

Hybrid Regimes' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: "The First Wave" Evidence from Ukraine and Georgia

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Abstract: Hybrid regimes have been largely overlooked in the scholarly discussion on the effectiveness of halting the new COVID-19 virus, not least due to the lack of conceptual clarity, as such regimes are considered as the halfway or "grey area" on the authoritarianism-to-democracy path. Hence, the present paper aims to contribute to the pool of research on the internal dynamics of hybridity through exploring the responses towards the pandemic by two stable post-Soviet hybrid regimes, namely Georgia and Ukraine. The "most similar systems" comparative research design allows us to demonstrate that the two countries' different crisis management and communication strategies explain Georgia's relative success in halting the virus spread in comparison to Ukraine throughout the first wave. The application of Henry Hale's "single-pyramid" and "competitive pyramid" models of patronal politics highlights the lack of competitiveness in the formal and informal governance processes in Georgia's case, as opposed to the chaotic mode of decision-making as well as plurality of informal actors in Ukraine's case.

Keywords: hybrid regimes, regime dynamics, COVID-19, crisis management, Ukraine, Georgia.

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Upon the unexpected arrival of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic at the forefront of academic journals and analytical assessments, prescriptions for effective halting of the virus spread as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses of particular regime types in this regard seized the attention of scholars and experts in the field. The initial focus centred on Beijing's ignorance of the pandemic's consequences on the global scale and criticism of its one-party rule, and its censure and silencing of those eager to inform the world about the developments inside the country (Roth 2020; Yang 2020; Fukuyama 2020). China's case revealed the pattern of authoritarian regimes behaving as enemies of their own people, prioritizing their unchallenged grip on power over millions of lives of their citizens as in the cases of Iran, Turkmenistan, etc. In Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary, Israel and Egypt, despite these countries occupying diverse positions on the

authoritarianism–democracy continuum, handling the pandemic equally served as an excuse for violating the courts' independence, violating rights to mass protests or limiting the possibility to introduce constitutional changes due to the state of emergency.

Concerning the countries of the former Communist bloc, the case of Hungary and Viktor Orbán's so-called "COVID law", envisaging a rule by decree without clear time limits, stands out as a vivid demonstration of autocratic trends in the region. Prioritizing support of large state-sponsored businesses and the absence of an effective policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic for small and medium enterprises as well as average citizens in Belarus, Russia and Central Asian countries contributed to revealing the fragility and lack of maneuvers of seemingly eternal authoritarian leaders under the conditions of systemic challenges (Gehrke 2020). The unprecedented wave of protests against the falsified presidential election outcomes in Belarus of August 9th 2020 as well as the ousting of the President of Kyrgyzstan as a result of vote rigging on Oct. 5th 2020 proved that the safety net of autocratic rule can be put on trial for crisis mishandling, as in the case of COVID-19. Both cases also stand out as the instances of the gravest ignorance of the pandemic outcomes for the lives and economic prosperity of the people, which caused massive dissatisfaction and irritation (Stiglitz et al. 2020).

In this light, relative merits of democracies in addressing the virus spread – trust towards institutions, emphasis on transparency of decision-making, and civil society's role in monitoring the response – stand out on the opposite side of the spectrum of assessments (Berengaut 2020; Frey 2020; European Committee on Democracy and Governance 2020). Balancing public health and economic challenges with the social wellbeing of citizens re-emerged among the challenges to be effectively addressed. The rising costs for democratic regimes in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic have been stressed in discussions of the dissemination of the contact-tracing applications and their compliance with the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms granted by constitutions (Verhofstadt 2020). As democracies' effectiveness lies in the availability of information to citizens, accountability and the monitoring mechanisms of the popular reaction towards quarantine measures turned into another strand of preliminary observations by political scientists. Initially, in countries like the US, France, Spain, Italy and South Africa high approval rates were noticed for the measures taken by the respective governments. However, in the beginning of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, global dissatisfaction with the partial restrictions and lockdowns to be introduced was on the increase. Hence, lesson learning, state capacity, and mass mobilization stand out among the topics high on the COVID-19-related research agenda. The lack of congruence among the political scientists and those studying public health, political economy issues and public compliance make the elaboration of complex interdisciplinary approaches even more challenging in the short run (Greer et al. 2020).

While already existing analyses offer an engaging discussion on the political regimes' strengths and weaknesses in effectively addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid regimes as "grey areas" in-between authoritarianism and democracy have been largely overlooked in this respect. At the same time, overarching systemic challenges such as COVID-19 offer a laboratory for an in-depth examination of response patterns stemming from the complex nature of "hybridity". Hence, the goal of the present inquiry is to explore the internal dynamic of this regime brand on the example of two post-Soviet countries, Georgia and Ukraine. The legacy of the Soviet past and similar challenges to democratic consolidation in the two countries, the supermajorities of the ruling parties in their legislatures as well as the equal timing of their nationwide elections combined with the informal governance endemic to each of the cases make explaining the differences in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic even more necessary for grasping the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes. While Georgia was praised as the regional role model for the effectiveness of its COVID-19 policy response, Ukraine did not manage to occupy

a place among the high-achievers. With a view to respond to the puzzle, the paper consists of six sections.

