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Casting off Soviet chains? Conditions for the Ideological Renewal of Communist Successor Parties in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova since the 2010s

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Abstract

This article studies the political developments of Communist successor parties (CSPs) in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova since the 2010s to identify conditions for their ideological renewal. We find that embeddedness in the patronalist systems is a major impeding factor to ideological renewal and the removal of patronal shackles and governmental responsibility are its key drivers. In terms of the prospects of Russia's communist party, an unreformed CSP may win elections but the actual ideological renewal begins while in power, as the case of Moldova shows. At the same time, the interdependence between the access to power and ideological renewal resembles a vicious circle. While a clientilistic status disincentivizes the real competition for power, the access to power becomes a nearly impossible task until the system collapses. As the example of the Ukrainian communists show, the danger is that the systemic collapse may also bring down its clients as well.

Keywords

Ideological renewal, communist successor parties, patronalism, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, political parties

Introduction

The legacy of communism and the nostalgia for it, growing socio-economic challenges and the ongoing appeal of socialist ideas suggest an obvious electoral demand for leftist political forces in the post-Soviet space. However, the communist successor parties (CSPs), as the main potential holders of this appeal, have shown a declining capacity to compete for power. With the exception of the Baltic states and Moldova, no left-wing party in the post-Soviet space has been able to win a national election and form a government. CSPs have been largely relegated to secondary or marginal political roles in the political systems with limited electoral support.

This paper explores recent undertakings by CSPs in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova to identify conditions under which these parties – whose ideological origin is rooted in Soviet communism – are able to renew their ideational output and increase their political appeal. This is not a new research agenda. The ideological renewal – the break with the past and modernization of the parties' ideology – has been highlighted as a central element of the political success of the Left in both former communist countries (March, 2008) and the West (Buckler & Dolowitz, 2009; Clift, 2007; Waters, 2006). Ideological renewal means, above all, overall detachment from the ideals, idols and politico-economic principles of Soviet communism, and overall approval for a market economy and democratic competition as a basis for left-wing policies. In terms of CSPs' ideational capital – as a form of their political capital (Hale, 2006, p. 12) – the challenge posed by ideological renewal can be seen as the friction between CSPs' consensus-building mechanisms (translation of ideational principles into

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decisions) and the party's overall reputation under the post-communist market realities. In order to render their ideational capital successful, this friction should be as minimal as possible. Ideological renewal is not an automatic or natural process that would unfold in the overall gap between the Soviet-era ideals and post-Soviet circumstances. There must be certain factors that facilitate the party in renewing itself ideologically.

In this article, we argue that it is access to power that triggers the process of ideological renewal. If the party has no access to power, consensus-building mechanisms – a kind of ideational praxis of the party's activities – become isolated from the reflection on the party's reputation, and there is no ideological renewal. In the opposite case, the access to power forces the party to reflect upon the relationship between consensus-building mechanisms and public reputation. We approach the ideological renewal of the CSPs by juxtaposing the Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan CSPs in light of their statements and activities over the course of the past decade. In the case of Russia, our particular emphasis is on the years 2018–2021 when the role of the *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (CPRF) as a protest party came to the fore. This study is not a systematic comparative analysis of party ideologies (e.g. party programmes). We justify this primarily because the CSPs we study represent the legacy of the so-called patrimonial communism (see below). This legacy tends to render the ideas of the parties particularly contradictory in relation to their activities. This does not make the analysis of ideas irrelevant, quite the opposite. However, since the CSPs' positions are strongly linked to the political power of the given country, resulting in particular ideational outcomes, a systematic comparative analysis of certain ideological texts between the CSPs does not provide an exhaustive picture of their ideological renewal, or the lack thereof. Thus, our analysis is descriptive and selective, emphasizing certain statements, periods and actors that capture the essence of the CSPs' ideological renewal, and whose outcomes are discussed in parallel.

The simultaneous political visibility and apparent inefficiency of the post-communist Left has garnered significant scholarly attention since the 1990s, especially in the case of Russia. Previous studies have explored institutional, ideational and organizational factors, including the patrimonialist communist legacy of the repressive regime, combined with extensive networks of patron–client relations (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Hale, 2006, p. 28) that plague the political culture in post-Soviet Eurasia in general (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020); political party development (Ishiyama & Kennedy, 2001); the (previous) regime type (Ishayama, 1995; Fish, 2006); the presence of identity and ethnolinguistic divisions (Wilson, 1997); as well as advances in nation-building (Wilson, 2002) and democratization (Lewis, 2006).

Over the course of the 2010s, popular demands for social justice, the organizational capacities of CSPs, and ailing incumbent regimes have created a clear opportunity for left-wing parties to gain electoral support. For instance, in Russia, despite the intensification of repressive measures, the regime's weakening appeal has created – regardless of exceptional circumstances and heightened support for the regime caused by the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – new insights for oppositional cooperation (Armstrong et al., 2020). At the same time, the mythical image of the Soviet Union has reached new heights. In September 2021, 49% of Russians stated that they preferred the Soviet type of political system to the present system (18%) and Western systems (16%), and 62% of citizens considered the Soviet type of planning to be the best economic model (Levada Center, 2021). In particular, the position of the CPRF as the longest-running organized political force in an increasingly authoritarian Russia has afforded it a more visible protest party status (Galeotti, 2021; Lotareva, 2021), especially in the 2021 parliamentary election. In Ukraine, the persistent inability and unwillingness of the *Communist Party of Ukraine* (CPU) to modernize itself has been aggravated by the absence of a viable social democratic alternative. No left-wing party has emerged to replace the collapsed CPU after the Euromaidan Revolution. This is particularly puzzling given widespread left-leaning attitudes among the population and the strong tradition of establishing 'new left' movements in Ukraine that have existed since the late 1980s (Ishchenko, 2017, p. 211). In turn, the *Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova* (PSRM), which became the main opposition during the country's authoritarian decline in 2015–2019 and won both presidential (2016) and parliamentary elections (2019), remains the only exception.

