



Privatization and elite defection in *de facto* states: The case of Transnistria, 1991–2012



Margarita M. Balmaceda

School of Diplomacy and International Relations, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 19 September 2013

Keywords:
Transnistria
Moldova
de facto states
Democratization
Hybrid regimes
Privatization
Elites
Post-Soviet space

ABSTRACT

What factors determine the timing of elite defection in conditions of post-Soviet personalistic presidentialism? How do relations with a powerful patron state affect this process? This article analyzes these questions on the basis of a case study of Transnistria, a *de facto* state with strong links to Russia. It argues that privatization processes involving actors from the patron state provide a unique opening for elite defection by heightening tensions between the rent-seeking interests of the personalistic president and those of new owners; direct or indirect signals from the patron state may also affect elite's perceptions of incumbent durability and their corresponding decisions.

© 2013 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

During the last years, the scholars have paid growing attention to the political dynamics of the regimes that occupy the “gray zone” between the ideal types of democracy and dictatorship (Carothers, 2002). Among them are “hybrid regimes,” that is, regimes where “political competition does exist but it does not lead to clear patterns of alternation of power among various groups of elites through the mechanism of free and fair elections” (Protsyk, 2012). Specifically concerning the post-Soviet area, the so-called color revolutions (Georgia, 2003; Ukraine, 2004; Kyrgyzstan, 2005) prompted reflection on economic competition among elites, including elites within the same coalition, as a source of political change and a factor contributing to the above-named “electoral revolutions” (Radnitz, 2010a; Way, 2005b).

Why do economic elites, previously part of a certain in-system, decide to defect from the ruling coalition and mount a challenge to the existing regime? What factors determine the timing of this defection, especially in conditions of personalistic presidentialism? How do relations with a powerful external patron state help differentiate economic actors and affect the timing of defection? Both the more general literature on elites and political change and that specifically focusing on post-Soviet “hybrid” states have offered important insights on this question. Building on Pareto and Mosca's elite theory, in the 1980s authors such as Burton and Higley (1987) already paid attention to how variation in elite structure may affect political outcomes and even a country's regime type. Concerning elite defection in post-Soviet states, some authors have emphasized how economic liberalization, including privatization, and the attendant dispersion of economic resources and growing economic autonomy of elites from the state help create the basis for defection (Junisbai, 2009; Radnitz, 2010a, 2010b). Others have approached the issue from the perspective of elite collective action: Hale, for example, analyzes how expectations of incumbent durability, “lame-duck syndrome,” influence elite decisions on how best to maximize influence and minimize possible reprisals (Hale, 2005).

This article builds upon these previous insights but also introduces three new analytical elements. First, the existing literature has largely focused on how decreased power of the state in the economy creates space for new actors to emerge (Junisbai, 2009; Radnitz, 2010a, 2010b). However, it has paid relatively little attention to the fact that in situations marked by

patronal presidentialism, where presidents and their associates control significant areas of the economy, the more significant issue may be the misuse of state structures that impose the preferences of private actors with access to state resources.¹ Secondly, the unspoken assumption in the literature has been that once there is a reduction in the state's role in the economy, private economic actors who gain political influence as a result of this opening will favor continued economic and political liberalization, rather than use this partial liberalization to simply advance their own interests (Hellman, 1998). Thirdly, the interaction between elite defection and external influences, in particular relations with a powerful patron state, remains understudied.²

2. Hypothesis, case selection and methodology

Our hypothesis is that privatization processes involving key outside players, such as players within an influential patron state, may provide a unique opening for elite defection by sparking a causal chain of re-evaluation of economic interests and decisions about whether to remain in a coalition or to mount a challenge to the incumbent. In this context, signals provided by an influential patron state – directly or through associated actors playing a role in the privatization process – may also affect elite decisions by changing their perceptions of incumbent durability.

