

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING POST-SOVIET ELECTIONS: BETWEEN THE THEATER STATE AND OCULAR DEMOCRACY¹

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Abstract: The paper suggests a re-conceptualization of post-Soviet elections beyond comparisons with the Western ideal-typical model of liberal democracy on the one hand, and their marginalization in patronal politics (Hale, 2005; Wilson, 2005) on the other. It exposes post-Soviet politics as an aestheticized domain, where ‘democratic transition’ did not bring about political agonism in the public sphere, but political theatricality of various kinds, and analyzes that domain through the constructive functionality of elections and social imaginaries linked to them. Special attention is placed on the convergences and divergences between Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Three threads are subsequently analyzed to expose the genealogy of post-Soviet political theatricality: 1) the Soviet ‘no-choice elections’ as public acts of affirmation and displays of power; 2) elections as political festivities celebrating the ‘king’ in the ‘theatre state’ (Geertz, 1980) that provide the ‘population’ with the only available identification through and under the leader; 3) elections as an investment of trust within ‘ocular/plebiscitary democracy’ (Green, 2016) that create an affective bond between a leader as a media persona and his audience as a ‘sleeping sovereign’ (Chatterjee, 2020). The conclusion exposes elections as a battle of imaginaries, or, a game-changer when an election is about the choice of a political order, not only of a political leader or strategy. Whereas the

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liberal-rational imaginary remains a ‘minority faith,’ the ocular/plebiscitary democracy is currently gaining ground in Ukraine and beyond.

Keywords: post-Soviet elections, social imaginary, patronal politics, theatre state, ocular democracy, plebiscitarianism.

Introduction: performing elections in post-Soviet states

An anecdote about elections was popular in Ukraine in the late 1990s. The incumbent Kuchma was running for a second term. The head of the Presidential Administration supposedly came into his boss’s office the next morning after the run-off saying he had good and bad news: “Congratulations, you were re-elected! However, no one actually voted for you.” This story, albeit completely made up, gives a glimpse into the political imaginary behind the post-Soviet elections as a social institution. What appears to a Western observer as a hollowed-out version of a democratic instrument, has deep cultural embeddedness and different functionality in the local context. Stephen Holmes famously labeled Russia after 1991 a “Potemkin democracy”, where “[e]lectoral politics, a pluralistic press, freedom of travel, and so forth, have been *surface froth* and have made no dent in the underlying depredation of the many by the few”² (Holmes, 2002: 116). Thus, elections get often inscribed in the imitative democratization paradigm, being interpreted as window-dressing for the international community and, most importantly, for donors. As Geddes, Wright, and Franz prove in their research: “Since the end of the Cold War, international donors have tied foreign aid and other resources to holding elections that allow some competition. [...] Until the early 1990s, dictatorships that held uncontested executive election rituals, such as Egypt during much of the time after 1952, received the most aid per capita. Post-Cold War, however, dictatorships that hold semi-competitive executive elections, and can thus claim to be taking steps toward democracy, receive the most aid” (2018: 138–139).

Why the “end of history” triumphalism resulted in futile attempts of democratic import, is an important question gaining special attention within the recent backslide of democracy. To put it differently, why were competitive multiparty elections perceived as the main vehicle of democratization? Fareed Zakaria back in 1997 insightfully remarked: “Democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war. [...] As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world” (1997:

2 From here onwards, the *italic* is mine.

42–43). The apologetic perception of democracy as “everything good,” all in the same basket, be it the rule of law, the accountability of authorities, the checks-and-balances, or competitive elections, is both analytically feeble and practically discredited. Therefore, there is a need to distinguish between voting in liberal and illiberal (Zakaria, 1997), consolidated and non-consolidated democracies (Geddes, Wright & Franz 2018), and, finally, between representative and non-representative/plebiscitarian governance (Green, 2016; Urbinati, 2014).

The argument developed in this paper is that post-Soviet elections, rather than being just a “surface froth,” or a distorted version of the Western model, present a different political phenomenon that bring together some of the Soviet legacy with post-Soviet crony capitalism and neopatrimonialism. This phenomenon has a broader social and cultural meaning than being an instrument of political manipulation, part and parcel of “virtual politics” (Wilson, 2005), a formal political institution gaining second-rate importance against informal politics of patron-client networks (Hale, 2015; Magyar, 2019). Following Lange-nohl’s reading of elections and voting as “epistemic machines that render some truth about society to the political system” (2019: 80), the article focuses on social imaginaries attached to post-Soviet elections: how they mirror the respective societies in flux, what constructive functions they perform towards these societies, and how they re-arrange the political domain. With these, several theoretical premises are crucial to understand.

With regards to Richard Pipes’s remark that “[r]evolutions normally result in the replacement of one government by another; in Russia, and there only, do they cause a collapse of organized life” (1992), I would add the same holds for elections in post-Soviet space. On the one hand, nothing is changing with electoral cycles, as the patronal system constantly adjusts to internal and external challenges to remain intact (Mizsei, 2019). On the other hand, given weak state institutions, any election threatens to shatter the entire social fabric. This delicate dance between autocracy, strengthening the power vertical, and counter-democracy, as mass protests challenging the regime’s legitimacy (Hale, 2005), *shift an equilibrium point*, which subsequently informs the next elections and the hegemonic social imaginary.