The first section of this paper introduces academic polemics on the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes as well as their features with a focus on the post-Soviet area. The second section presents the puzzle guiding the inquiry, explains the case selection as well as the empirical data used. Utilizing an approach that is highly similar to the systems approach of Przeworski and Teune, this section introduces the measurements according to which the different response strategies in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia towards the COVID-19 pandemic are best explained through the concepts of “patronalism”, “competing pyramid” and “single-pyramid” models of hybrid regimes (Hale 2015). The following two sections of the paper explain the responses undertaken by the governments of Ukraine and Georgia through the prism of the analytical concepts mentioned above. The conclusions reiterate the findings, namely that the effective crisis management strategy elaborated by the Government of Georgia stems from its lack of competition and highly hierarchical “single-leader type” of informal governance, which, in combination with the Government’s solid grip over the core decision-making institutions and the weak, fragmented opposition, explains the effective and prompt handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia. In the case of Ukraine, the “divided-executive type of decision-making” and “competing pyramid model” of patronalistic networks ensured the opposition’s criticism of and discontent with the policy responses undertaken by the incumbent Government.

EXPLAINING THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF HYBRID REGIMES

The abundant polemics on the constituent features of hybrid regimes ranging from the pioneering research of 2002 by Larry Diamond through the notion of “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky – Way 2002, 2010) to that of “defective democracies” by Wolfgang Merkel (2004) may lead to a conceptual confusion, taking into account the impressive diversity of political regimes characterized by hybridity. Moreover, building on the scholarly contribution, the democracy measurement datasets (Freedom in the World, Nations in Transit, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Bertelsmann Stiftung, IDEA and others) have developed a sophisticated and rather diverse set of criteria against which to measure the type of political regime in each particular case.

While seeking to explain the challenges to stability of hybrid regimes, two major strands of discussions can be singled out, with one being labelled as the organizational approach – addressing the question of the dominant party repeatedly winning elections. Hence, stability in this case implies government continuity, and instability means the ruling party’s electoral defeat (Brownlee 2007; Levitsky – Way 2010). In the opinion of the organizational approach’s proponents, a high voter turnout and electoral victories by huge margins as well as grandiose electoral campaigns – a signal of a stagnant and fragmented opposition – raise considerably the cost of voting for and/or defecting to the opposition camp. Therefore, the ruling party (coalition) absorbs control over the governmental apparatus and legislature over a longer time period.

The second approach, namely, the economic one, discusses why and how a ruling party repeatedly wins elections over an extended period in a context of limited multiparty competition (Magaloni 2006; Green 2007). In this regard, for such a party, provision of socio-economic benefits to the populations involved outweighs the request for accountability, transparency and fair competition. Economic crises may destabilize the regime only when repeated crises or prolonged economic stagnation take(s) place. Departing from the general discussions of the regime dynamics and entering a cluster of area-based research, Eleanor Knott (2018) addresses the question of the democratic-authoritarian equilibrium in hybrid regimes, specifically dealing with the cases of Ukraine and Moldova. This author distinguishes between democratic backsliding (as in the case of democratic deterioration

processes taking place, for instance, in Hungary, which was previously categorized as a consolidated democracy, or in cases of semi-consolidated democracies such as Romania and Bulgaria) and backsliding in hybrid regimes. The latter is defined as the processes whereby periods of democratic deterioration and improvement interchange without causing qualitative changes in the equilibrium of the hybrid regime. This occurrence takes place in the form of increased fraud practices throughout elections, infringement against certain civil liberties, or a decrease of independence of judicial branch institutions. Knott also emphasizes the central role of extra-incumbent actors for hybrid regimes' persistence, as these are so-called "grey cardinals" linked to representatives of business circles not occupying any formal positions throughout the decision-making process. These actors bear the burden of responsibility for the state and/or media capture taking place. Another feature characteristic for the resilience of post-Soviet hybrid regimes is the weakness of the link between the civil society and its influence on the actions of the incumbents.

Knott's arguments refer to Bela Greshkovits's (2015) research emphasizing the difference between backsliding and hollowing (the latter being the process of citizens' disengagement from politics). These two processes may take place simultaneously or in different time frames and are not distinguished by a causal relationship. Joakim Ekman (2009) contributes to the discussion on persistence of hybrid regimes by singling out three dimensions (the electoral agenda, executive-legislative relations, and the judiciary) through which he stresses the difference between a competitive brand of an authoritarian regime and one in the process of transition to a consolidated democracy (Ekman 2009: 9). According to Ekman's analysis, Georgia and Ukraine are the only instances of post-Soviet countries clearly fitting the category of hybrid regimes (in the sense that they have four or five hybrid regime characteristics). Moldova, currently the third instance of a hybrid regime according to the Nations in Transit report, only has two of the hybrid regime characteristics. Nevertheless, these research findings do not reflect on the recent developments of the last decade. Ekman's findings relate to Greshkovits's hollowing argument, as in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia's hybridity, its sustainability rests upon the lack of interconnection between the people and the opposition due to these countries taking less care of pluralism, and their lack of activism.

Henry Hale develops a cutting-edge argument on the dynamics of post-Soviet political regimes by emphasizing the "*trap of patronalistic social equilibrium*" that rests on gaining political and economic benefits through acquaintance networks and the "rewards and punishments" mechanism over a lengthy period of time (Hale 2015: 423). The case of the post-Soviet hybrid regimes demonstrates that their persistence is linked to extended patronage networks that reach out to a wide array of institutions and are divided into single or competing pyramid patterns. These two types of patterns determine whether constitutions provide a divided or united and powerful executive, which in turn sends a signal towards the patronalistic networks on how they should continue to operate. The strength and length of a network's survival depends upon the allegiance of its existing members and its ability to recruit new ones, according to Hale (2015: 424). In this respect, elections are of importance to patronalistic networks due to their revealing the winners who manage to place a bet on the right elite and, hence, continue to preserve or increase the survivability of the networks. Hale departs from several analytically productive arguments which create the basis for a dynamic model of hybrid regimes. First of all, he suggests "*replacing a theory of the ideal with a theory of the real*", and also puts in doubt the widespread belief "*that regime types are best identified in snapshots rather than dynamic patterns*", and stresses the need to "*augment the study of regime change with a science of regime dynamics*" (Hale 2015: 422). Importantly, Hale also adds: "*A momentary overwhelming surge in popularity for one party can set in motion a tip toward single-pyramid politics even when the parliamentarist constitution provides for high executive divisibility and multiple formal electorates*" (Hale 2015: 423).