We argue that it is primarily access to power, defined as a hold on an executive and legislative power in the country, that facilitates CSPs' ability to abandon typical characteristics of patrimonial communism. The aspect of access/non-access to power means that we are not studying the parties' relative success in the respective countries after the collapse of the USSR vis-à-vis particular factors and legacies of communism.[1] Instead, we focus on the factors behind the parties' ideological renewal. We find that the dominant perspectives provide only a partial explanation. For instance, although parliamentarism provides much better conditions for democratization than presidentialism, this difference does not explain the differences in the ideological renewal of the CSPs in Ukraine and Moldova. The same applies to advances in nation-building or the strength of external legacies. The new Left has not been induced to emerge in Ukraine despite the decrease in Russia's political influence and progress in nation-building after the Euromaidan. Instead, we find that the major impediment to ideological renewal is rooted in the peculiarities of the political systems of these countries, primarily their patronal

character. In patronal systems, CSPs face institutional, organizational but also ideational limitations in maintaining their systemic status. This often leads to the CSPs undertaking specific functions on behalf of the incumbent to manage state-society relations, such as 'voice' and 'exit', and to occupy specific electoral and ideological niches. In this regard, access to power is a crucial variable that allows the CSPs to remove these ideational shackles of patronalism.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the relevance of the present study by providing an overview of the literature on the issue of ideological renewal and the leftist value patterns in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. We then outline the CPRF's activities, especially in the regional, presidential and Duma elections between 2018 and 2021, and the role of the *Left Front*, the most influential ally of the CPRF. This is followed by a discussion on the CPU's evolving role in the Ukrainian political system and the roots of its decline after the Euromaidan. Our last empirical section discusses the electoral success of the PSRM – the renewed ideological heir of the *Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova* (PCRM) – in the 2010s concerning its activities in both opposition and in government. In the Conclusion, we crystallize our key findings and mirror them in developments that possibly lie ahead for the CPRF. Our primary data comprise speeches, official documents and party platforms. For Russia, these include the CPRF's Duma platforms for 2011, 2016 and 2021, the programme of the *Left Front*, as well as the platform for CPRF presidential candidate Pavel Grudinin in 2018. For Ukraine, these include the CPU's programmes for 2012 and 2019, and for Moldova the PCRM's programmes for 2000, 2005, 2011 and 2014, and PSRM platforms for 2014 and 2019.

Communist Successor Parties, Ideological Renewal and the Demand for Socio-Economic Protection in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova

In general, the literature identifies three main factors that explain the ideological renewal of the CSPs in the post-communist states. First is the structure of party competition after the one-party dictatorship. Second is the ability of CSPs to exploit opportunities in society in line with their party ideology, and the third factor concerns legacies of the past. In terms of the structure of party competition, the success of communist successor parties depends to a large extent on the absence or presence of other left-wing alternatives (March, 2006, p. 344). The ability of CSPs to exploit opportunities in society, in turn, is related to how well they have been able to keep 'the socialist value culture' and its welfarist underpinnings (ibid.) viable after the collapse of the communist system. In this regard, a partial explanation of the different ideological trajectories of CSPs in the post-Soviet space can be found in different structures of party competition between parliamentarism and presidentialism (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020, p. 58). Parliamentarism maintains the centrality of political parties in the exercise of power, and this centrality, sooner or later, is oriented towards updating party ideology. Since electoral successes result, sooner or later, in governmental responsibility, CSPs' government participation – especially in Western Europe – has demonstrated that they have clearly become aware that the key to being asked to join governments in the future depends on their potential government participation in the present (Bale & Dunphy, 2011, p. 280; Tavits, 2008). Given this recognition, it is arguable that government participation has an impact on party behaviour (Mair, 2008). Furthermore, a country's regional and linguistic diversity has had a negative effect on the ability of CSPs to renew themselves. The inability to overcome regional and linguistic diversity has complicated the CSPs' 'nationalisation' and/or 'social-democratisation' (Wilson, 1997).

A central issue for CSPs in the countries of the former communist bloc has been the legacies and the nature of the previous regime type, including the presence of political opposition during communism (Ishayama, 1995; Kuzio, 2014) and their relationship to the communist past. Grzymala-Busse's (2002) study of the party-internal reform efforts stressed the role of the historical legacies in shaping them. This has been materialized either in terms of distancing themselves from the past or relying on it while facing the reality of the lost one-party monopoly (Curry & Urban, 2003). In terms of the latter, CSPs in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova are seen as representatives of patrimonial communism (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020, p. 49–50). The outcome of this legacy has been that whereas leftist movements in general – moderate and radical – have identified themselves as progressive movements historically, the development of patrimonial communist parties has followed a different path. In ideological terms, the CSPs in these countries after their re-establishment in 1992–1993 continued the conservative Brezhnevian line of the CPSU used by opponents of Gorbachev's perestroika. They equally enjoyed political success in the 1990s, which was linked to the socio-economic difficulties, the weakness of nation-building projects, and the popularity of re-establishing ties with Moscow in Ukraine and Moldova (Tudoroiu, 2011). Moreover, an important role was also played by the CPRF's capacity to act as an umbrella of anti-Western sentiments targeted against the Yeltsin regime within the political and socio-economic turbulence that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Flikke, 1999).