The main social function of post-Soviet elections seems to be *forging the unity* of an otherwise heterogeneously fuzzy population. It stands in drastic contrast to the ideal-typical liberal-democratic model of *collaborative diversity*, structuring the polity and representing multiple interests in public politics. And it explains the post-Soviet obsession with high turnouts and unanimous voting (average support figures going above 70 percent). Against weak national identities remaining an active “minority faith” (Wilson, 2010) and largely dysfunctional state institutions disabling strong state-nation identifications (Stepan, Linz & Yadav, 2011), highly personified politics remains almost the only game in town, where *national unity is achieved only under*

and through a national leader. The exact configuration of his relationship with the electorate defines the content of the social imaginary: whether his authority derives from God and descends on people (the “theatre state” model (Geertz, 1980)), or he performs “under the eyes of the people” who could withdraw their trust from him at any point (the “ocular democracy” model (Green, 2010)).

Despite the bureaucratic Soviet legacy in-built in most of the post-Soviet political elites, the general framing differs significantly. The dismantlement of the USSR destroyed the impersonal charisma of the Communist party (Jowitt, 1993) and the ideological appeal of Soviet Communism as the reference point providing the society’s cohesion. The resulting ideological void opened up space for the public comeback of religion and de-modernization (Rabkin & Minakov, 2018). The parallel thread concerns technological super-modernization, the use of contemporary digital technologies for political purposes (Runciman, 2018). On top of that, integration of the region into the global capitalist world-system resulted in state capture and crony capitalism. The strategic goals of the ruling elites become twofold: “to weather economic and political storms and remain in power” and “to get fabulously rich, in a manner unimaginable in Soviet times” (Mizsei, 2019: 536). In a nutshell, authorities use ideologies without being driven by them. This instrumental/cynical political rationality interpenetrates the entire societies, thereby affirming wealth accumulation as the only valid goal.

The article opens by discussing the design and functionality of no-choice elections in Soviet times and their lasting legacy in post-Soviet politics. While primarily serving as rituals of loyalty and public displays of power, they also stand as useful checks on the society and on the bureaucratic power vertical, thus reversing the vector of accountability and binding the voters, not the voted. Upon acknowledging the institutional *inertia* dating back to Soviet times, I proceed with two alternative developments in political imaginaries and electoral tendencies. Geertz’s concept of “theatre state” is useful for marking the *re-archaization* trend, where the quasi-public space is emptied from political agonism and filled instead with political festivities celebrating the “king” as one conferred with divine power. An apathetic population deprived of any political agency acquires identity under the leader and compensates for the misery of daily life with the grandeur of political festivities. This model has limited applicability to former colonies that are prone to ridicule political power rather than sacralize it. Flattened postcolonial spaces with an absent center efficiently externalize imperial hierarchical power as foreign and imposed. The cultural proclivity to political humor and satire enabled the emergence of ocular democracy in Ukraine, which signaled a shift from elections as a political ritual of loyalty to elections as a revolt against hypocrisy.³ Interestingly,

3 Symptomatically, the 2019 elections in Ukraine were swiftly dubbed ‘an elector-

this synchronizes the region with the rising global trend of media populism. Ocular/plebiscitary democracy emerges out of people's frustration with predatory elites (either Western technocratic or Eastern oligarchic) and dysfunctional institutions (that stopped serving people or that never did). What the post-Soviet context demonstrates is that ocular/plebiscitary democracy does not come from worsening people's conditions but from people's empowerment: the rise of social media weakens gatekeeping in public politics, thus equalizing the media-political landscape.

Elections as public acts of affirmation: the Soviet legacy

Soviet elections have rarely been the focal point of scholarly attention. The general consensus is that they aimed to confirm the legitimacy of the political order by pushing for unanimous voting. As Stephen White notes: "Unlike, for instance, the major fascist dictatorships, the USSR and the other communist countries have always based their legitimacy upon the doctrine of popular sovereignty and, by *extension*, upon the electoral process as a means by which that sovereignty may at least notionally be expressed" (1985: 215). According to the official ideology, codified in the Soviet constitutions and in other legal acts, political power derived from the people served as the main sovereign. The Soviet order was proclaimed to be the order of 'workers and peasants,' where the Communist party stood just as a 'helmsman.' One might suppose that the more the heirs of the Great October established themselves as *nomenklatura*, the bigger the gap between them and the rank-and-file became, thereby buttressing the symbolic importance of elections.

Alex Pravda (1978) singles out three main stages in the electoral development of the USSR in explaining the seemingly paradoxical 1936 Constitution presenting a new electoral system in the wake of the Great Purge. In the 1920s, the Communist Party had to participate in party struggles in quite a challenging and hostile climate with a no clear majority. Yet, after getting rid of 'class enemies' and making political and economic changes, it was 'safe' to introduce universal suffrage. Pravda claims that Stalin felt empowered to introduce the plebiscitary elections: "Whereas in the period of outright proletarian dictatorship it had been necessary to use elections as an instrument of class power to forge unity, in a basically harmonious socialist society the role of elections was to give *unimpeded expression to existing unity*" (1978: 172). The ideological underpinning and the ideal-typical

al Maidan' (Schreck, 2019), which captured their protest character, uncommon even against the Ukrainian tradition of 'dissent elections.'

model were different. According to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the socialist society has no class conflicts, thus political agonism is artificial and harmful. Elections in the socialist society are, therefore, a temporary measure aimed to affirm unity. Hence, in the plebiscitary voting, a great emphasis was put on high turnouts approximating 100 percent. Accordingly, absenteeism became an important form of political dissent. Given that secret balloting was strongly discouraged, and any unclear signs on the ballot were counted as voting for a candidate, overt dissent came in the form of not attending elections altogether. However, if choosing, absentee certificates were granted by the authorities to potential dissenters as a lesser evil (Zaslavsky & Brym, 1978: 366).

