

Critical Dialogue

Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine: Electoral System Change in Diverging Regimes.

Bryon Moraski. New York: New York University Press, 2022. 304p. \$99.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592723000671

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Bryon Moraski's tightly argued, careful analysis of the consequences of introducing closed-list proportional representation in two countries currently locked in a massive, yet undeclared, land war leverages a narrowly construed question about electoral rules to shed light on big questions in politics. Scholars have long recognized that authoritarian leaders can use elections as an instrument of legitimation. But as Moraski suggests, *how* authoritarians have used the design of electoral systems to serve their own aims has received relatively less attention. Among competitive electoral systems, proportional representation (PR) is widely regarded as a comparatively equitable way to pool votes and aggregate preferences. Moraski shows that even as implementation of a closed-list PR system may incite similar behavioral responses among politicians across diverging regimes, the consequences of that behavior can contribute to authoritarian consolidation. By analyzing party-list formation across different electoral cycles, *Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine* shows how antidemocratic politicians can use rules intended to widen democratic representation for their own aims and how unforeseen consequences of rule changes for political coalitions can destabilize politics in competitive electoral contexts.

The weaponization of democratic institutions to consolidate authoritarian rule is by now a familiar story. Even as politicians with authoritarian ambitions often rely on informal institutions to maintain power, they also regularly use rule changes within formal institutions to consolidate it. Kim Lane Scheppele has shown how Hungary's Victor Orbán has presided over minor rule changes in a mixed system, reassigning "surplus" votes to party lists to win even highly contested elections, while Maria Popova has analyzed Putin's rule by law. Moraski's study contributes to this literature with a novel analysis of correlates and consequences of party-list placement; its findings resonate with the ways Kremlin-adjacent politicians practice in a variety of other national contexts. Moraski highlights party

tactics in Russia that echo or anticipate those of self-styled populists elsewhere who expanded their constituencies by involving people theretofore uninvolved in party politics: United Russia, rather than trying to bring people formerly affiliated with other parties into the party fold, recruited representatives by co-opting independent deputies. He also shows that, across the state border in Ukraine during the same period, the Our Ukraine party used party-list formation as a tool to co-opt rather than convert local politicians.

Because Moraski analyzes the implementation of electoral rule change in two countries that, during the period under analysis, seemed to most scholars to be situated near different ends of the democracy–authoritarianism spectrum, the implications of his findings for the two are different. If the Russian case reminds us that politicians with ambitions to single-party rule can adapt to use even more distributive vote-pooling rules to their advantage, examination of the Ukrainian case ultimately shows that frequent change in the rules of the game can introduce instability into electoral politics.

Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine was written before Russia's full-scale war of conquest and undisguised genocidal intent and before most Ukrainians have had to fight for their lives and the sovereignty of their state. As Moraski acknowledges, a "most similar cases" research design comparing Russia and Ukraine may suggest uncomfortable political resonance for some: the Kremlin has waged violence in the names of brotherhood and similarity, even as Ukrainians roundly reject this claim as imperial pretension. Moraski asserts that with the choice of these two cases, the book's analysis "helps control for historical and cultural legacies" (p. 14). On the one hand, such a position can be problematic insofar as it elides divergent contemporary practices of political engagement, distinct traditions of state identity, and Russians' and Ukrainians' different experiences with the Soviet state, which included genocide for millions of Ukrainians (rural famine also occurred in Soviet Russia, but unaccompanied by concurrent campaigns of cultural extermination). On the other hand, the objects of such elision are not central to the book's argument, which focuses on the consequences of the rule changes across diverging regimes and amid weak party institutionalization. Still, both the current war and its likely future reverberations offer an opportunity to

reexamine how we think about assumptions underlying case selection, embedded as they often are in dominant geopolitically inflected narratives that may or may not reflect the self-perceptions of people who live in given polities.

A comparison of politics in Russia and in Ukraine bumps up against another thorny problem: long-standing Kremlin efforts to influence Ukrainian domestic electoral politics and the deep mutual imbrication of Russian and Ukrainian oligarchic capital in the conduct of Ukrainian politics during the period under investigation. Paul D'Anieri addressed these processes in *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (2019). Although Moraski's analysis in this book does not include this issue, it is one that complicates modeling of correlates of party-list inclusion in Ukraine. During a period of intensive cross-border engagement, how did networks of relationships, including political and economic ties with Russia, affect Ukrainian politicians' inclusion on party lists, and how would one quantify the influence of such relationships on decisions to include them?

Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine offers conclusions based on an analysis of painstakingly compiled data about district-level politicians and the correlates of party-list composition. This approach is well aligned with the book's central research question. Yet, what else might we learn by thinking about these findings in dialogue with other methods and forms of data? We know that in authoritarian systems and within political parties led by leaders harboring authoritarian ambitions, competition among pretenders to office is sometimes resolved through extraconstitutional means. In the case of the parties and electoral cycles studied in this book, in the years following the Orange Revolution during which Ukraine implemented a closed-list PR system, consequential and extralegal intraparty violence—not only party-list compilation—defined some politicians' availability for participation in politics. Such violence included the death of then-prime minister Viktor Yanukovich's main competitor within the Party of Regions, an act with consequences that reverberate to the present day. Without reference to Ukraine's context of informal interventions in party representation at that time, presentation of which can require extensive longitudinal knowledge of local landscapes, a reader unversed in the details of Ukrainian regional politics could struggle to evaluate, or to evaluate correctly, the relative salience of formal institutional change for the composition of party lists.

The evidence and argument presented in this book raise broader questions and complement a growing literature that critically examines the idea of regime types as stable categories of analysis. Moraski persuasively shows how Russia's adoption of closed PR lists contributed to the development of one-party rule, and his analysis

illustrates how parties can leverage shifts in electoral rules to consolidate power. In some places in his book, Moraski portrays the opportunistic use of electoral rule change as a reflection of party development under authoritarian rule. Yet in other places, especially in thinking about the implications of these changes for parliamentary elections in Russia in 2011, United Russia's co-option of independent district deputies emerges as a factor *driving* Russia's march toward authoritarianism. This begs a question about the nature of regime types as concepts: Are they something resembling Platonic forms, revealed by the conduct of politics, or are they better thought of as instantiated and reproduced through people's choices? Both approaches to regime types as concepts are present in this book, but only the latter allows for historical contingency and agency—and for the possibility that even in a contemporary Russia seemingly unable to achieve escape velocity from its imperial and Stalinist pasts, something else could have happened.

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the stakes of understanding political development in these two countries during the decades leading up to the war are high. As the consequences of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion reverberate around the globe and threaten state sovereignty and stability not only beyond Russia but also within it, future scholars will turn to the period Moraski examines to understand both the origins of Russia's regime and the evolution of politics in Ukraine now characterized by both self-organized society-wide resistance and tightly coordinated, innovative communication strategies among its leadership. *Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine* identifies key watersheds in twenty-first-century party development in these two countries and the changes in formal institutions that led to them. The contributions of this book may become even more valuable as time wears on.

As important as Moraski's findings are for understanding the role of formal institutional change in the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Russia and the destabilization of electoral politics in peacetime Ukraine, the book's implications extend far beyond the two countries under study. Even as proponents of electoral reform in existing democracies argue that constitutional changes, including the adoption of PR systems, will bring about fairer outcomes, Moraski's findings offer a cautionary tale: electoral reform alone will not prevent would-be authoritarians from adapting to capture control of political parties and electoral systems, even if the reforms in question were expected to produce more representative results. For as Anna Grzymała-Busse, Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, Daniel Ziblatt, and others have reminded us, institutions offer no panacea amid the erosion of norms protecting political competition; without deep work to maintain the societal foundations of

that competition, electoral system change cannot protect democracies from ambitious politicians who seek to create one-party rule.

Response to Jessica Pisano's Review of *Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine: Electoral System Change in Diverging Regimes*