Contrary to post-communist states in Central Eastern Europe that had a national history and an identity prior to communism, CSPs in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova lacked

an adequate pre-Soviet history for their post-Soviet choices that would make a solid break with the Soviet past easier. Unlike the CEE parties, they did not have experience of interwar electoral strength, post-1945 political participation, albeit brief, or the inner debates and crises of the 1970s. After 1991, in both Ukraine and Moldova, societies on the one the hand were deeply divided between pro-Russian and pro-European supranational identities (Kulyk, 2016). On the other hand, these societies recorded a high level of Soviet nostalgia (Nikolayenko, 2008), which created a sustainable voter niche for the CSPs. In Russia, the failure of Yeltsin's liberal reforms strengthened the idea of seeing communism as an intrinsic part of the national continuity, carving out the peculiar, and electorally successful, combination of Soviet communism and nationalism in the 1990s (Flikke, 1999; March, 2002; March, 2003). At the same time, regardless of the persistence of Soviet nostalgia in Russia, the CPRF cannot be regarded as particularly effective in capitalizing on these sentiments (Munro, 2006, p. 306). In this respect, it was the Brezhnevian experience, rather than any other legacy, that served as 'portable skills and usable past' for the CSPs' re-organization after 1991 (Grzymala-Busse, 2002, pp. 26–27).

CSPs that stem from a patrimonial background are particularly vulnerable to the challenge that has been dubbed 'the dilemma of democratic socialism'. That is, 'the choice between a party homogenous in its class appeal but doomed to perpetual electoral defeats or a party that struggles for electoral success at the cost of diluting its class orientation' (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986, p. 3; March, 2011, Introduction). This dilemma is accompanied by the 'perverse trick of democratic institutions', meaning that the more successful radicals are at exploiting these institutions, the more their radicalism risks being undermined (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986). The latter can be seen as a central structural impetus for CSPs' ideological renewal. In Russia, the CPRF's electoral downfall since the advent of Putin's rule in the early 2000s partially fits with this picture given the rapid improvement in Russians' standard of living in the early 2000s. Social contracts made by Putin's rule satisfied the great majority of the population, and the alternative provided by the CPRF appeared politically irrelevant. Yet, as mentioned above, over the course of the 2010s, and especially at the beginning of the 2020s, along with emerging difficulties faced by the Kremlin, the CPRF has increased its oppositional potential as the most organized political alternative to the Kremlin's *United Russia* party.

However, these perspectives offer only partial explanations for the CSPs' ideological renewal. Their ability to exploit existing opportunities in society and the structures of party competition in the post-Soviet space is strongly undermined by the patronal political regimes that have emerged. Following Henry Hale's (2014, p. 20) account, patronalism is 'a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations that include many people one has not actually met in person'. Such states are weakly institutionalized and highly corrupt, characterized by the domination of informal over formal rules and extensive patron–client relationships. These kinds of regimes manipulate the costs and benefits of collective action and manage political opportunities for rival political forces. The incumbent has an opportunity to skew political opportunity structures and establish relations that determine how political actors position themselves vis-à-vis the dominant power. Even if some differences exist at the formal level, such as the type of political system, patronal political regimes concentrate a considerable amount of informal power to control, manage and manipulate the political (parliamentary or presidential) system and state-society relations (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020). For instance, both Ukraine and Moldova are parliamentary-presidential republics, yet Ukrainian presidents have traditionally been vested with vast powers beyond constitutional boundaries.

In the patronalist context, the political parties become externally 'managed', whereas elections become the indirect tool for navigating societal expectations and preferences (Birch, 2000). A party that refuses to act according to these rules will face financial and legal repercussions and lack the resources to compete in elections. The ease of manipulation stems from the degree of regime consolidation, and the availability of resources and alternative sources of power. These can be external (such as Russia in the former Soviet Union) or domestic (oligarchs or societal cleavages). Under such circumstances, political parties have to pay the price for being a part of the 'system'. They need to focus on their relations with the regime while their interaction with society depends on the degree of dependence and political functions assigned by the regime. In this regard, the aforementioned dilemmas become apparent in the ideological radicalization (and hence marginalization) of the systemic CSPs vis-à-vis the incumbent regimes. In this respect, the CSPs' outdated ideology largely facilitates the regime's capacity to control them by limiting their popular appeal and increasing their dependence on the regime.

During the last 20 years, the CSPs in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova have played the role of systemic parties, which became particularly apparent in the 2010s. Parties of this kind play an important part in managing 'voice' and 'exit', defined as 'individual' action or inaction (Hirschman, 1970). They allow societal discontent to be channelled, transforming it from a threat into a resource for the regime. As a systemic opposition, the CSPs offer a Left alternative to the regime that indicates the existence of pluralism, steers

collective action and represents the benefits of loyalty in comparison with the potential costs of becoming non-systemic parties. The CSPs also serve as a 'voice', when public ignorance and uncertainty over state performance are substituted by 'sudden and enormous intensification of the preference for public actions' (Hirschman, 1970). A case in point are the relatively modest protests by the CPRF over the widespread opposition to the regime's pension reform in 2018. Voice dominates in those situations where issues of public interest are at stake, and might take the temporary form of mass protests, riots, or even revolutions. Elections can play the role of voice and push voters to express their grievances at the polls. Regime control over political views and ideologies is a key feature of patronal regimes, which explains their ideologically eclectic nature (Hale, 2014; Magyar & Madlovics, 2020). Ideologies become instruments of political control rather than principled worldviews, and can be changed depending on the regime's expectations of popular moods, an approach that Hale et al. (2019) call 'ideational improvisation'. This has also been typical of post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. Differences in the CSPs' mode of operation and, more generally, in political pluralism between the countries, are related to the ability of patron regimes to subjugate the CSPs into the system, for example. Next, we examine how these factors manifest themselves in relation to the ideological renewal, or non-renewal, of CSPs, starting with Russia.

