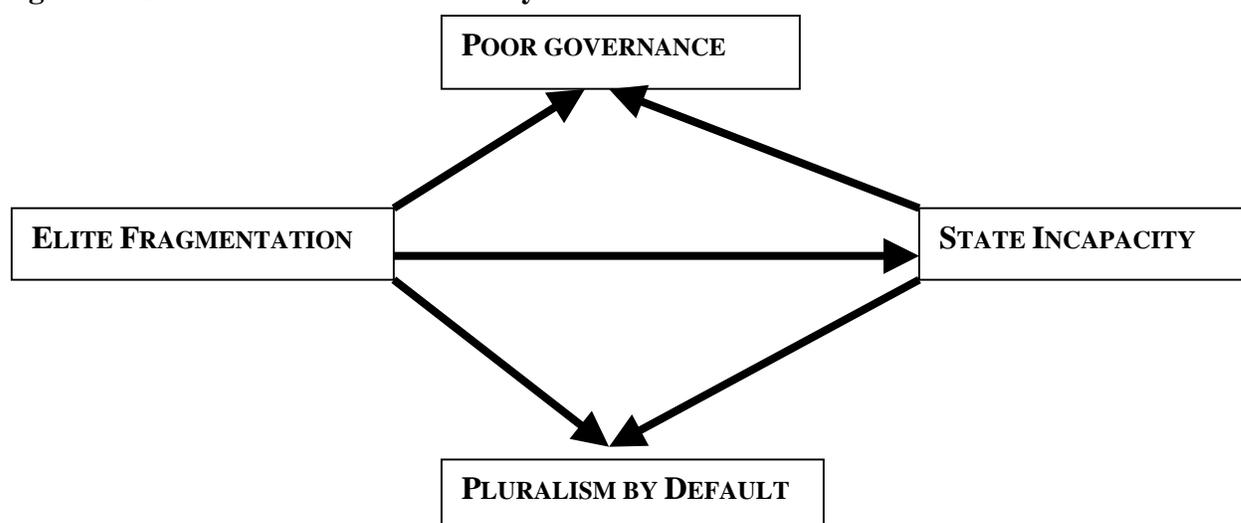
V. Democracy and Governance in Weak States

The focus on elite cleavages puts my argument in the same company as O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and others (Easter 1997, Roeder 2001) who argue that such divisions are key to the emergence of greater pluralism. However, discussions of elite fragmentation have mostly ignored the impact of cleavages in the context of highly personalistic, weak and emerging states. First, as argued above, elite fragmentation in the context of personalistic states can weaken already weak state institutions. A second problem is that the most robust forms of elite fragmentation arise from polarization over core ideological and ethno-national issues, which also threaten to undermine effective governance in some cases the viability of the state itself. Fundamental conflicts over core national issues (such as state borders, or the character of the social system) provide powerful and meaningful sources of elite division but also threaten to lead to severe conflict. Perhaps the most robust source of elite cleavage is polarization over cultural or ethnic issues. As Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan and others (1996, chapter 1; Rustow 1970: 350, 359) rightly note, such conflicts create serious problems for governance and long-term democratic consolidation. The factors that promote pluralism can simultaneously promote civil war – as in fact happened in Moldova in 1992.

In this sense, the correlation between pluralism on one side and elite fragmentation and state incapacity on the other may have important implications for how we view the relationship between pluralism and effective governance in personalistic or weak states. The type of conflict between pluralism and governance argued in this article is fundamentally different from the classic participation dilemma described by Huntington and Przeworski. Traditionally, democracy has been seen as a threat to governance because it allows interest groups to participate in politics and to block reforms.⁴⁸ However, in my view, it is not that democracy undermines governance but rather that elite polarization and state incapacity may simultaneously promote pluralism while undermining governance. Here, elite polarization and state incapacity, *rather than participation*, is the problem.

⁴⁷ See the memoirs of Viacheslav Kostikov (1997), Yeltsin's press secretary in the early 1990s who was closely tied to the reformist camp.

⁴⁸ Adam Przeworski (1991); Huntington (1968)

Figure 2: Governance and Pluralism by Default

Pluralism by default undercuts governance in several important ways. First, pluralism by default has often been sustained by highly polarized conflicts that numerous theorists have argued undermine democratic consolidation. Thus, heightened polarization over fundamental issues of state territory and economic system has generated prolonged elite fragmentation (and thus political competition) in countries such as Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Yet such conflicts also create serious problems for democratic consolidation.⁴⁹

Polarization and fragmentation have also directly undermined economic policymaking. Timothy Frye, for example, has argued that polarization reduces growth.⁵⁰ He argues that polarization undermines efforts at a coherent response to economic crisis. In addition, weak elite coherence associated with pluralism by default has often motivated Presidents to fire Prime Ministers who are perceived as being too good at their jobs and thus a potential threat to the executive.⁵¹ Such Presidential ambivalence about the success of his own administration obviously does little to promote more effective policy-making and governance.