While in both Ukraine and Georgia color revolutions took place with a difference of roughly a year between them, still they did not result in a ruination of the single-pyramid politics; they only led to brief moments of competing-pyramid dynamics and then returning to a single-pyramid mode again. According to Hale's classification, both Ukraine and Georgia belong to *"the politics experiencing lame-duck syndrome with low popular support for the President"* (Hale 2015: 423). The case of Ukraine's brand of hybrid regime is discussed by Yuri Matsievsky (2016). He argues that its core characteristic is the relation between the formal and informal institutions, rather than that of democratic and authoritarian features. As Matsievsky claims, *"hybridity implies the façade function of the formal institutes for those of [an] informal character. The latter outweighs the former throughout the political process"* (Matsievsky 2016:16). In the case of Ukraine, among the informal institutions sabotaging the proper functioning of the formal ones, are corruption, clientelism, nepotism and favoritism during the distributing of administrative and political appointments. The informal pacts between the political players range from electoral competition to "state capture". Moreover, the author defines clientelism, nepotism and informal agreements along with corruption as the operational code of the political culture of Ukrainian elites. Hence, Matsievsky approaches the persistence of hybrid regimes by using the case of Ukraine as one in which the outcome of the "institutional trap" translates into an ineffective institutional equilibrium.

Finally, Robert Nalbandov (2014: 102) enriches a rather modest scholarly discussion on hybrid regime stability with the *"logic of expected consequences"*, implying that the selection of the "most anticipated utility" and the choices for political, economic and cultural institutional patterns proved to be effective in the surrounding environment in the hybrid regimes. While explaining the regime choices in Ukraine and Georgia (prior to 2014), Nalbandov introduces the concept of regime mimicry – the complex process of institutional change in which a set of democratic institutions is adopted without uprooting the previous setting, which in turn prevents the complete process of embedding these institutions from taking place.

Recognizing the value of the above-discussed scholarly polemics on the post-Soviet hybrid regime variety (Hale 2015; Knott 2018; Stewart 2012; Nalbandov 2014; Greshkovits 2015), our inquiry sticks to Leonardo Morlino's conceptualization of a hybrid regime, namely: *"a set of institutions that have been persistent, be they stable or unstable, for about a decade, have been preceded by an authoritarianism, a traditional regime (possibly with colonial characteristics), or even a minimal democracy and are characterized by the break-up of limited pluralism and forms of independent, autonomous participation, but the absence of at least one of the four aspects of a minimal democracy"* (Morlino 2009: 282).

The above-given definition stands out as the most encompassing for grasping the internal dynamics of post-Soviet regime hybridity through the examples of Georgia and Ukraine. First, it avoids defining the concept through a dichotomy of democracy/authoritarianism, gives a clear-cut understanding of the regime component – which is understood as a set of institutional arrangements with a long-lasting character – and, finally, approaches hybrid regimes as a distinct type of its own. Secondly, Morlino makes it clear that a hybrid regime fails to meet the minimal barrier (threshold) for democracy to be constituted as consolidated, with free and fair transparent elections, media pluralism, more than one party, and universal suffrage. No less important is compliance with constitutional and real-time limitations for the "non-elected actors" that must be in place, as stated by Karl and Schmitter (1991). Thirdly, Morlino stresses the centrality of the limitations for pluralism, and competition with the existence of powerful domestic or external veto players interested in preserving their final say in the processes. As Hellman argues (1998: 204–205), *"Instead of forming a constituency in support of advancing reforms, the short-term winners have often sought to stall the economy in a partial reform"*

equilibrium that generates concentrated rents for themselves, while imposing high costs on the rest of society.”

Finally, the added value of Morlino’s hybrid regime conceptualization is emphasis on the institutional memory, where, in other words, the institutions that were formed in the beginning of the transition still leave a long-lasting imprint on its further path as well as invisible politics under the influence of the non-elected actors. The given conceptualization of hybrid regimes, apart from overcoming the dichotomous approach, draws a difference between the transitional type of regime and the stabilized one (the category to which the two cases analyzed in the paper also belong). Understanding this distinction is of special relevance for discussing the internal dynamics of Ukraine and Georgia’s hybrid regimes. By highlighting the different responses to the challenge of effectively handling the COVID-19 pandemic by two long-term post-Soviet hybrid regimes, the present research contributes to the scholarly and analytical polemics presented above. The obtained findings allow one to properly grasp the peculiarities of the decision-making process endemic to hybrid regimes with predominantly similar features. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to further study the manner in which patronalistic networks and the patterns of informal governance they induce, interact with the formal decision-making process.

ARGUMENT & METHODOLOGY

Firstly, as mentioned in the previous section, while presenting the core argument of the study, we depart from Leonardo Morlino’s conceptualization of hybrid regimes as distinct, independent types of political regimes and not their transitional phases. Secondly, understanding the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes based on Henry Hale’s notion of “patronal politics” and “patronalistic networks equilibrium” allows one to assess the internal decision-making process throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of both formal and informal governance. Being instrumental to grasping the by far most outstanding specifics of the decision-making process in hybrid regimes, “*patronalism refers to a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments*” (Hale 2015: 20).