Russia: The implications of Being outside of Political Power

In the cavalcade of Russia's political parties, the CPRF has remained the most organized and long-standing. Since the early 2020s, there have been no viable challengers to the CPRF among the radical left, and the ideological rivalry within the communist movement that occurred in the early 1990s has not threatened the party for years. Moreover, the *Just Russia* (*Spravedlivaia Rossiia*, SR) party, the Kremlin-induced social democratic formation (March, 2009), did not succeed in challenging the CPRF, largely because of the Kremlin's repressive measures against SR's powerful and too disloyal representatives. More importantly, in the framework of systemic parties, the CPRF has sustained its semi-oppositional status in contrast to the LDPR, whose incarnation, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, acted as a regime spoiler throughout his political career (Lukyanova, 2019; Umland, 1997). In the 2010s, the CPRF's oppositional dimension has become apparent in the regions in particular. As distinct from the LDPR and the SR, the CPRF has been the most active organizer of anti-governmental protests (Armstrong et al., 2020; Dollbaum, 2017). Yet, in terms of protests against the government's pension reform in summer 2018, the CPRF's activities were also seen as a part of its systemic role, strengthened by party leader Gennady Ziuganov's cautious criticism against Putin at the height of the public discontent (Krasheninnikov, 2018).

In this respect, there are strong grounds for suspecting that the CPRF's activism – without damaging results for the Kremlin's status quo – shows the importance of the official role that 'the second party' in the Duma plays at the cost of political opportunities that are constantly emerging for the party. For instance, CPRF candidate Andrei Ishchenko lost to sitting governor Andrei Tarasenko from the United Russia party only due to blatant vote-rigging in the gubernatorial election in the Primorsky region in 2018. Fury and protests by Ishchenko's voters immediately ensued, and Ishchenko himself went on hunger strike against the fraud. However, he and his comrades soon submitted to the Central Election Committee's compromise of organizing a third election round, instead of defending the CPRF's obvious victory in the second round (Yedinaia Rossiia proigrala, 2018). In a similar vein, the CPRF's Vladimir Bortko – a potential winner against the Kremlin-backed weak incumbent Alexander Beglov in the Saint Petersburg gubernatorial election in 2019 – withdrew from the race a week before election day, presumably after a discussion with the Kremlin (Rubin et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, certain representatives of the party in the regions have shown that the CPRF's 'systemic subordination' is not preventing them from criticizing the regime beyond the federal-level rules, and building coalitions, for instance, with supporters of Aleksey Navalny (Deputat ot KPRF, 2017). This became evident in the 2019 regional election in Moscow where the 'smart voting' organized by Aleksey Navalny paid off. After being barred from running in the election, the Navalny team advised supporters to vote for the 'most' oppositional candidates in districts to beat the Kremlin candidates. Several genuinely opposition-minded left-wing candidates were selected from the CPRF. Not surprisingly, since the election and especially around the 2021 Duma election, numerous candidates and representatives of the party have become targets of repression throughout the country (Litoy, 2021; Pertsev, 2021a). The fraud seen in the election, particularly through electronic voting in Moscow's opposition-minded districts, was targeted against the Navalny-backed CPRF candidates, deepening the rift between the party leadership loyal to the Kremlin and the rest of the party (Zamiatin, 2021).

It is noteworthy that a clear majority of current actors and allies around the CPRF are just as incapable of thinking outside the box of Soviet communism as the mother party. The radical left-wing extra-parliamentary actor, the *Levyi front* (Left front, LF), is a case in point. The LF has been an influential player in the Left's extra-parliamentary protest movement since its establishment in 2008 (Savina, 2008) and was instrumental in nominating Pavel Grudinin as the CPRF's candidate in the 2018 presidential election (Levyi

Front Vydvinul, 2017), as well as supporting Vadim Kumin as the party's candidate in the Moscow mayoral election in 2018 (Miller, 2018). The nomination of both candidates beyond ideologically driven party cadres, initiated by an extra-parliamentary organization, indicates certain attempts to update the CPRF's political output.

Grudinin's platform was devoid of traditional communist clichés, such as class struggle, bourgeois or proletariat (20 shagov, 2018). Even the word capitalism was mentioned only once in connection with oligarchic capitalism. The CPRF's traditional ideological references were replaced by explicit left populism that hailed the omnipotence of the state in fixing all societal problems. Moreover, there is an intriguing hint that Grudinin managed in part to speak to those voters who were looking for a non-communist left-leaning candidate: the number of Russians who view Stalin with respect (*s uvazheniem*) was lowest among Russians who voted for Grudinin in the presidential election (Dinamika otnosheniia k Stalinu, 2019). Yet Grudinin himself was reluctant to distance himself personally from Stalin and spoke highly of him in interviews whenever he was asked about the matter. Interestingly, in an interview with Yury Dud, a vlogger widely followed by young people and anti-Putin urban liberals, Grudinin lauded Stalin as 'the best leader in Russia over the last 100 years' (Grudinin: Stalin nash luchshiy lider, 2018). This cannot be considered a successful move in terms of electoral tactics.

Besides nominating Grudinin, the LF spurred the nomination of party outsider and entrepreneur Vadim Kumin as the CPRF's candidate for the Moscow mayoral election in 2018, an indication that there had been reflection on the fact that the CPRF's electoral appeal must be expanded. Both Grudinin's and Kumin's views chimed with social democratic ideas that reject communism's class-based principles, such as the importance of entrepreneurs (Azar, 2018). However, these ideological openings were not very consistent. Whereas Grudinin praised Stalin for potential liberal city-dwellers regarding their demands for social justice, Kumin painted socialism with a broad brush and emphasized that it is Left parties in general that defend the interests of entrepreneurs everywhere, irrespective of whether this happens in Western Europe, Vietnam, or China (Buntman, 2018).