The algorithm and the goals were substantially different from what is known as competitive elections. Yet, it was not an empty ritual either. Guy Hermet suggests that the East European Communist practices could be “*a better ideal-type model*” (1978: ix), or a more fitting yardstick for describing electoral developments in different corners of the world. If comparing the ‘Western liberal’ and ‘Eastern communist’ elections, some functions would seem unexpectedly similar, at times with an unusual twist. Zaslavsky and Brym’s research (1978) gives some extra insights revealing the functioning of elections also as a lift of social mobility for successful canvassers (‘agitators’) within the Party; as an educational tool, or as an opportunity to explain the governmental policies and their ideological backdrop (rather than negotiating and choosing policies); and, finally, as a tool of exposing possible islands of dissent in order to neutralize them.

Soviet elections performed the function of *communication* between the ruling elites and their constituencies but the flow of information was reversed. It stood as an *educational* tool: canvassers were explaining the central policies and their ideological meaning rather than inquiring about voters’ preferences. However, there was a share of bargaining concerning local extra-political issues: complaints about local mishaps were collected, and there was a good chance for the local infrastructure to be repaired or for unpopular local leaders to be replaced (usually moved to different constituencies): one in every 10 000 local elections resulted in the candidate’s defeat (Pravda, 1978: 177).

The apologists of Soviet elections as an alternative type of a democratic configuration use this argument: For instance, Jerzy J. Wiatr calls them “*consent elections*” that supposedly “do not decide who rules the country, but... influence the way in which the country will be ruled” (1962: 251). Despite a manipulative exaggeration packed within this claim, there was a degree of mobility and of surprise results, with the caveat that it was about the intra-party mobility and possible changes in the positions of different regional elites. The competition between various candidates was happening not at the ballot box but at the stage of the selection process within circles of local officials “accompanied

by a good deal of consultation and bargaining” (Pravda, 1978: 178). Another curious twist was that voting implied not certain obligations on the side of elected officials but the commitment of voters: As Pravda mentions, votes were “interpreted as the political equivalents of the *pledges* given by work-forces to fulfill production targets ahead of schedule” (1978: 191). In a similar vein, Zaslavsky and Brym confirm that the election campaign had a rationale of both “a thorough explanation of the domestic and foreign policy of the Communist Government, and the mobilization of the workers in the struggle for the successful fulfillment of the plans for communist construction” (1978: 370). It is worth noting in this context that workers’ meetings were important venues of the electoral campaign where candidates were approved, if not chosen.

Elections were also exerting *social control*, both over the population’s discipline and the fidelity and performance of the party cadres. Carrots and sticks were used in the process. Lay people flocked to the polling stations, as some deficit goods could be acquired only there. All in all, the no-choice elections in the USSR pursued the outer goal of affirming and demonstrating the almightiness of the Communist Party and the regime. On the inside, they were aimed at checking the functionality of bureaucracy on all the levels by tracing the weak spots in the apparatus and the islands of dissent in the society.

Elections as a *display of power* exerted a powerful psychological effect tangible also in the post-Soviet times: Those who are in power win the elections, not the other way around. Krastev and Holmes refer to Gleb Pavlovsky, a pioneer in electoral technologies in post-Soviet Russia. An anecdote goes that he asked a senior lady why she planned to vote for the incumbent when she favored the quasi-oppositional leader Zyuganov. The answer was: “When Zyuganov is president, I will vote for him” (Krastev & Holmes, 2012: 35). Therefore, the capacity of power-holders to rig elections proves their power rather than challenges their legitimacy, as one would expect from the “Western” vantage point. Researchers note that in (semi) authoritarian regimes, citizens do not trust the results of elections, while at the same time believing that an incumbent enjoys popular support and “would win anyway.” Rigged elections, or *show elections*, as Krastev and Holmes put it (2012: 39), demonstrate the capacity of power-holders to control the elites and the societies, thus affirming they are worthy of office.

At the same time, researchers note that both in the USSR and its post-1991 successor states, the electorate is quite immune to ideology and propaganda, not taking the claims seriously (Pravda, 1978: 187). Utechin mentions: “Stalin intended people to be aware of the fictitious nature of the theory, for an attempt on the part of the people to treat it as truthful (e.g., to believe that they enjoyed freedom of the press) would undermine the whole of his system of rule. Therefore, any action based on belief (genuine or pretended) in the truthfulness of the

official theory was treated as a most serious political offence” (1963: 242). Zaslavsky and Brym add that manipulated elections were in the toolkit “to adjust the population to the system’s *irrationality*, to resolve for them the blatant contradiction between official ideology and proscribed political practice” (1978: 371).

That brings us to the next crucial point inherent in the Soviet political system, that is its double-sidedness, an omnipresent cleavage between the proclaimed and the real. In it, Andrew Wilson sees the roots of the post-Soviet “virtual politics”: “The denial of truth in the Soviet Union throughout most of the twentieth century created many of the preconditions for virtuality in the twenty-first” (Wilson, 2005: 8). Kalman Mizsei echoes him on this: “The devastating cynicism of the Soviet system, and the general practice of “double-speak” practices by everyone in communist times, smoothed the path to creating this [patronal – V.K.] system of social organization” (2019: 535). These considerations, present in the rich body of literature on patronal politics (Hale, 2015; Magyar, 2019), reckon that the main legacy of Soviet-style elections inherited by post-Soviet political elites is the belief that elections must be staged with a pre-defined outcome, even if pocket parties and multiple candidates are introduced. Wilson aptly describes political technologies behind such ‘Potemkin elections,’ or ‘show elections,’ convincingly demonstrating their Machiavellian character, bluntly exposed in the name of a respectable political technology agency in Moscow “Nikkolo-M” (2005: xiii).