The literature on post-Soviet elite defection has dealt mainly with the well-known cases of “color revolutions” in recognized states such as Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Yet much insight can be gained on this issue and on the connection between the timing of elite defection and external influences by looking at post-Soviet *de facto* (unrecognized³) states that emerged through violent conflicts with their “parent” states since 1989 and declared independence from them in the early 1990s: Transnistria (from Moldova, 1990); South Ossetia (from Georgia, 1991); Abkhazia (from Georgia, 1992⁴); and Nagorno-Karabakh (from Azerbaijan, 1991) and also having strong ties to a patron state. In all cases but that of Nagorno-Karabakh that patron state is Russia.⁵

Due to their weakness and dependence on external aid and to the intensity of economic ties with the patron state, the *de facto* states are likely to be especially prone to outside influence.⁶ Within these states, Transnistria constitutes a particularly interesting case. Its economy is larger and relatively more diversified than that of the other post-Soviet *de facto* states. It also has ties to a variety of actors in its patron state and is of strategic importance due to its proximity to the EU.⁷

Long-term president (1990–2011) Igor Smirnov's resolute defeat in the first round of the December 2011 elections – where he received less than 25% of the votes, compared to 26.3% and 39.5% for his main two opponents – caught many by surprise. Indeed, most of the literature on Transnistria up to then⁸ focused on his near airtight dominance over the region's political life.⁹ The December 2011 elections are widely seen as the first in Transnistria's history to offer a real alternative to Smirnov. The results call for a more nuanced look at Transnistrian political processes and the recognition of the differentiation of economic interests and power taking place in the region during the preceding two decades.

The objection may be raised that *de facto* states such as Transnistria, lacking international recognition and marked from the very beginning of their institutional history by the secessionist dynamic, differ so greatly from other post-Soviet polities that their experience cannot be generalized to other cases. The response to this is two-fold. First, *de facto* states worldwide constitute a discrete group worthy of research in their own right.¹⁰ Second, as shown by recent research (Broers, 2005; Kolsto and Blackkisrud, 2008; Markedonov 2012, Protsyk, 2009, 2012), these unrecognized states are undergoing political processes that are similar, in many ways, to those taking place in other post-Soviet societies. Recognized or not, the states or state-like

¹ While authors such as Junisbai (2009, 2012) have paid attention to economic patronage networks set around a president, the analysis assumes that diminished state control of the economy will open the way for the dispersion of economic and political power.

² Brownlee (2002) analyzes the role of external patrons in the survival of (non-post-Soviet) neo-patrimonial regimes (using the cases of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia) through a different perspective. That is, of their role in constraining – or not – these states' repressive capacity.

³ Two of these four entities, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, can be most accurately described as “partially recognized,” having gained recognition from Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Vanuatu.

⁴ The formal declaration of independence took place in 1998 after a referendum on the issue.

⁵ While Nagorno-Karabakh's patron, Armenia, itself has a close political, economic and trade relationship with Russia, its mediated rather than direct relationship with Russia puts Nagorno-Karabakh in a different category than the other cases.

⁶ In discussing patterns of Western influence on former Soviet states, authors such as Levitsky and Way (2007), among others, have emphasized how linkage to other systems through “myriad networks of interdependence that connect polities, economies and societies” can make leverage particularly effective. While their argument is specifically about Western leverage, it can be expected that such dense networks of interdependence will also affect other actors' abilities to exert leverage on these states.

⁷ As an unresolved conflict involving one of its direct neighbors (Moldova), the Transnistrian issue is of high priority for the EU, and Russia's behavior with respect to the conflict can have important effects on Moscow's overall relationship with the EU. Moreover, agreements on Transnistria are likely to set the standard for Russian and EU roles in other conflicts involving unrecognized states.

⁸ Though there are exceptions, like Korobov and Byanov (2006) and Protsyk (2009).

⁹ The year 2011 was also ripe with political surprises in the other Russia-dependent post-Soviet *de facto* states. In Abkhazia, after the death of long-term President Vladislav Ardzimba, Moscow's favorite, Sergei Shamba, lost in the first round to vice-president Aleksandr Ankvab in the August 2011 elections. In South Ossetia, after Moscow decided in 2011 it would be best served by Eduard Kokoity's departure from power, Russia set its hopes on Anatolii Bibilov. He lost to Alla Dzhioeva; the results were nullified, without much explanation, by the Supreme Court, which led to demonstrations and confrontations. New elections were held in 2012, with neither Bibilov nor Dzhioeva (who reported being held in the hospital against her will) participating.

¹⁰ As of 2009, the group also included Somaliland (seceded from Somalia), Northern Cyprus (Cyprus), and, according to some interpretations, Taiwan; historical cases include, among others, Chechnya (Russia, 1996–99), Republika Srpska Krajina (Croatia, 1991–95), Eritrea (Ethiopia, 1991–93) and – most recently – Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka, 1986–2009). Caspersen 2009, 47.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1046412>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1046412>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)