Given the election results of the new candidates – Grudinin 11.77% and Kumin 11.38% – the CPRF's balancing between political competition and ideological principles resulted in a combination of the worst alternatives of both dimensions. Even the fact that Grudinin had become a real threat in the eyes of the Kremlin – in light of the coercion and black PR he faced during the campaign – did not bolster his reputation as a real alternative for the Kremlin. Those who could vote for Grudinin or Kumin as potential alternatives for the regime apparently did not do so because of the programmatic stagnation of the CPRF and the party's indisputable role as a part of the system. Consequently, the CPRF's core electorate and party activists could not identify with candidates who seemingly violated traditional programmatic (communist) principles (Batov, 2018; Semyon, 2018).

Looking at the LF's statements and programme, the legacy of programmatic 'scientific communism' is clearly present alongside biased interpretations of leftist tendencies in the world. The issue of social justice is intrinsically related to ideas of Soviet-type socialization (nationalization) onto which global manifestations of social security policies are regularly projected (Levye na vlasti, 2008). Although European social democratic parties have not echoed the given teleology for decades, LF's leader Sergey Udal'tsov saw that Grudinin was 'declaring a moderate programme of socialist transformations, a conditionally Scandinavian model' (Azar, 2018). Besides obvious ideological stretching, Udal'tsov considered that Grudinin's success would be 'the best response to sanctions and pressure on Russia since there is a worldwide request for an alternative to American hegemony [and it] is Russia that could build a new left bloc all over the world' (Azar, 2018).

A major aspect of the ideological backwardness of the CPRF and its allies lies in their inability to see the modern Western left as primarily separate from Soviet communism. In tactical terms, besides its inherent anti-Western position, its most progressive representatives' reluctance to use foreign (Western) left-wing references (e.g. regional representative of the CPRF Nikolai Bondarenko from Saratov, widely known for his YouTube channel 'Diary of the deputy') might be explained by the necessity to avoid accusations of being influenced by the West, widely made by the Kremlin against the opposition (Galeotti, 2021).

When comparing the CPRF's platforms between the 2016 and 2021 Duma elections, we see almost no evolution. Whereas the 2016 platform was titled '10 steps to a decent life' (10 shagov, 2016), the 2021 platform was titled '10 steps to people's power' (10 shagov, 2021), while Grudinin's presidential platform in 2018 was simply titled '20 steps' (20 shagov, 2018). The ten steps in both Duma election platforms are more or less identical in content, although since 2016 the position of the CPRF as a protest party has clearly strengthened, while the position of the ruling party *United Russia* has weakened, at least up to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

At the heart of the economic policies are state ownership, the de facto absence of a market economy, as well as anti-globalization. A Soviet-type economic system with its 'Gosplans' is seen as a principal solution to current problems. For instance, the 2021 platform laments that 'It is a shame when the share of the manufacturing industry in Russia is several times less than in other countries' (10 shagov, 2021), while it is complex manufacturing that was a major bottleneck in the planned economy. Moreover, while

the platform calls for democratic rights and political freedoms with the slogan 'A human being is at the heart of everything', China is seen as the main reference for this principle (10 shagov, 2021).

Finally, in the 2016 and 2021 platforms, the share of foreign policy is significantly lower than in the 2011 programme (Predvybornaia programma KPRF, 2011). This is perhaps because, from 2014 onwards, the Kremlin's foreign policy has come much closer to the CPRF's anti-Western principles. Nevertheless, the platforms in 2016 and 2021 called for a 'new foreign policy' whose content is emphatically isolationist. For example, the 2021 programme points out that 'Anti-Sovietism and Russophobia are spreading like leprosy…We are obliged to do everything to bring the fraternal peoples of the USSR closer together, to revive our historical unity' (10 shagov, 2021).

The 2021 Duma election deepened the party's programmatic challenge vis-à-vis narrowing the prospects of oppositional political participation. Owing to the CPRF's organizational strength, the 2021 Duma election made it apparent that more and more oppositional candidates see the CPRF as the only viable leftist or even the only political alternative to the incumbent regime. For instance, in Moscow, university lecturer Mikhail Lobanov was actively supported while openly declaring himself a democratic socialist and not a communist (Medvedev, 2021; Sidorov, 2021). The most striking case was the election of Viktor Vorobyev as a representative of the CPRF in the 2021 regional election of the Komi Republic. Not only a non-communist but also a libertarian and ally of Navalny, Vorobyev became head of the CPRF faction in the regional parliament (Pertsev, 2021b). The Kremlin's intensified pressure against the CPRF reveals that it has recognized the party's growing status as the main protest – and consequently the main oppositional – party. This heightens the risk of the party splitting if the CPRF aims to sustain its systemic stance towards the increasingly authoritarian regime under a new party leader (the current and original party leader Gennady Ziuganov is 78 years old at the time of writing).

Ukraine: Communists Lost in the Post-Maidan Transformation

In many respects, the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) strongly resembles the CPRF. Prior to the Revolution of Dignity, it was one of the most organized political forces. In the 1990s, the CPU was the most potent political force in the country, with close to 160,000 members in 2000 (Wilson, 2002). Its leadership and cadres comprised mid-level Soviet bureaucrats. Its ideological basis was rooted in Marxism-Leninism, including the traditional Leninist interpretation of national self-determination, class struggle and state ownership (Haran & Belmega, 2010). Yet, similar to the CPRF, after the defeat of the Left opposition in the 1999 presidential election (Wilson, 2002), the Left, and the CPU in particular, experienced a steady decline, which went hand in hand with its transformation into a systemic pillar of the political system. In comparison with Russia, the degree of its freedom of action in opposition was generally higher, yet from the 1990s on, it was gradually co-opted into the 'system'. The CPU's access to state resources and public funds was provided by positions such as head of the customs service or the state property fund alongside corruption by oligarchic groups that funded the party's campaigns and purchased seats on the party electoral lists. Whereas during the 2000s the CPU suffered from systemic limitations vis-à-vis the political goals of the *Party of Regions*, between 2010 and 2013 the CPU was de facto embedded in Yanukovych's system of power (Haran & Belmega, 2010, p. 5). As Haran and Belmega (2010, p. 5) point out, 'Communists, like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, have always been a "comfortable opposition"'.