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— Bryon Moraski 

I would like to thank Jessica Pisano for an astute review of *Party Politics in Russia and Ukraine*. Since, as Pisano notes, the book was published in the shadow of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, I would like to elaborate on the case selection. Although the decision to compare party politics and electoral system changes in Russia and Ukraine was made well before Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine, I was mindful of the Kremlin's rhetoric on Ukraine while writing. For example, endnote 11 in chapter 1 submits that "placing too much emphasis on [the two countries'] shared experiences risks sounding like Russian politicians, including President Putin, who discount Ukraine's independence and statehood" (p. 232). The note also discusses both Ukrainian demands for autonomy as the Russian Empire disintegrated and the challenges that Ukraine's national movement posed to the Communist Party. The body of the work, meanwhile, focuses on post-Soviet differences, such as cross-national variation in presidential turnover and the evolution of the two countries' national identities (pp. 15–16). With such differences in mind, I acknowledge that some scholars may doubt whether politics in Russia and Ukraine can be meaningfully compared. I also assert, however, that for certain, well-specified questions "there are not only enough similarities but also enough meaningful differences to make a comparison of Russia and Ukraine intellectually fruitful" (p. 16)—with the caveat that the conditions facilitating the comparisons that interested me "were temporary due to the countries' evolving regimes" (p. 28).

Setting aside the question of case selection, Pisano raises two important issues: Russia's influence in Ukraine's domestic politics and the role of informal politics in candidate selection. Given that one goal of the book is to assess the impact of diverging regime trajectories on how parties navigate major electoral system changes, the possibility of cross-border diffusion raises the question of whether the behaviors of Ukrainian parties and politicians accurately reflect what one might expect in the absence of potential meddling from an increasingly authoritarian neighbor. This is a fair point. However, if Russian influence led Ukrainian parties and politicians to behave more like Russian parties and politicians, its influence should have made the cross-national differences uncovered in the book less likely, not more.

Finally, the decision to limit the analysis to incumbent legislators was made to increase comparability and to focus on politicians more squarely situated in the formal corridors of power. Future work could certainly combine quantitative interparty analyses of candidate selection and cross-national responses to electoral system changes with a qualitative approach relying on more idiographic explanations. In addition to using widely available data to draw meaningful inferences across parties and regime types, the book's analyses of candidate selection, culminating in chapter 5, offer a potential model for identifying nominations that defy conventional explanations and would be worthy of closer inspection.

Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond. By Jessica Pisano. Ithaca, New York: Cornell

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In *Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond*, Jessica Pisano depicts post-Soviet politics in Russia and Ukraine as emblematic of a "global shift in how states construe their responsibilities to individuals and individuals understand their responsibilities to states" (p. 7). Specifically, the book uses the lens of political theater to illustrate how the contemporary capitalist order grants those in power opportunities to mobilize the economically vulnerable for political purposes. In many instances, the process involves local authorities using control over public goods and social services to command popular support for themselves or their superiors. Although Pisano concedes that a combination of motivations drives participants to engage in political theater, individual decisions about whether to participate ultimately hinge on the possibility of economic retribution. Thus, even though the empirical analysis relies on years of participant observation and offers an abundance of riveting examples, the underlying storyline is one of instrumentally rational actors responding to material circumstances: "why people participate in political theater is a material story, one that has to do with the connection between how people are situated in market economies and what kinds of choices are available to them in politics" (p. 30).

Because Pisano notes that relatives of political theater can be found across time (e.g., imperial Russia) and space (e.g., Africa, Latin America, and the United States; pp. 7–8), her conclusions serve as a cautionary tale that speak both to developing states and established democracies. In Russia and Ukraine, the existence of command performances is not only common knowledge but the practice has also bred suspicion and doubt about the authenticity

of democratic participation, even among individuals with the means to escape elite pressure. Moreover, Pisano sees political theater as gaining traction in established democracies. As evidence, she points to Donald Trump's willingness to hire actors to play the role of political supporters and efforts by US companies to exert electoral pressure on employees. According to Pisano, these developments not only expand the space available for disinformation campaigns but also have the potential to transform politics in consolidated democracies: the more that Western elites are willing to stage democracy, the more likely it will be that political contestation in these societies will be defined by elites offering protection in return for political loyalty (pp. 176–79).

Readers may question Pisano's transition from using the metaphor of political theater to understand post-Soviet politics in Russia and Ukraine to asserting that consolidated democracies may experience similar fates. After all, democracy is more than the holding of elections. Although electoral participation and contestation certainly characterize democracy, democracy also requires the presence of civil liberties and political rights that help protect citizens from state abuses. Pisano, at least implicitly, acknowledges such differences. She questions, for example, whether America's existing guardrails are enough to stave off democratic erosion.