The puzzle guiding the inquiry is the noticeable difference in the handling of the first wave of COVID-19 in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia despite the similarities (see Table 1). With a view to carve out explanations for the core question guiding the research, the qualitative comparative approach is employed. The selected strategy, rather than producing generalizable data for a wide range of cases, explores each case in-depth using the concepts of the “single and competitive pyramid” models, and traces the processes of response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the application of these analytical concepts. This strategy follows David Collier’s understanding of small-N analysis and its three core goals: first, “*a systematic examination of covariance among the cases for the purpose of causal analysis*”; secondly, “*the examination of a number of cases with the goal of showing that a particular set of concepts usefully illuminates the model*”, and finally, “*examining how the parallel processes of change are laid out in different ways within each context*” (1993: 108). In this manner, the explanations obtained in the final stage of the comparative inquiry suggest avenues for exploring similarities and differences between other instances of hybrid regimes in the post-Communist countries, namely the mode of their reaction to systemic challenges. The section below presents the empirical data employed to provide an account of the COVID-19 pandemic handling in each case.

With a view to draw a comparison of public opinion towards the policies of the pandemic handling, the present research uses evidence from the Caucasus Resource Research Centre’s “Caucasus Barometer – Covid-19 Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Monitor 2020” dataset presenting six waves of data collection throughout the late April –

early June timeframe. Our research uses the outcomes of the first wave of surveys carried out in April and the beginning of May 2020. In the case of Ukraine, the surveys carried out by the "Rating" sociological research group serve as a basis for inquiring into the public opinion on the handling of the pandemic. These surveys, with the title "Ukraine on Quarantine – Monitoring of Public Opinion", were held in three waves in March and April 2020.

The second group of empirical evidence employs the analysis of the COVID-19 responses by Georgia and Ukraine throughout the period of February – July 2020. These are the online media outlets *ambebi.ge*, *News.On.ge*, *Netgazeti*, and *Civil.ge*. in the case of Georgia, and *BBC Ukraine*, *Radio Svoboda*, and *Ukrainska Pravda*, which are utilized as additional sources for the analysis of the COVID-19-related developments and governmental actions undertaken in the case of Ukraine.

The third group of sources employed for the comparison is the analyses of democracy performance and decision-making process transparency by international watchdog agencies such as Transparency International, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit. As regards local agencies whose monitoring of the COVID-19 developments were instrumental to presenting the analysis, they are the following: the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), IDFI (the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information), and Georgia's Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA).

In order to select the factors in possession of explanatory power for the puzzle, the present inquiry employs "the most similar systems" design, which is extensively used in political science (Collier 1993: 110–111; Przeworski – Teune 1982: 32–34). As Przeworski and Teune argue in *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (1982: 34), firstly, "*the factors that are common to the countries are irrelevant in determining the behavior being explained*" and secondly, "*any set of variables that differentiates these systems in a manner corresponding to the observed differences in behavior can be considered as explaining the patterns of this behavior*". To put it differently, in case a significant difference occurs in the outcome (the dependent variable – the effectiveness of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic), it can be assigned to the relatively small number of different factors designated in the process of data analysis. The rest of the similar features are controlled for (in other words, they do not account for the different outcome in the dependent variable). Therefore, upon application of "the most similar systems" design presented in Table 1 the difference in the dependent variable can be attributed to the difference in the crisis management and strategic communication performed by the Governments of Georgia and Ukraine. In turn, the difference in their management of COVID-19 is explained through the concepts of "single pyramid and competitive pyramid" models of hybridity for Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. The first four explanations presented in Table 1 are similar in both cases; hence, they do not account for the different outcomes in the dependent variable.

As stems from the variables presented in Table 1, upon examining the actions undertaken by the responsible stakeholders in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, the difference between them is noticeable in two particular areas: the strategic communication throughout the first wave of pandemic, and the crisis management strategy. The time framework for carrying out the research is limited the period before the end of July 2020, which allows us to assess the preliminary outcomes of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the first wave, namely, the critical first 6 months, when the degree of uncertainty about the features and survivability of the virus was at its highest. The COVID-19 phenomenon has so far demonstrated only preliminary outcomes and has entered its second wave in September 2020. This condition turns out to be a major limitation for the research, since when it comes to the long-term consequences, they remain to be assessed after the global pandemic reaches its end.

Table 1
Research Design – Georgia and Ukraine – “the Most Similar Systems” Design

No.	POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS	The Case of Georgia	The Case of Ukraine
1.	The legacy of the Soviet past & similar challenges to democratic transition	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
2.	Regime type – a Hybrid post-Soviet regime – a stable hybrid or transitional regime (according to the Nations in Transit Report, Freedom House) ranging from 3.01 to 4.00 points on the Report’s scale of 0 to 7.	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
3.	A supermajority in the Parliament (“Servants of the People” in the case of Ukraine and “Georgian Dream” in the case of Georgia each control 66% of seats in the legislature)	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
4.	The timing of the nationwide elections, decisive for the ruling party in power: Ukraine – local elections (Oct. 25 th , 2020) Georgia – the parliamentary election (Oct. 31 st , 2020)	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
5.	Strategic communication throughout the pandemic	DIFFERENT	DIFFERENT
6.	Crisis management throughout the pandemic	DIFFERENT	DIFFERENT