Prior to the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine's party system was restrictive regardless of the country's political pluralism. Political institutions offered limited access for outsiders, while several clans dominated at national and regional levels, competing for power and control over state institutions through formal and informal (clientelist and corruption) mechanisms (Fisun, 2016; Hale, 2014). The party system was weak, and parties relied on their funders rather than voters (Kuzio, 2014). Regional divisions reinforced the existing system as pro-Russian forces dominated in the southeast and pro-EU forces controlled the west. Various political projects were used as spoilers by the power groups to split and weaken their opponents, including on the Left (Haran & Belmega, 2010).

The CPU was an integral part of Ukraine's political system without access to power. In 2000s, it emerged as a systemic opposition party, which played a left-wing role for the dominant *Party of Regions*. The latter established a political machine in the southeast and patronage networks at the national level (Zimmer & Haran, 2008). The CPU's radical left and pro-Russian ideology attracted several societal groups, including pensioners, while its oppositional rhetoric allowed it to attract protest voters. In October 2012, the CPU strikingly doubled its electorate and won 13.2% of the votes in the parliamentary election. It received over 5% in all regions except Lviv, Ternopol and Ivano-Frankivsk, drawing a fair number of young voters.

After 2014, the CPU quickly faded away from national and regional politics, which cannot be explained merely by territorial losses and legal challenges. For instance, in its traditional stronghold, in the Kherson region, the CPU gained 13.39% in the 2012 parliamentary election and 4.31% in the 2014 parliamentary election, yet its candidate received 0.53% in the 2015 mayoral election. De-

communization laws and the district court's decision in December 2015 banned the party, although the CPU continued to function legally and was able to participate in elections.

The CPU's electoral decline is rooted in a double failure: the loss of its place in the political system and its simultaneous disconnection from Ukrainian society. First, the reformatting of the political system deprived the CPU of its status and resources (Kravets et al., 2018). The party lacked both financial and media resources. In the third quarter of 2018, the CPU registered five employees, less than three thousand hryvnas (150 USD) in donations, and spent most of its money on taxes (NAZK, 2019).

Second, although the de-communization laws did not prevent the CPU from participating in elections, the party's ideological radicalization went completely against the prevailing attitudes in Ukrainian society. It strongly rejected Ukraine's reinvigorated nation-building. It insisted that the Bolsheviks created both the Ukrainian state and nation: 'without the October [Revolution], there would be no Ukraine' (Kravets et al., 2018). The Soviet nostalgia and propaganda about Soviet achievements reclaimed the dominant position in the party's narratives and its official programme. For instance, the new CPU programme outlines a two-stage plan: returning power to workers and building up a socialist society. The party envisions a restoration of public control over the economy, while politically these goals refer to the realization of the slogan 'all power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies' as well as the reintroduction of the Stalin-era principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (CPU Programme, 2019).

The ideological stagnation has been reinforced by external patronage in which the CPU openly served Moscow. The party actively served Russian propaganda and promoted the Russian narrative of the Kyiv government as a 'Nazi junta' and Ukraine as a 'place d'armes of Russophobes and military-political aggression against Russia' (Belta, 2022a). The party echoed Moscow's position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict by consistently insisting that the war in Donbas is a 'civil war'. The CPU not only fully endorsed the Kremlin's vision, but also blamed the Ukraine government for the collapse of the peace plan: the '[unrealistic] threat of Putin's attack is used by pseudo-patriots for militarization of the country' (Simonenko, 2019, p. 9). Moreover, the CPU advocated immediate federalization in 2017 (Kravets et al., 2018), direct negotiations with separatists, and also proposed granting them full economic and political autonomy within the boundaries of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2019 (KP.ru, 2019). In January 2022, a month before Russia's invasion, the CPU issued calls to liberate the country from 'neo-fascists' (Belta, 2022b).

The party's main function shifted to disseminating these narratives in the West. For this purpose, the CPU increased participation on different platforms including PACE, the OSCE, the European Parliament and the Venice Commission in order to urge the West 'to stop the terrorism of illegal neo-Nazi paramilitaries', 'judicial and police oppression against dissidents' and 'violations of human rights' by the regime (Simonenko, 2019). It specifically prioritized 'involving Western partners in court hearings' in Ukraine (CPU, 2018b) and launched cases against Ukraine in the European Court of Human Rights.

Altogether, the outcome was the loss of touch with a Ukrainian voter. Even if references to Soviet nostalgia may have resonated to some extent in society, the CPU's new narrative and anti-Ukrainian activity strongly clashed with new dominant societal attitudes towards independence and Russia (see IRI, 2020). This deprived the party of an opportunity to carve out a new electoral niche. Naturally, this led to a major re-constitution of the CPU towards inward-oriented and narrative-reinforcing activities. The party focused on cleansing and improving control over its ranks (CPU, 2018a), and prioritized the celebration of Soviet-era anniversaries and holidays, such as the celebration of the centennial of the October Revolution in 2017. In 2019–2020, the party made preparations to celebrate the 150-year anniversary of Lenin, the 140-year anniversary of Stalin and the 75-year anniversary of Victory Day. Local communist activists focused on local commemorative dates, such as the liberation of Donetsk, Vinnitsa and Kakhovka from Nazi occupation in October 2019 (CPU Programme, 2019).