In general, however, Pisano proves more interested in identifying commonalities across regime types than in determining the degree to which regimes differences might explain differences in the practice of political theater. As she notes, the book “temporarily brackets generalizations about the concentration of power, the rule of law, and the extent of freedom upon which traditional regime-type designations depend” (p. 7). However, because neither the book's title nor its conclusions bracket regime type, it seems reasonable to wonder how much of the global shift in terms of how states and citizens relate to one another reflects the global spread of electoral authoritarianism identified by Andreas Schedler (e.g., *The Politics of Uncertainty*, 2013). Likewise, differences in regime type might help explain variation within and across Russia and Ukraine. Chapter 2, for example, traces the history of political theater through the tsarist and Soviet periods. As Pisano observes, one way in which recent political theater differs from previous eras is its attempt to convey “the idea that contemporary Russian politics are democratic, and that the government is responsive to citizens' concerns” (p. 50). In other words, Russia's post-Soviet political regime has sought to derive legitimacy from creating a democratic façade, one that combines the appearance of competitive elections with authoritarian practices (i.e., electoral authoritarianism). In Ukraine, meanwhile, the “mechanisms of control” used during national elections appear to vary depending on whether the electoral campaigns are those of authoritarian-leaning politicians

(Kuchma and Yanukovich) or reformers (Yushchenko) (p. 166).

Pisano is right to contend that regime type describes the politics of entire polities, whereas political theater is more applicable for understanding the development of groups and group boundaries (p. 167). She is also correct that political theater allows us to see “local contours of a political shift that is prior to and deeper than regime change” (p. 163). These assertions do not, however, challenge the utility of regime types. Rather, they highlight how Pisano's emphasis is on a lower level of aggregation than work that seeks to compare how politics operates in different national or subnational regimes. Scholars interested in differences across regime types would not be surprised to read that “people's experiences of interaction with state agents vary not only from region to region, but also from street to street and from household to household” (p. 166). What concerns them is whether differences in regime type or regime trajectory make command performances more common or more frequent in certain polities than in others.

It is worth noting that the literature on post-Soviet elections in Russia and Ukraine regularly discusses temporal and spatial variations in elite pressure, often referring to the use of “administrative resources.” Unfortunately, this term functions almost as a residual category, capturing a wide range of practices from falsified ballots to the kinds of coerced political participation that Pisano describes. Thus, future work on the mechanisms that elites use to drive political participation in general and to influence election outcomes specifically should find *Staging Democracy* valuable. Chapter 3 reveals how changes in local economies following the Soviet Union's dissolution made a broader cross-section of Russian and Ukrainian citizens more dependent on their employers and local authorities. Chapters 4 and 5, meanwhile, explain how local elites converted goods and services conventionally deemed public entitlements into a system of state-controlled privileges reserved for those who demonstrate political fealty. With this foundation laid, chapter 6 exposes the challenge of understanding what political participation means in these contexts, and chapter 7 discusses how the ambiguity associated with the meaning of participation serves those in power.

In the spirit of Pisano's desire to move beyond regime type, others might focus on variations in the quality of governance. Like Pisano, Bo Rothstein (*The Quality of Government* 2011), for example, observes that corruption, low trust, and inequality are common features of daily life in many countries, both democratic and authoritarian. According to Rothstein, one route for limiting elite abuses of state power in such contexts is the establishment of impartial institutions, like independent courts and a non-partisan, professional civil service. Although one might contend that these institutions are more likely to emerge in

democratic than authoritarian regimes, this is not always so, and one should expect command performances to be more likely in democratic regimes where impartiality is in short supply. It is notable that Rothstein's emphasis on impartial institutions echoes Pisano's contention that more capitalism is not a solution to the politicization of public services (pp. 172–75). As Rothstein observes, “you can have a market for anything as long as you do not have a market for everything” (2011, p. 209; emphasis in the original). At the same time, Rothstein's focus on the origins and operation of impartial institutions reminds both citizens and scholars that a well-functioning democracy, one that protects its citizens from elite pressure, requires much more than the holding of competitive elections.