However helpful for an understanding of the design and internal mechanics of post-Soviet elections the literature on patronal politics is, it has its blind spots. First, it is overly focused on political elites and stakeholders, thus denying any political agency to the society, which has proven unable to explain the expansion of people’s agency, for instance, during mass protests – albeit successfully explaining their failure (Hale, 2005). Secondly, it one-sidedly elaborates on “arranging” as the post-Soviet *modus operandi* – as opposed to liberal “governing” and communist “commanding” (Hale, 2019: 13) – which acknowledges solely the cynical political rationality. However, the Soviet legacy includes constructive functions of elections, most importantly, as a temporarily opening of the otherwise hermetic sphere of governance, which re-connects the society with the governing elites and creates opportunities for providing feedback, social mobility of lay citizens, and rotation in local elites. This legacy has played out most saliently in the Belarusian case: While Lukashenka overtly proclaimed the intent to keep the Soviet institutional heredity, its positive component secured him wide popular support up until recently.

Thirdly, it oftentimes focuses on the convergences between Russia and neighboring states deriving from their shared past, while mitigating the divergences coming from elsewhere. Most importantly, Ukraine and Belarus are not only former peripheries of Moscow (that would explain them taking similar paths with a certain delay) but they

are also former colonies with absent power centers and power hierarchies. It is harder to suture this flattened space of an imperial wreck, yet it is easier to de-sacralize political power and to challenge imposed hierarchies. Symptomatically, Ukrainian political technologists in the 1990s dubbed themselves the 'Golokhvastov Club' (Wilson, 2005: 37) referring to a satirical character of a man of fortune, not an Italian diplomat.

On the one hand, Ukraine is a typical post-Soviet state, where elections were staged (at least, in the late 1990s) as political rituals with pre-defined outcomes; people had a vote without having a voice. Yet on the other hand, it stands out from the rest of FSU, as incumbents tend not to be re-elected (with a telling exception of Kuchma's second term). On the surface, Ukraine has passed Huntington's test for democracy: Elections did bring changes in power more than twice in a row. But if digging deeper, the situation looks much gloomier. After an initial chaotic stage in the early 1990s, an oligarchic patronal regime gained ground and remains intact to date (Minakov, 2019). The specificity of Ukraine is as follows: Paraphrasing Jerzy Wiatr, Ukrainians are prone to *dissent elections*, voting against incumbents and parties in power, and by the same token sending a message in the only accessible way. Thus, elections have a plebiscitarian essence and binary structure, standing like a total sociological poll with a usually negative result. If looking, for instance, at the unexpectedly high 10 percent for the right-wing Svoboda party in the 2010 parliamentary elections and analyzing the profile of this electorate (drastically divergent from the party ideology), it stands as a case of protest voting against the Orange revolution coalition having failed to deliver. Secondly, up until 2014, elections in Ukraine had *antagonized* the society, exposing the cleavages rather than celebrating the unity. The country's inherent diversity had prevented the authoritarian aggrandizing of power, yet also impeded any successful projects of common future. Thirdly, *the effective mechanism of changing high officials was not elections but mass protests* triggered by rigged elections and the impotence of existing legal institutions. However, after bringing the revolution leaders into high offices, citizens soon got frustrated with their inability to deliver. The "system" (not the Soviet but the post-Soviet, oligarchic one) seems to catch up on the protests' agenda to stay intact.

To cover the mentioned blind spots, I suggest complementing the instrumental rendering of post-Soviet political rationality – that implies top-down governance with contracted citizens' agency and intra-elites negotiations as the main site of political struggle – with the reading of elections as meeting points reconnecting the governing with the governed (Langenohl, 2019: 94). This reconnection is not arranged but performed, played out. Thus, political theatricality is crucial for understanding post-Soviet politics and politics.

Elections as a festivity celebrating the unity: a 'theatre state'

Clifford Geertz in his largely ignored but thoroughly cherished book "*Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*" (1980) coined a useful notion of 'theatre state' that sheds some light also on the post-Soviet political developments. According to Geertz, a 'theatre state' is the one governed by rituals and symbols rather than by force. He argues that various public rituals are not ornamental add-ons distracting attention from real politics, but instead are the quintessence of the political in some specific orders. As he puts it: "A royal cremation was not an echo of a politics taking place somewhere else. It was an intensification of a politics taking place everywhere else" (1980: 120). From this perspective, a political ceremony not only manifests but also generates political power. It is a Steinberg self-writing hand that creates itself through publicly constructing and displaying its might: "The state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies" (Geertz, 1980: 123). Geertz's core claim is that common conceptions of a state through the monopoly on violence, a site of interest groups negotiations, or a vehicle of economic exploitation fail to explain this aspect of political symbology, "the ordering force of display, regard, and drama" (1980: 121).

From Geertz's perspective, political performances construct a certain imaginary that subsequently puts people in line with official guidelines without force and repressions. This imaginary presents a specific *power hierarchy* with a 'god' as a divine source of power on top, a 'king' as a worldly site of power, and his 'court' / officials as parts of king's regalia attesting to the sacrality of his power. Lay people stand as the subjects who could establish their identity only through the symbolic person of a 'king.' Thus, the political power has a sacred nature. It derives from the divine order, and it has a perennial character. That explains the political importance of religion in contemporary political orders, be it Moscow as the Third Rome in the Russian imperial construction, or Poland as the Christ of nations in contemporary Polish populism. Communism as a 'social religion' (Berdyayev, 1906), and the impersonal charisma of the Communist party in the Soviet times (Jowitt, 1993) structurally play the same role through the messianic appeal of the Communist promise. It puts a ruler outside any social or political norms: The more he dares to benevolently misbehave, the stronger his power establishes itself. Krastev and Holmes argue on contemporary Russia that "the regularly rigged election can only be described as a central, load-bearing institutional pillar of Putin's regime" (2012: 34), as the capacity to mobilize mass voting and secure a unanimous result testifies to a power-holder. "In Russia, in other words, a leader's 'popularity' (as measured at the polls) is an effect and not a cause of his perceived grip on power" (Krastev & Holmes, 2012: 35-36). Belarus before 2020 is another case of elections as a similar "*plebiscite of silence*":

citizens tolerate electoral frauds gauged as the sign of power, not its lack thereof. Sierakowski quotes from a conversation he had with Maria Kolesnikava: “Lukashenka could have won all previous elections in Belarus democratically – he rigged them not in order to win, but in order to secure his status as the only politician in Belarus” (Sierakowski, 2020: 8–9). In this configuration, elections aim to celebrate the only politician and the national unity under and through him.