The CPU's almost complete disappearance notwithstanding, the Left void has not been filled as yet. In May 2018, a SOCIS poll recorded that almost a third of Ukrainians were ready to vote for a left-leaning party, while more than 50% would support the non-radical Left according to the Electorate Committee of Ukraine (SOCIS, 2018). Despite these demands, no 'new Left' seemed to emerge in Ukraine (Gorondi et al., 2018). Instead, the leftist field is occupied by interchangeable populist forces, such as *Sluha Narodu*, which exploits anti-establishment and justice sentiments. Vitaly Portnikov (2019) summed up the trend, stating that Vladimir Zelensky imitates his fictional TV character, who in turn 'is built on the most popular form of political behaviour for the Ukrainian voter'.

Moldova: Removing the Shackles of Lenin

In comparison with Russia and Ukraine, the evolution of Moldova's Left provides insights into the CSP's transformational path in the post-Soviet space. Moldova's political system and societal demands are in many ways similar to those of Russia and Ukraine. Since the 1990s, the country has oscillated between 'pluralism by default' in the 1990s (Way, 2015) and the early 2010s, and a 'soft' authoritarian

system in the 2000s and the second half of the 2010s (Nizhnikau, 2017). In the second half of the 2010s, the reformed successor to the PCRM, the PSRM, gradually consolidated the left-leaning as well as the protest electorate, regardless of its links to oligarchic money and external patronage, and won both presidential (2016) and parliamentary elections (2019).

In the 2000s, the CSP's access to power added a major impetus to its ideological renewal in the 2010s. The 1990s was a volatile period for Moldova's political system, which stalled the formation of a coherent 'system' and eventually opened a window of opportunity for the opposition. The economic distress and disintegration of the ruling *Agrarian-Democratic Party* under the failed attempts to change the Constitution, the personal ambitions of its leaders and intra-party clashes led to the emergence of a highly fragmented ruling coalition in 1998 (Roper, 2008). Following the economic and political crises, which led to a snap election in February 2001, the *Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova* (PCRM) won the election on an anti-reform and pro-Soviet ticket.

Prior to the 2001 parliamentary election, the PCRM was an unreformed patrimonial sister party of the CPRF. Its party platform was based on communist slogans and it exploited the Soviet nostalgia and economic distress of the 1990s. Yet, upon access to power, the PCRM significantly re-oriented itself politically (Tudoroiu, 2011). During their rule, the party moved away from doctrinal communist economic policies and slogans. One of its first acts in power was the restoration of cooperation with the IMF, previously dubbed 'villains' (Solonari, 2003, p. 18). The PCRM's new course sparked the rapid expansion of the party's membership base and the emergence of multiple ideological platforms within it. The party followed electoral preferences that strongly prioritized economic well-being and growth instead of radical programmatic policies. The PCRM proclaimed that its approaches and goals should correspond to the preferences of the majority (PCPM Programme, 2005). The party inaugurated pragmatic socio-economic policies including privatization, EU integration, as well as fiscal discipline. The 2008 party programme combined moderate social-democratic and unorthodox leftist views in presenting a 'modern' version of communism. In essence, the programme was built on centre-left political and economic agendas that combined socio-economic development and modernization plans. The idea of this 'communist liberalism' was 'humanist and liberating above all […] to fight against poverty and lawlessness, support for democracy and social justice' (PCPM Programme, 2009).

Nevertheless, as Tudoroiu (2011) notes, the party remained a superficially reformed CSP, which led to a major internal rift within the party. Consequently, the loss of power in the snap election in July 2009 resulted in a party split between an orthodox communist group and a pragmatic wing. This group of the PCRM's 'organic opposition' included relative moderates, such as former Minister of Economy Igor Dodon, former head of the secretariat of the government committee for European Integration Ion Ceban, and former Prime Minister Zinaida Greceanîi. While the PCRM returned to its doctrinal roots, these group rejected this turn and eventually established a new left party, *the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova* (PSRM). PSRM built upon new ideological principles and a new-style Left rhetoric, which made it the most popular political force in the country in the 2010s.

The PSRM was built upon the ideational and policy practices of the 2000s. The former communists, as Igor Dodon put it, were primarily disillusioned with the PCRM's trajectory: 'I sincerely regret the party's development, since I hoped that it would modernize and things would change' (Vedomosti, 2012). Dodon's group insisted on breaking with the remnants of unreformed communism within the PCRM and in November 2011, before his departure from the PCRM, he proposed the political reform of the party. He emphasized that the party was facing a steady decline in support that would accelerate along with demographic changes: 'in 7–9 years, the electoral base of the PCRM will decrease sharply due to the natural decline in pensioners and the emigration of Russian speakers' (Dodon, 2011). His 'ten theses' included ideological changes and the modernization of party structures to stop the ongoing ideological self-insulation. He pointed out that the party should broaden its popular appeal, expand its electoral support among other social groups, and actively cooperate with civil society (Dodon, 2011).

The old and the new Left quickly embarked on contrasting electoral and programmatic trajectories. While the PCRM shifted to Bolshevik narratives, the PSRM's programme was driven by socio-economic grievances, pragmatic anti-regime policies and 'pro-Moldova' foreign policy. The PSRM's centre-left platform promoted a modern socio-economic agenda, social conservatism and moderate nationalism. The party offered a combination of left-leaning economic ideas, pro-Moldova nation-building and pragmatic foreign policy. Instead of 'Bolshevik slogans', the PSRM emphatically addressed key public concerns, such as low income/pensions (35%), corruption (31%), unemployment (30%) and migration (20%) (IRI, 2019). It offered support for Moldovan patriotism, family and Church in a conservative society. Furthermore, the PSRM re-emphasized the importance of Moldova's statehood and promoted a unifying vision of Moldova as a nation: 'We have one country, one homeland–Moldova'. This was combined with a demand for a strong hand under the slogan 'Strong president–strong country'.