Overall, *Staging Democracy* offers several keen insights. For example, because variations in command performances reflect how local economic institutions interact with the state, one should expect the operation of political theater to function differently in villages, provincial cities, and capital cities. Although one can imagine different reasons why economic pressures might be greater in the provinces than in capital cities (e.g., less anonymity, fewer employment opportunities), Pisano identifies two potential exceptions. First, she submits that people living near state borders might benefit from a cross-border labor market, making them less dependent on local economies. Second, she suggests that where command performances in capital cities assume greater significance, elite pressure may be lower for citizens residing in the countryside (p. 19). Although Pisano concludes that no real difference exists between the center and periphery on these counts, the book also “expressly did not involve the kind of research wherein the researcher chooses a set of cases based on a certain kind of variation and then sets about explaining that variation” (p. 20). *Staging Democracy*, then, illustrates the inner workings of how political theater operates and, in doing so, offers a novel assessment of the potential consequences of command performances while leaving room for future research to empirically interrogate the correlates of those performances.

Response to Bryon Moraski's Review of *Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond*

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— Jessica Pisano 

Bryon Moraski has provided a serious and thoughtful reading of *Staging Democracy*. Here I respond to two points he raises and one I wish he had raised. First, while acknowledging the role of political theater in undermining trust, Moraski wonders about the applicability of the

book's contributions for consolidated democracies. One of the book's key conclusions is that political theater does not need to be widespread (as it was in Ukraine before Zelenskyy) or the only game in town (as it is in Russia) to be consequential. The book argues that, even if a relatively small number of people are paid or prodded into protests, political rallies, or other forms of support for a political leader, the very existence of those performances can discredit the entire system in some people's eyes. If some people are doing it because they are paid, the logic goes, maybe everyone is similarly motivated. Such ideas and logics are already in circulation in the United States, where a substantial proportion of Republican voters continue to find credible the lies of the “Stop the Steal” political influence operation. *Staging Democracy* discusses examples of accusations of “crisis acting” in the United States and situates them within a broader global context of political theater.

Second, Moraski describes *Staging Democracy* as focusing on commonalities across regime type. Although the book does analyze political theater in divergent regime settings, its research design is neither meant to parse differences nor to focus on similarities cohering around regime type. Instead, *Staging Democracy* means to add to our conceptual toolbox: to provide a way of thinking about politics that accounts for the dramaturgical and economic practices that regime type concepts do not usually consider.

What does a focus on political theater reveal that other concepts might not allow us to see? Ukraine provides a case in point. For decades, elections seemed to divide the country along the Dnipro River, with pro-EU parties popular in the west and support for politicians friendly to Moscow in the south and east. These electoral preferences mapped onto ethnic and linguistic identities in post-Soviet Ukraine, and over time this correlation became a causal story in scholarship and public commentary. The Kremlin took on board this interpretation, imagining that Ukrainians in the east and south supported pro-Russian politicians because they wanted to be ruled by Russia. *Staging Democracy* suggests a different explanation: in the east and south of Ukraine, more people voted for pro-Russian parties in part because the tools of economic pressure were ideally suited to conditions in those regions, with their large-scale agriculture and industry, dense concentrations of educational institutions and hospitals, and company towns. Russified Ukrainians in the east and south felt no less supportive of Ukrainian statehood than their compatriots to the west, but their realities often included more economic pressure to support Kremlin-leaning politicians.

Third, as *Staging Democracy* went to press, some communities in Ukraine where I conducted research for the book were destroyed by Russian missiles, others came under occupation, and still others became

destinations for massive numbers of internally displaced people. Moraski quite reasonably read *Staging Democracy* retrospectively, but how do its contributions help us understand politics after Russia's full-scale invasion? Time will tell whether Volodymyr Zelenskyy's success in moving politics offstage in Ukraine will persist after victory, but the implications for Russia are evident already. *Staging Democracy* brings into clearer view the continuity between the conduct of Russia's war and Kremlin governance generally: many of those who volunteered to fight in Ukraine went to pay off a debt, to obtain a car, or to qualify for a mortgage, whereas those who stayed behind framed their choices in similar terms, insisting their political silence allowed them to keep their jobs. Further, the findings of *Staging Democracy* suggest

that sanction regimes, though slow to work, may be effective. Because political theater depends on political threats against people's livelihoods, it functions best in middle-income contexts where people still have something to lose. In Russia, once people no longer benefit from their silence, seemingly broad public support for a war of imperial expansion may begin to look very different. Finally, an understanding of the economic and societal foundations of political support for contemporary authoritarian regimes can help us better evaluate the salience of ideology in maintaining that support. Kremlin politicians and their allies have a long history of underestimating the intelligence of both their constituents and their adversaries. Even as political performances continue in Russia, something else may be brewing backstage.