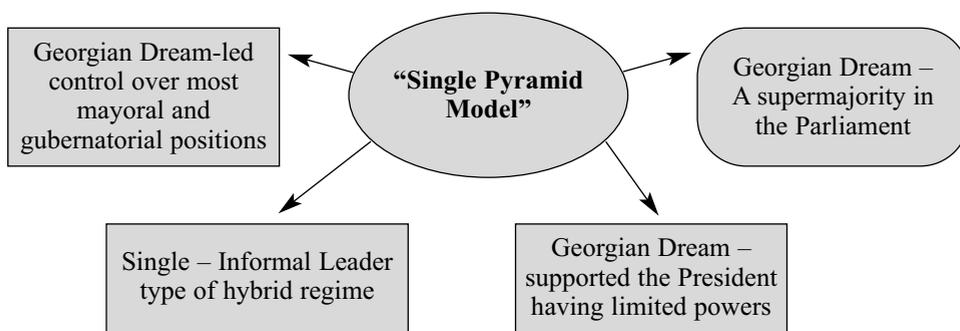
THE CASE OF GEORGIA: A “SINGLE – PYRAMID MODEL” OF THE HYBRID REGIME

As stressed in the Argument and Methodology section, in both cases, namely those of Georgia and Ukraine, informal governance stands out as the key to understanding the specifics of decision-making in a hybrid regime with its patronal networks. In the former case, Bidzina Ivanishvili is the country’s richest person with unprecedented influence over the formal institutions. Ivanishvili holds the position of the leader of the ruling party Georgian Dream since 2018, when he reentered this position after leaving it in 2013. After Georgian Dream’s first parliamentary victory in 2012, Ivanishvili also served as Georgia’s 10th Prime Minister for slightly longer than one year. Since the 2018 presidential elections and the victory of Salome Zurbishvili, the independent candidate supported by the Georgian Dream block, all key decision-making positions were under the control of GD. This situation was also caused by the 2017 municipal elections, which resulted in an unprecedented victory of the Georgian Dream block. As Figure 1 demonstrates, despite the fact that Georgia is in the process of completing its transition towards a parliamentary system with the country’s Electoral College being responsible for electing the President in 2024, the transfer does not introduce any qualitative changes in the unquestionable

domination of the Georgian Dream political block. Furthermore, since the 2013 presidential elections the President's powers were significantly reduced in favour of the Prime Minister's.

In an effort to preserve its supermajority in the Parliament in the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream swiftly departed from its initial 2019 promise to carry out the October 2020 parliamentary elections according to the proportional electoral formula instead of the initially scheduled year 2024, when the transformation to the parliamentary system is to be complete. The unfulfilled promise caused a crisis and criticism on the part of the opposition parties, which was resolved in March 2020 with the mediation of Georgia's Western partners, the US and the EU in particular (Tskipurashvili 2020), a change in the distribution of the proportional/majoritarian parliamentary seats from 77/73 to 120/30 respectively and the reduction of the threshold for getting to the Parliament to 1% (Parliament of Georgia 2020a).

Figure 1
The "Single Pyramid Model" Explained – the Case of Georgia



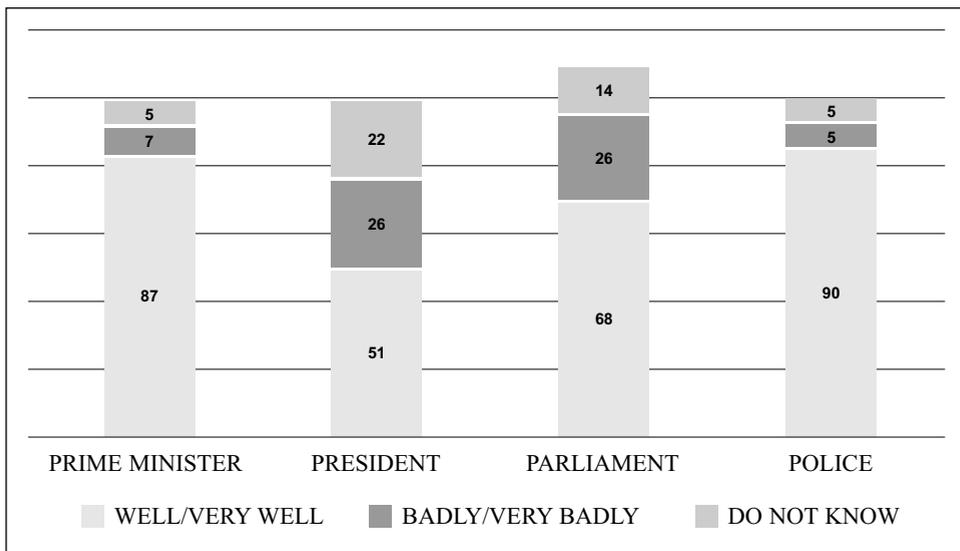
Georgia's persistence in the hybrid regime category can be assessed through the Nations in Transit report published by Freedom House in the 2009–2020 timeframe¹. Along with the two other cases of hybridity in the post-Soviet space, Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia is nested in the transitional/hybrid regime category of states that received 3.01–4.00 in the report's rating system, exhibiting an internal dynamic of its own with periods of democratic openings and closure. Relating to Knott, Greshkovits and Morlino's arguments addressed in the scholarly polemics section, these slight variations, though, have never resulted in a transfer of Georgia to a qualitatively different category (a semi-consolidated democracy or a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime).