Another important feature of such symbolic geography is the distinction between the ‘little world’ (the court) as the site of politics, its sacred ‘inside,’ and the ‘big world’ (society) as the ‘outside’ of politics. The political anatomy is structured as concentric circles centered on the seat of the king as the “axis of the world” (Geertz, 1980: 109). Public politics in theatre states presume no political competition, debates, or articulation of diverse interests. It is monolithic, while the public outside the “little world” is dispersed, politically impotent, and apathetic. The only available identity is constructed through a leader as its nodal point: “Russia’s fraudulent elections [...] have also served to give at least a semblance of palpable form to the otherwise dubious political unity of the nation” (Krastev & Holmes, 2012: 38). Krastev and Holmes rightly point out the absence of any positive identity and even of any fixed national borders in the perception of ordinary Russians. Only the electoral map and the leader’s figure present the nation as a seemingly coherent political whole. *The grandeur of political happenings compensates for the misery of daily life.* Cora Du Bois’s diagnosis, elaborated on in another context, fits in here: “the king was the sign of the peasantry’s greatness” (Geertz, 1980: 102). In its post-Soviet rendering, public festivities compensate for the scarcity of public politics. Political performances substitute political struggle and debates.

Geertz develops his concept of a “theatre state” on the material of pre-colonial Bali but it has important implications for contemporaneity beyond a Western-centric vision. Byung-Ho Chung in the book “North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics” argues that North Korea is a contemporary theatre state, as the durability of political power there owes to its reliance on theatrics: The leader behaves “like a heroic actor in an epic revolutionary theater production and is continuously playing the role in the contemporary political drama” (Chung, 2018). In this case, elections are out of the equation. Thus, other performances are enacted, missile launching being the core display of power: “Guns, missiles, and nuclear bombs are the national identity of the theatre state of North Korea” (Chung, 2018). Let us compare with Putin’s Russia, where political theatricality reveals itself in happenings that aim to demonstrate the leader’s popularity, physical strength, and the state’s geopolitical weight. The crucial ones are the following: 1) military parades on Victory Day, missile launching, military exercises, warfare; 2) large sporting events (the Olympics, World Cups, and the like) arranged with gargantuan pomp; 3) the leader’s physical activities (diving, riding a horse, working out); 4) direct lines with Vladimir Putin,

opinion polls exposing his tremendous popularity, and elections. All public activities, even seemingly quotidian (like sporting events or the leader's leisure time), get political, as this is *the only acceptable public politics*. Depending on a specific display of power, a *celebrant-in-chief* is appointed among the officials: the head of the Central Election Commission; the head of a public opinion research center; the Minister of Foreign Affairs; a Commander-in-chief, President's spokesperson, or TV star. Rotating celebrants-in-chief serve their duties in various "exhibitions of symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1984).

Observers often note the huge social weight of sporting events and musical competitions in the post-Soviet region: Proverbial Eurovision song contests became overly politicized in the area (Seely, 2016), and to an even greater extent, so did the Olympics and FIFA World Cups. Many scholars tend to interpret them as instruments of the Kremlin's soft power. Makarychev and Yatsyk (2014) put together the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea as two major events (re)affirming Russia as a great power. Citing the political commentator Sergey Medvedev, they expose them as epic storytelling: "the Sochi story is propagated as an epic myth – from the miraculous award of the winter Games to this sub-tropical city to the even less expected victory of the Russian team in the overall medal count. This epos [...] has been transformed into the celebration of Russia's victory in Crimea – a highly mythologized and sacralized territory, blending cultural appeal with military glory" (2014: 63–64). In another contribution, they elaborate on the shifts in the 'Putinite sovereignty' from the 2014 Sochi Olympics to the (then prospected) 2018 FIFA World Cup, underlining how Agamben's paradox of sovereignty worked out in preparations for the Olympics in Russia. According to Agamben, the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order he embodies (1998): He produces the laws, thus being their guarantor, and at the same time reserves the right to disobey, thus putting himself above the law. Makarychev and Yatsyk show that "in the lead-up to the Olympics, the Russian government introduced multiple exceptions to existing legislation, both as a response to requirements of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and as a means of facilitating the logistics of the event. [...] The practice of legalized exceptions was extended to the FIFA Cup" (2015: 4). What usually is framed through Carl Schmitt's concept of the state of exception, fits well into the 'theatre state' model: The ruler is above the rules, while public happenings are the quintessence of the political.

Elections as a revolt against hypocrisy: ocular democracy

2019 was a revolutionary year in Ukraine's post-Soviet history. This time, however, a revolution happened not in the streets but in front of

monitors and at the ballot boxes. Not only did all the regions unanimously support one candidate, by the same token discarding the long-standing West vs. East framework, but also, for the first time, this candidate's political party gained a one-party majority in the parliament on the subsequent parliamentary elections, thus discarding the Ukrainian version of check-and-balances (cf. Levitsky & Way, 2010). All of that was accomplished with almost no political program and/or electoral promises. On top of that, the sixth president had literally no political experience before running for the office, whether in party politics or even as a civic activist. What he did have under his belt, was sizeable media popularity linked to his heavy presence on TV, a role of a teacher-turned-president in a TV series, and the image of a cheeky critic of political elites in a satirical TV show. Another side of his public persona presented him as a successful manager transforming a students' amateur performance gang into a successful business project producing comical media content.