In this context it is suggestive that, according to available data, Belarus has avoided some of the immediate social and economic crises present in Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries: available data suggest that in Belarus, there is less inequality⁵² and notably less corruption than in neighboring countries.⁵³ (In addition,

⁴⁹ Linz and Stepan, 1996: 16.

⁵⁰ Frye, Timothy (2001) "The Perils of Polarization: Economic Performance in the Post-Communist World." Paper prepared for delivery at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30-September 2, 2001, p. 2.

⁵¹ In Moldova, President Lucinschi reportedly convinced eight independent deputies in parliament to pull support from Prime Minister Sturza in part because he was perceived as getting too popular. In a similar vein, President Kuchma in Ukraine fired Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko in part because the Prime Minister was gaining in popularity for having managed the country's first period of growth in ten years.

⁵² According to World Bank figures, Belarus has one of the two most equal income distributions in the world.

⁵³ According to the 2003 Transparency International Report, Belarus has a corruption score of 4.8 as compared to Russia (2.7), Ukraine (2.4), and Moldova (2.1). A higher score means less corruption on a scale of 1-10.

production, according to official statistics, has not declined as precipitously. However, these numbers are more suspect since they come directly from the Belarusian authorities). The preservation of the Communist-era Belarusian state appears to have facilitated authoritarian rule but also may have softened some of the social and economic consequences of the transition.

While elite polarization may create important problems for governance, their resolution undermines pluralism. The end of polarization in countries such as Russia and Ukraine has eliminated important sources of pluralism in these societies – paving the way for a reassertion of much more authoritarian forms of rule. At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere “it should be stressed that while elite cohesion is critical for governance, *such cohesion by itself is certainly not sufficient and may undermine governance for other reasons*” (Way 2002b). Some may think that a more authoritarian Putin has governed Russia more effectively than a tolerant but weaker Yeltsin. Yet, it is in many ways even more likely that a more coherent elite will simply steal more effectively rather govern in the public good. Thus, the rise of Heidar Aliyev in Azerbaijan ended the threat of civil war in the country – but also created an extraordinarily corrupt regime.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper has argued that the persistence of political liberalization in personalistic or weak states is often a product of failed efforts to control the political environment in the context of international liberal hegemony rather than successful attempts to build democratic institutions. A focus on incumbent incapacity may help us to understand the emergence of pluralism not just in the former Soviet Union but in other contexts such as Africa where countries also have personalistic states and lack democratic traditions. There, an important source of political liberalization was arguably increased state weakness due to severe fiscal crisis that other parts of the world such as the Middle East have managed to avoid (Herbst 2001; Bellin 2002). In African countries such as Zambia and Kenya, fiscal crisis forced liberalization by undermining authoritarian patronage networks that had kept regimes afloat.

My argument highlights the need to expand discussion of regime trajectories to include more than a focus on democratic institution-building (flawed or otherwise). Broadening the focus to include transitions to non-democratic rule means much more than calling certain glasses half empty that others have called half full. In this paper, I have shown how such a broadened focus throws light on factors that may thwart authoritarianism and create more competitive politics but simultaneously undermine the transition to democratic rule. No one would ever argue that state weakness, fiscal collapse, elite polarization over national territory, or lack of incumbent experience with competitive elections promotes democracy. Yet, these are precisely the factors that in the post-Soviet and African contexts have sometimes been key to undermining authoritarian consolidation and promoting greater pluralism (Levitsky and Way 2002b).

Moldovan Interviews cited (January 31-February 15, 2002)

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 Nicolae Chirtoaca, former National Security Advisor to Snegur
 Dumitru Diacov, parliamentarian 1994-2001; head of Parliament 1998-2001
 Anatol Golea, Infotag News Agency, former Press Secretary for President Lucinschi
 Ion Gutu, Parliamentary deputy 1990-; Minister of Economy under Sangheli
 Valeriu Matei, Parliamentary deputy 1990-2001
 Nicolae Negru, independent journalist, member of Writer's Union in late 1980s
 Iurie Rosca, nationalist Parliamentary deputy 1990-
 Ion Safronie, Press Secretary for the Constitutional Court
 Mircea Snegur, President of Moldova, 1991-1996

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