The effectiveness of the communication strategy as well as the crisis management in handling the COVID-19 pandemic is best explained through the concept of the “single pyramid model” of patronal politics, which becomes especially relevant in the light of the upcoming parliamentary elections and the close eye of the international democracy watchdog agencies monitoring the transparency of the decision-making process in Georgia. Despite the concentration of administrative resources and core decision-making institutions under the control of the Georgian Dream-led representatives, the Caucasus Barometer survey shows an unprecedented support for the measures undertaken throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Georgia (see Chart 1). On February 13th, 2020 the Inter-Institutional Coordination Council was inaugurated, consisting of representatives of core ministries. The local NGOs are also responsible for observing the transparency process inside the Coordination Council. Upon the very first instances of the COVID-19 infections, the Government and the Coordination Council, with the strong support of the Parliament and the President, introduced expansive measures against COVID-19,

including a lock-down of the largest cities, travel restrictions, and mandatory quarantine zones.

In Georgia, the state of emergency was introduced on March 21st, whereas the curfew was introduced on March 30th. The initial timeframe of the state of emergency caused confusion among the population, especially in regard to the retail conditions, work-related activities, and curfew violation-related penalties. Nevertheless, after only a brief time period, the Georgian Government’s efforts to halt the pandemics on its territory were referred to as a “miracle”, and praised by the World Health Organization. Georgia became one of the first 15 countries on the EU list of countries resuming their international flights due to a low level of COVID-19 cases and a high level of individuals already cured (Turp-Balasz 2020). As for Georgia’s managing of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the “Public Attitudes in Georgia” survey conducted by the NDI and the CRRC, 41% of the public partially trusts and 44% fully trusts the information on the pandemic provided by the Government. For the sake of comparison, in this regard the Government is only outnumbered by the NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control), with the percentage of those fully trusting it at 59%. The traditionally influential Church representatives did not receive such a high level of trust (35% – fully trust, 26% – partially trust); journalists and media are in the “partially trusted” category in this respect.

Chart 1
Governing Institutions' Effectiveness in Halting COVID-19



Source: Own compilation based on the data from COVID-19 Monitor, 1st wave, April 29 – May 3 2020 (caucasusbarometer.org).

TV and social networks are the major sources of the information obtained by those surveyed according to the NDI Public Attitudes Report (National Democratic Institute 2020). At the same time, roughly 58% of the respondents consider some of the information spread about the coronavirus false. As Chart 1 shows, according to the COVID-19 Monitor data the most effective institutions in halting the pandemic are considered to be the Prime-Minister and the Police, although an overall positive assessment should be noticed in the respondents’ answers to all the questions. Interestingly enough, the Lugar Laboratory’s effectiveness is assessed positively by 88% of those surveyed as opposed to only 1% assessing it negatively. The Lab does not belong to the decision-making institutions;

however, its founding and opening in Georgia in 2013 with the assistance of the US Government is considered to be one of the major factors behind Georgia's success in coping with the pandemic spread. Along with a significant level of trust towards the Government and the related agencies responsible for effectively halting the spread of infections, immediately concerns also arose about the danger of authoritarian seduction for the single-party-led Government. Georgia's Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) warned of the potential threat of the Government overusing the powers which it obtained in the framework of the state of emergency. For instance, attempts to appoint the judges for the Supreme Court under the state of emergency were effectively delayed due to the timely criticism of civil society watchdogs. *"Despite the declared state of emergency, the democracy and the political processes and promises we pledged to the society still remain the priority. Naturally, the agenda also includes the Parliamentary oversight which our society will witness today again. I appeal to you to take maximal part in this process and hold the comprehensive political discussion"* (Parliament of Georgia 2020c).

The second major criticism addressed to the Georgian Dream-led Government, was voiced by Transparency International Georgia's analysis of public procurements throughout the state of emergency period. A decrease in competition was noticed along with a decrease in the number of tenders. The construction sector obtained most tenders (out of 460 mln GEL, 266 mln GEL) (Transparency International Georgia 2020a). Roughly 1/5 (127,2 mln GEL) of all the tenders were carried out through the simplified procedures, and 35% of those tenders were won by companies belonging or close to the ruling Georgian Dream or the President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili.

In light of these developments, public opinion polls in Georgia demonstrate that 59% of the respondents do not consider Georgia as a democracy, whereas 33% do so. When asked about the meaning of democracy, the highest share of the respondents (54%) consider it to be freedom of speech, freedom of media and hearing different views; in contrast only 3% of the respondents mention "the Government responding to their concerns" as their closest association with democracy (National Democratic Institute 2019).

Another episode in which the actions of the Government were criticized, but it did not lead to benefits for the weak and fragmented opposition, concerned the feasibility of COVID-19 related policies. According to the opposition's concerns, the 3.5 bln GEL apportioned by the Government was not enough for easing the socio-economic hardships of those suffering as a result of losing employment. Instead, their suggestion was to assign 6 bln GEL for compensation purposes, envisaging more generous and long-term benefits (ITV 2020). In the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March 2020, opposition figures such as the representatives of the "Lelo for Georgia" political party, a relatively new player on the Georgian political scene, criticized the Government for its allegedly insufficiently strict quarantine measures (especially as concerns the functioning of banks and supermarkets). *"The Government is putting forth an effort to undertake something, but rather late and slowly"*, argued one of the representatives of "Lelo for Georgia" (Formula News 2020).