Zelenskyy's supporters compared him to Ronald Reagan (Yurkovich, 2019). His opponents referred to him as the Waldo bear from the Black Mirror TV series (Makarenko, 2019). Philosophers and literary critics invoked Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque culture that testifies to the human need to (temporarily) turn the metaphysical world hierarchy upside down by appointing a clown to be a king (Boichenko, 2019; Gaufman, 2018). Political scientists reckoned him yet another case in the global populist trend on the rise (Wilson, 2019). Indeed, Zelenskyy has been using Trump's and Johnson's playbooks, as Andrew Wilson reveals (2019), but such a perception misses a crucial point. Like other populists, the Ukrainian president criticized the political establishment and dismantled state institutions. He refrained from setting clear-cut political goals and rational means to achieve them. However, he gained office by mobilizing the *hopes* of the people, not the hatred; he attempted to suture the country together against the existing cleavages. Thus, this political phenomenon must be rendered as a case of plebiscitary democracy, where a leader stands as his electorate's *trustee*. The audience delegates their candidate the duty of political performance, whereas keeping for itself the privilege to *refrain from the political domain*. Secondly, it is an incarnation of ocular democracy, one that is operating with images and emotions, constituting the electorate as the audience connected to the leader, not via interests but bound with the special sense of intimacy.

This brings us to the tension between the two versions of political anthropology. According to the tentatively liberal one, people aim at maximally broad participation in politics. Thus, political representation could be considered a temporal limitation caused by technical constraints, as any contemporary democratic state is far bigger than a Greek agora. However, various procedures of constructive distrust

(Rosanvallon, 2008) keep the people as the symbolic center of power in a polity, which presupposes a will on the side of the many to have a grounded political opinion. An alternative, pessimistic political anthropology states that the majority has neither the capacity nor the opportunity to actively engage in politics, thus representation will always be requested (Lippman, 1993 [1927]). From this vantage point, ordinary citizens seek someone to delegate their political power to, be it elected officials or their fellow citizen-activists. Accordingly, civic activists stand rather as *counter-elites* than as laypeople, as they have the educational and organizational resources to engage in politics, unlike the mute masses. Jeffrey E. Green claims that “the Few-Many distinction is a permanent feature of political reality” (2016: xi), therefore “ordinary citizens understand themselves as being able to influence events only insofar as they can affix themselves to a larger mass of like-minded others” (2016: 3). That came as a surprise in Ukraine with its strong record of unrest and civic activism dating back to the Soviet and even Russian imperial times. When hundreds of thousands flood the streets to protest against the authorities and prove able to oust delegitimized rulers but also to take over the tasks that state institutions fail to perform, it makes it to the news around the world. The Maidans and mass volunteering presented Ukraine as a strong civic nation. Yet, despite how numerous the movements were, even more inhabitants of a 40-plus-million country stayed at home, alienated from ongoing events and unwilling to engage in politics on whatever side. Elections and opinion polls gave them a voice, and they voted for *extrapoliticism* (Green, 2016).

The 2019 presidential elections were not an ideological struggle between the ‘European values’ against the ‘Russian world’ (then it would have been Petro Poroshenko vs Yuriy Boyko in the runoff). Neither were they a pure populist fight against the establishment: Yulia Tymoshenko and Oleh Lyashko were most prominently elaborating on this, yet failed to make it to the second round. The landslide victory of Volodymyr Zelenskyy could be explained by his vision of the country presented in the later New Year address: “Where the name of the street doesn’t matter because it is lit and paved. Where it makes no difference, at which monument you’re waiting for the girl you love” (Zelenskyy, 2020a). Jeffrey E. Green labels a corresponding mindset “extrapoliticism” aimed “to protect the ordinary citizen’s private happiness from the unhappiness that engagement in politics is so likely to generate beneath the shadow of unfairness” (2016: 131). He explains that “ordinary citizenship is second-class citizenship” (9), and for political “plebs” it is impossible “to see their leaders merely as public servants;” they are perceived “as holders of an immense, disproportionate power beyond the scope of full accountability” instead (4).

The current moment reveals the futility of the assumption that humankind is moving towards general political participation, and modern technologies enable a more direct democracy. However, even though

“democracy has broadened, one cannot say with the same certainty that it has deepened” (Manin, 1997: 234). The main effects of social media seem to be producing the intimacy effect (cutting the distance between a leader and his electorate) and giving a broad spectrum of identities beyond traditional ones, including the ones from the party politics times. “Online communities offer a plethora of different ways to discover a sense of belonging. We don’t need politics to be our social club when there are so many other kinds on offer” (Runciman, 2018: 217). It transforms the nature of political representation. Voting becomes more *personal*: People tend to vote for a specific character presented on the screens. And his ratings depend on the ability to produce the right *impression*. Bernard Manin proves that it is a comeback of the initial idea of political representation, when elected were “*trustees*” of those who voted for them (1997: 203). But unlike the governance of the notable, contemporary elites are composed of those accustomed to media tricks: “television confers particular salience and vividness to the individuality of the candidates. In a sense, it resurrects the face-to-face character of the representative link that marked the first form of representative government. Mass media, however, favor certain personal qualities: successful candidates are not local notables, but what we call “media figures” / persons who have a better command of the techniques of media communication than others” (Manin, 1997: 220).