The renewed ideological basis was central to the PSRM's campaign in the 2019 parliamentary election. The party stressed the importance of economic and social protection.

Instead of nationalization, it pledged to boost trade and private businesses. In a country where 60% of voters in previous elections were over 50 years old, it promised the indexation of pensions twice a year, to cancel the increase in the retirement age, and to cut social taxes for the retired. The PSRM also emphasized the state and nation-building. The party offered 30% of the seats on its list to ethnic minorities and underlined that the Russian language was not a state language but rather a language of inter-ethnic communication.

Finally, the PSRM promoted neutral foreign policy and cooperation with both Russia and the EU. The rapid rise of the PSRM in 2014 was largely attributed to Russia's support (Soloviev, 2019) and Moscow's assistance was instrumental in the rise of the party. However, while other pro-Russia projects were traditionally quick to falter, the PSRM did not fall under external patronage and its positions remained sustainable. The PSRM's policy towards Russia was driven by pragmatic considerations and popularity among voters. As polls show, in 2020, 56% and 48% of the population considered Russia an important economic and political partner (IRI, 2020). The party explained links to Russia as a matter of national interest. At the same time, integration with the EU remained a key foreign policy objective. In 2019, the party's foreign policy declaration and President Dodon's 'Large Package for Moldova' both envisioned strategic partnerships with the EU and Russia. Upon forming the government, the PSRM announced that it would maintain all agreements with the EU, while restoring strategic cooperation with Russia. As Dodon underlined, 'if we choose one side, half of [Moldovan] society will feel betrayed' (Interfax, 2019). Subsequently, even during its stay in power in 2019–2020, the PSRM did not re-draft the foreign policy course of the country. It did not attempt to join the Eurasian Economic Union and maintained the pro-European course in line with the dominant voters' preferences.

Conclusion

Judging from the trajectory of the CSP in Moldova, where an unreformed patrimonial communist party came to power, the conclusion of our article is that access to power is the central condition for a CSP's ability to renew ideologically. There are two reasons for this conclusion. On the one hand, the lack of power combined with a CSP's systemic status may lead to its complete marginalization when the dominant system collapses, as happened in Ukraine with the CPU after 2014. On the other hand, since the political systems in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova are thoroughly patronal (Hale, 2014) – whereby the CSPs function as systemic parties according to incumbents' formal and informal capacities – the CSPs face a dilemma between the system and emerging opportunities to change the system. For instance, in Russia's presidentialist system, the parliament has been effectively neutralized, and parties are more likely to remain 'hermetic' custodians of their original ideological stamps than in parliamentarism, where they could play a more significant role in the exercise of power. This condition clearly applies to the CPRF whose opposition-minded candidates, especially in regional parliaments – related to the party's growing status as a general leftist oppositional structure – have only a nominal connection to the parent party. However, it is precisely this nominal connection – the gap between the party's consensus-building mechanisms on the basis of its ideological principles, and the lagging reputation – that speaks to the fact that the need for a more modern and powerful Left is obvious.

A particularly problematic issue for the CPRF is related to the party's external patrons, who draw attention to the party's patrimonialist legacy, and the loss of its leadership status in the communist superpower (see e.g. in the case of CSPs in the former Yugoslavia, Mikucka-Wójtowicz & Wojnicki, 2021). Consequently, the pre-revolutionary history of Russia cannot provide meaningful left-wing role models. However, the lack of external ideological patrons in the case of the CPRF should not be viewed too deterministically. Since the CPRF's ideological and reputational role is not dependent on any existing sister party (unlike in the case of the CPU and the PCRM), it should be free to conduct its ideological work without external constraints. Nonetheless, as the example of Moldova demonstrates, an unreformed CSP may win elections but the actual ideological renewal begins after the victory, not before it. Yet it is obvious that the possibility of winning elections with a renewed agenda that aims to speak to the widest possible electorate is a better option than relying on diminishing core voters (KPRF na razvilke, 2017).

The interdependence between access to power and ideological renewal resembles a vicious circle in the patronal system. Given the parties' clientilistic status, which disincentivizes and punishes for real competition for power, access to power to a large extent becomes a nearly impossible task until the system collapses. At the same time, the example of the CPU demonstrates what the risks of system collapse entail for unreformed systemic parties.

In this regard, given the collapse of the CPU and the reinvention of the Moldovan Left, the CPRF remains the main unreformed CSP in the post-Soviet space. Russia's deepening authoritarianism is pushing the party into an increasingly visible role of the main protest/opposition party, which irrevocably creates major pressure for its ideological renewal. However, this can be reached only via political risk that involves the party's growing popular support (reputation) vis-à-vis its systemic status (current consensus-building mechanisms). It is obvious that the party's outdated ideological conduct serves the latter while vitiating

the former. If the risk is taken for the sake of the party's oppositional potential, this will create a serious challenge for the Kremlin's capacity to sustain the current status quo by letting opposition candidates under the CPRF win in elections.

Consequently, this might increase the party's chances of getting into political power with the help of popular support which – following the Moldovan example – will very likely lead to a serious re-consideration of the party programme and its ideological principles. Nevertheless, the CPRF's current struggle between a rock and a hard place is the result of the decades-long non-access to political power. If the current systemic status prevails, there is a risk that the position of the protest party in an increasingly closed autocracy without true power will distort the party's ideological output even further. In other words, support for the party under the systemic constraints is interpreted as a success for the stagnant party ideology by the stagnant party leadership.

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Note

1. See e.g., Luke March's pivotal study on Russian and Moldovan communists (2006), or Fisun (2001) and Ishchenko's (2017) studies on Ukraine's Left. For a regional comparison, see e.g. Ishiyama (1995) and Kuzio (2008).

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