Other opposition party members, such as those of the party European Georgia, mostly focused on criticism of the socio-economic policies of the Government, while the representatives of the Labour Party demanded the cancellation of the limitations set by the emergency regime (the curfew, the limits on the numbers of passengers in private vehicles). Considerations about human rights under the emergency conditions were voiced as well. Independent MPs, such as the long-time member of Parliament Eka Beselia, requested a commission establishment which would give a floor for the opposition to monitor the actions of the Government; it would consist of healthcare, economic and human rights policy subcommittees. Overall, criticism was also directed at the Government for allegedly serving private commercial interests instead of the interest of its citizens. In

particular, much of the responsibility was put on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream party, and the wealthiest, most influential oligarch in Georgia. Needless to say, the criticism of the Government by the opposition in the Parliament and some political parties outside of it (but willing to become part of it after the Autumn parliamentary elections) has not turned out to be effective due to the Government's successful policies of combatting the spread of the pandemic, as proved by the public opinion polls, and the lack of agreement on points of criticism of the Government among the rest of the political parties. Hence, the attempts to discredit the Georgian Dream-led Government and its Head, PM Giorgi Gakharia, were futile.

A major impulse for criticism was given to the opposition when after the end of the state of emergency on May 23rd six MPs representing the ruling party Georgian Dream tabled the draft bill entitling the Government to additional powers till July 15th and aimed at preserving the achievements in the realm of healthcare: "...b) with the present law or/and in accordance with the normative act issued in compliance with the present law the measures are to be applied temporarily with the goal to protect the population in the face of the pandemic and/or societal health threats and may envisage an order different from the one of other normative acts in Georgia, among others, temporary implementation of the corresponding measures with regard to public institutions, institutions that are part of the executive branch, legal entities of public law, other legal entities' administrative and other types of activities, provision of public services, individuals' movement, property, employment, professional or economic activity, illegal migration/ international protection and/or delivering of social activities." (Parliament of Georgia 2020b).

Despite the criticism from the opposition and human rights watchdogs as well as the Public Defender's Office, the law was passed with 80 votes "for" and 0 votes "against" with the opposition (in particular, the National Movement of Georgia) boycotting the vote, referring to it as an attempt to establish a dictatorship and make use of the pandemic in a Viktor Orban-like manner (Civil.ge. 2020). However, as of July 15th, its effect was not prolonged, thus preventing the Government from losing credibility in the eyes of the population.

While the case of the weak and fragmented opposition and the discussion of the formal and informal governance instruments concentrated in the hands of the Georgian Dream-led block as well as its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili show specific features of the single pyramid model, effective communication and crisis management did not come into effect in the two cases reviewed below. The first one is the case of the Orthodox Church, which enjoys an unprecedented autonomy of its own as opposed to the other religious confessions in Georgia, and the second one is that of the ignorance and underestimation of the need for an effective communication strategy for the ethnic minority-settled areas of Georgia. While the two cases have not changed the success of handling the first wave of the pandemic, they emphasize the peculiar features of Georgia's hybridity and selective approach when it comes to exercising an effective management strategy.

In contrast with the Government's impressive effectiveness in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, its complete failure to take an effective control over the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in this regard was illustrated through the Synod decision of March 20th, 2020 which prioritized the internal rules of the Orthodox Church over the Governmental decisions regarding the framework of the quarantine measures. The Georgian Orthodox Church's decision stood in stark contrast to the unconditional compliance by other religious denominations' representatives with the measures, as the latter recognized the importance of due implementation of the lockdown measures under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020). According to the 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: "GOC members constitute 83.4 percent of the population, followed by Muslims at 10.7 percent and members of the AAC at 2.9 percent. The remaining 3 percent includes Roman

Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of “nontraditional” religious groups such as Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and individuals who profess no religious preference” (US Embassy in Georgia 2019).

In the light of the governmental decision of March 23rd prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 persons, the Church’s decision, which was not mentioned as an exception to the rule, stands out as a violation of the Law on Public Healthcare. This law equips the Government with the tools to take the lead over religious authorities in case of societal danger. Doubtless, the COVID-19 pandemic belongs to such dangers (On.ge. 2020). When asked the question of whether the limitations also concern the Church, PM Giorgi Gakharia replied in a rather blurred manner that the limitations concern each and every one. Hence, the case of the Orthodox Church has demonstrated the autonomy of the “patronalistic networks” and their unwillingness to lose this capacity even under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The GOC is considered an especially influential social actor with a high degree of political involvement; namely, it is an important source of continuous electoral support for the Georgian Dream political bloc throughout the elections. Therefore, the Church and its representatives reaffirmed their positioning above the law and the Government’s decisions.

The final COVID-19-related episode that requires consideration here is the spread of the virus in the eastern part of Georgia (the area of the compact settlement of the Azeri ethnic minority), where, since the beginning of the pandemic, the infection rates continued to be high, resulting in the quarantine and closure of certain settlements. Despite the COVID-19 application’s accessibility in languages such as Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian and Ossetian, Azeris who do not speak Georgian mostly get their information about the COVID-19 dynamics from the Turkish and Azerbaijani media outlets, which makes them especially vulnerable (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020).

In light of Morlino’s emphasis on the centrality of the limitations for pluralism and an actor’s unwillingness to face competition from other potential veto players, Georgia’s ethnic minorities’ lack of integration continues to persist, which is comforting for the ruling party since its standing is not challenged by the minorities. The Government has long been criticized for the absence of an effective strategy of integration of and communication with its ethnic minorities (Armenians, Turks and Azeris for the most part, as these groups constitute roughly 1/6 of the total population). The COVID-19 pandemic has only reaffirmed this condition. Due to the lack of information from the Government and also trust towards it among the minorities, these were local activists informing the minority populations voluntarily. Hence, at the end of March local municipalities were only planning to start distributing leaflets on COVID-19, and there were also plans for cars to drive around the streets of the villages with compact settlement of Azeris and distribute information. In spite of that, since then, epicentres of the pandemic continued to appear throughout the region (Radio Tavisufleba 2020).