In this new “*media-political system*,” as, ironically, Marine Le Pen coins it (Davies, 2019: 51), media popularity becomes the main political asset, and media moguls become main political brokers (cf. Pleines, 2016). Moreover, through so-called ‘bot farms’ and big data analysis, power-holders manage to ‘hack’ the Internet as a free space of horizontal ‘many to many’ communication. Thus, Ukraine’s competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010) transforms into a competitive ‘theatre state,’ where oligarchic media define the political agenda by choosing what events are ‘newsworthy,’ and what enters into the public debates. A recent act of self-immolation by Donbas war veteran Mykola Mykytenko protesting against Zelenskyy’s war strategy (Chernichkin, 2020) has been scandalously absent (or mitigated) in mainstream Ukrainian media. Instead, the media space was filled with discussions of the nationwide poll (a quasi-referendum) on the day of local elections on October 25th, 2020. The incumbent made an address to the electorate claiming that “everything will be as you decide” (Zelenskyy, 2020b). The initiative falls in line with the ocular/plebiscitarian governance. Not only does it contradict the existing law on referenda, thus having no legal force, but also the set of proposed questions is incoherent and tendentious, from the Budapest memorandum to the legalization of cannabis. The rhetoric dwells on the same tropes as the above-mentioned New Year address: it criticizes ‘politicians’ and ‘experts’ who are supposedly ‘damn scared,’ because “if direct democracy is really enacted, they will become useless. They will stop being invited to various talk shows. Their parties will not be funded. Their opinion

will be of interest to no one, as everything will be decided upon by the citizens of Ukraine” (Zelenskyy, 2020c).

The new era of social media is changing politics everywhere. In Ukraine, it clicked well with the neopatrimonial mindset. Dysfunctional state institutions and catchy public performances seem to be two sides of the same plebiscitarian coin. As Denis Semenov (2020) aptly remarks, *performatives and algorithms replace institutions*. Public politics are played out in media all over the world; political negotiations give way to Internet memes, bright happenings, and catchy images. William Davies calls the current situation a ‘nervous state’ connected to the rising speed of knowledge and decision-making where human reason is overtaken by emotions of all sorts. “Where events are unfolding rapidly and emotions are riding high, there is a sudden absence of any authoritative perspective on reality. In the digital age, that vacuum of hard knowledge becomes rapidly filled by rumors, fantasy, and guesswork” (2019: 7). This vacuum is caused not by the absence of experts but by the decreasing demand for their expertise that gets too slow, too boring, and too uncompetitive in catching attention and grasping the feeling of the moment. These are the times of the “*politics of spinal cord*,” when people have strong bodily reactions to events, and they are longing for trust. Under these circumstances, more and more people fall into the plebiscitarian niche. David Runciman argues that the illusion of transparency produced by social media camouflages the real struggle between the old Leviathan with a sword (a modern state) and the new Leviathan with a smartphone (social media) (2018: 199). And the latter is getting more and more powerful; its salient horizontal network shadows an opaque and rigid hierarchy behind it. “Like a modern state, Facebook is both a hierarchy and a network. If anything, it is far more hierarchical than any democratic state: Zuckerberg and his immediate circle exercise an extraordinary level of personal control. It is more like a medieval court than a modern polity. Power flows from the top” (Runciman, 2018: 170). However, it enhances the sentiment of people’s power against corrupt politicians.

Thus, elections turn into *a revolt against hypocrisy*: the hypocrisy of electoral promises (as it is considered more candid not to promise anything), the democratic hypocrisy that people are the main sovereign, and the inherent hypocrisy of Western values. Hannah Arendt back in 1970 aptly remarked: “if there is one thing most likely to convert engagement into enagement – more even than injustice – it is hypocrisy” (1970: 56). The emerging politics of feeling invokes political rage and, at the same time, produces a longing for trust and hope. Albeit Ukraine’s jump from apathetic post-Soviet voters to an enthusiastic audience frustrated domestic bearers of liberal-rational imaginary, saliently present in the Maidans (see details in Korablyova, 2020), it signified a shift from imitative to ocular/plebiscitarian democracy. Inter alia, it synchronized the country with the global trend

of “politainment,” the mediatization of politics, or the rise of the performative in politics.

Conclusion: elections as a battle of imaginaries

The recent democratic recession exposed the historical contingency of coupling liberalism with democracy. While liberal values and institutions are under attack in different corners of the world, elections still hold sway as one of the main political rituals. However, they drastically change in the design and prospected outcomes. As Fyodor Lukyanov, Scientific Director of the Russian Valdai Discussion Club, outspokenly remarked: “Elections play an important role in the political process but as a pretext for setting in motion other mechanisms for establishing a new balance. [...] Their main function is to *prevent surprises and uncontrollable scenarios*” (2020). There is a long-standing tradition of juxtaposing elections as a democratic procedure with an unpredictable outcome to their rendering as a tool for ‘normalizing’ the situation, that is, securing the grip on power by the incumbents in illiberal regimes. What is a rising trend, however, are elections as a *game-changer* both in liberal and illiberal orders. This new “winner-takes-all” politics implies not just a regular rotation in ruling elites but a wholesale regime change as an outcome of elections. Among the rest, it entails that competing candidates and their electorates hold *alternative political imaginaries*, divergent visions of the political process, state functions, and institutional design of the polity. The cornerstone tension is around the state–society relations, as well as about the basic unit of society, whether it is an individual, various social groups, or a community as a monolithic whole. As Andreas Langenohl aptly notes, “voting in general elections is not coupled to just one imaginary of society presupposed as a truth, but to many, which may be overlapping but also persist in mutual contradiction” (2019: 93). This encounter of mutually opposing imaginaries often acquires an antagonistic character moving from a “contact zone” to a battlefield for an imaginable future. Arguably, what sparked electoral protests in Russia in 2011–12 and in Belarus in 2020 was the sentiment of the “stolen future.” As Krastev and Holmes remark on Russia, “the country’s main political division now runs between those who dread the loss of a fragile stability and those who fear being deprived of an imaginable future” (2012: 43).

The article develops the argument that the post-Soviet political domain is grounded in political performances as an alternative to institution-building. Rather than taking the expected path of democratization enforcing the liberal-democratic rationality, it took a divergent route. Partly it could be explained with the mental rootedness of post-Soviet elites and laypeople in the Soviet past. As Minakov shows

in his research (2019), the initial stage in early 1990s was characterized by the ideational competition of multiple models of development “simultaneously rooted in Soviet totalitarian and perestroika experiences, pre-Soviet traditions, Western political and economic models, and experimentation with new forms of political and economic life” (229). However, there was little institutional memory to lean upon. As Pipes remarks bitterly: “there are no quick solutions to the Russian tragedy. The country must overcome the legacies of 75 years of Communism and of centuries of czar-ism, whose central institutions were autocracy and serfdom” (1992). Under such conditions, the main competitive advantage was the administrative experience and capacity of regional elites’ groups (Minakov, 2019). Their victory contributed to the instantiation of patronal politics in late 1990s, whether in a single-pyramid, as in Russia and Belarus, or in a multi-pyramid version, as in Ukraine. In any incarnation, it is distinguished with instrumental political rationality, ideological indifference, and despise for ordinary citizens.

The resulting arrangement of Potemkin institutions (Holmes, 2002) and the mafia state core (Magyar, 2016) left little space for people’s agency and marginalized elections as negotiations on the future involving broad citizenry. Bleak public politics, hollowed out of public debates and political struggle, was filled with political performances aimed at affirming the rulers’ power, entertaining the people, and forging national unity. Importantly, political opposition and dissent resort to performativity as well – from Pussy Riot’s Punk Prayer to mass protests with salient carnivalesque character. The telling case of Ukraine shows the tension between an active, even if quite numerous, minority promoting the reformist agenda of the Maidan – and the majority largely upholding paternalist attitudes and reluctant to active political participation.

Three divergent streams of top-down political theatricality embodied in elections have been discussed here. The Soviet-style electoral performance demonstrates the no-choice sterile political environment, even against the presence of pocket parties and puppet candidates on the ballot. As Stephen Holmes remarks: “Russian elections do not help the many to discipline the few. They are not connected to the struggle of the ruled to compel their rulers to act, at least occasionally, for the interest of large voting blocs, rather than for the predatory interests of well-placed private groups or for the corporate interests of top administrators” (2002: 112). Here, political power precedes elections and manifests itself through the capacity to rig elections and to ignore the political will of citizens. However, this Machiavellian reading (Wilson, 2005) must be complemented with the social contract legitimizing this arrangement. Lukashenka’s Belarus demonstrates strong paternalistic attitudes as its underbelly (the leader’s nickname testifies to that). People refrain from the political

domain in exchange for social and economic guarantees. Uninterrupted show elections re-validate this contract.

The 'theatre state' model widens the gap between the subjects and the 'king' figure whose political power has a sacred character. It does not derive from people but descends on them. As compared with the previous model, with which it shares a lot in common, the 'theatre state' is a move towards re-archaization, with an important role of religion in public life and the exclusion of the possibility to terminate the contract. The depletion of political life is compensated with the grandeur of political festivities. Moreover, with the absence of public politics, every public action gets political. While electoral maps forge the sense of unity, large sporting and musical happenings endorse national pride. This model could be traced in contemporary Russia, where it clicks well with the imperial sentiments and ambitions. Similar – largely failed – attempts were connected to Euro-2012 Football Championship in Ukraine during Yanukovich's presidency.

The ocular/plebiscitary model gives more agency to the people as a 'sleeping sovereign' (Chatterjee, 2020). Albeit still refraining en masse from the political domain, voters keep the right to demand transparency as 'ocular accountability.' The duty of a leader is to keep direct contact with his voters, to report on a regular basis on social media, to ignite the hopes of the voters and to comfort their fears. Institutions are mostly distrusted. The incumbent recurrently violates legal procedures to disperse the parliament, appoint banned officials, or claim a referendum aka a nationwide poll, and all this is greeted by the majority. Arguably, the iterations of successful mass protests in Ukraine known as the Maidans carved out more space for citizens' sovereignty, while incentivizing the rulers to have regard to the audience reaction. As Jeffrey C. Alexander notes, "politicians win power by convincing voters to believe, becoming symbolic representations of *the hopes and fears, and dreams of collective life*" (2011: 1).

In the Belarusian case, the jury is still out, and it is yet to be discovered where the failure of Lukashenka's Soviet-style model brings the country and its inhabitants. Back in 2005, Vladimir Fours compared Lukashenka to "a screen onto which life fears and hopes of thousands of people are being projected" (2005: 17), behind which "a small man with a big lust for power" is hiding. From summer 2020, his authoritarian power has been challenged by a mass protest movement against the rigged elections. Tatiana Shchytsova commented on Lukashenka's formal political opponent: "the uniqueness of the phenomenon of Svetlana Tikhonovskaya lies in the fact that she attained hegemony (she got to represent the whole society), without offering any specific discourse. This means that her political mission has become the personification – the embodiment – of *an empty signifier* as such" (2020). This ongoing tension between two alternative political screens, two empty signifiers for the hegemonic representation of collective emotions

stands as an apt illustration of ocular democracy that is arguably here to stay, both in the post-Soviet region and beyond.

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