Nevertheless, as an outcome of these developments, inside the Georgian society rumours and fake news accusing the Azerbaijanis of disseminating COVID-19 started to spread. In stark contrast to their impressive effectiveness in halting the pandemic, the outbreak of xenophobia went virtually unnoticed among the decision-making institutions. In response, the activist NGOs dealing with human rights and protection of ethnic minorities launched the “I am a Citizen of Georgia” campaign after the ethnonationalism wave began to take place. Transparency International Georgia, along with other leading NGOs, has voiced its concerns over the xenophobic messages and posts in social media which appeared when certain settlements (Marneuli and Bolnisi) were closed for quarantine after the first COVID-19-infected person of Azerbaijani descent was discovered (Transparency International Georgia 2020b). The poor conditions of the information campaign are the outcome of deeper and far-reaching systemic problems such as the minorities’ poor language

knowledge, higher risk of disinformation, low level of integration into the host society, lower levels of political activity, etc. The episode of the Azerbaijani settlements in the eastern part of Georgia revealed not only the poor communication strategy of the Government as well as the absence of proper integration strategy. *“The pandemic and the closure of the Marneuli/Bolnisi municipalities reveal two issues that were never properly addressed: first, the deep and non-erasable dividing lines of inequality and racism, and second, the issues of the centre and the periphery, and the trivial nature of the elites and the discriminated ones’ ignorance”* (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020). Hence, Georgia’s hybrid regime has indeed demonstrated its impressive capacity to effectively handle systemic crises such as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The explanation of the effective crisis management and communication strategy of the first wave lies in the concentration of informal governance instruments in the hands of the single richest person in Georgia, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Furthermore, the Georgian Dream-led block occupies core decision-making positions at all levels under the close eye of its leader. At the same time, along with the effective overall management, a selective approach is being observed in the instances of the Orthodox Church’s autonomous decision-making, and the communication strategy towards the compactly settled ethnic minorities, both of which serve as long-term unresolved issues of Georgia’s hybrid regime brand.

UKRAINE – A CASE OF “COMPETING PYRAMID DYNAMICS”

As in the case of Georgia, the assessment of Ukraine’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic is gauged by the specifics of its internal dynamics. According to Leonardo Morlino’s classification of hybrid regimes, Ukraine, throughout Volodymyr Zelensky’s presidency (since May 2019), falls into “the democracy without state” type, *“a situation of widespread illegality in which the state is incapable of performing properly due to poorly functioning institutions”* and where *“the state can be conceived as a ‘government based on the primacy of the law’”* (Morlino 2009: 288–289). The hybrid regime in Ukraine at its different stages was gravitating to the features of interaction of institutional actors (the army, bureaucracy, single party rule) and societal actors with a high level of political involvement (churches, competing large business interests, etc.) (Morlino 2009: 284).

As seen in Figure 2, the “competing pyramid model” in the case of Ukraine rests on the constitutional division of powers between the President and the Government led by the Prime Minister. At the same time, the sweeping victory of Volodymyr Zelensky in the 2019 Presidential elections and the “Servants of the People” political party’s success in the consecutive July 2019 snap parliamentary elections made a single-party supermajority possible in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine for the first time in its modern history (Petsa 2019). Hence, despite the relatively stronger powers of Ukraine’s President in comparison to the Georgian case, current circumstances outline a similar pattern in Ukraine with the President and the PM belonging to the same political force.

Nevertheless, the supermajority in the legislature, and the President and the PM belonging to the same political force did not result in a performance of an effective communication strategy by the central decision-making bodies. Furthermore, the measures of additional quarantine zones to be introduced all over Ukraine were criticized by the mayors of large regional centres such as Ternopil’, Kharkiv, and Khmelnyts’ky that were assigned the status of “orange” or “red zones”. The core reasoning for the lack of acceptance of the limitations from the centre was unclear, and there was a non-transparent methodology in assigning the respective statuses, potentially resulting in a worsening economic situation, further social deterioration, and increased dissatisfaction among the people. For instance, in Lviv, local authorities refused to close hotels and fitness clubs as it would threaten the socio-economic wellbeing of its inhabitants (Radio Svoboda 2020). Therefore, the assigning of the zones and the negotiations over the issue became the

responsibility of the PM of Ukraine Denys Shmygal', who had to take the decision to delay the final divisions into zones only after discussions with the local governors. Another problem in this respect turned out to be claims by the local governors about the lack of communication, and the PM consulting with them while taking such potentially stressful decisions (DW 2020).

Another instance of delayed decision-making was the establishment of special ad-hoc bodies designated for the task of overseeing the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike in the case of Georgia, where the Coordination Council responsible for coping with the virus's spread was established prior to its arrival, in Ukraine the Council to Counteract COVID-19 was only initiated during the 2nd wave, on October 20th, 2020. The draft bill for the COVID-19 Council stood out as a joint initiative of the "Bat'kivshchyna" parliamentary faction's leader Yuliya Tymoshenko, the leader of the "Servants of the People" David Arakhamia, and the Deputy Leader of the "Voice" faction Yaroslav Zheleznyak (Ukrayinska Pravda 2020a). The initiative envisages the establishing of the Council under the leadership of the President of Ukraine, mass COVID-19 testing, increasing the labs' capacity as well as reprofiling of hospitals for treating COVID.

Figure 2
A Competing Pyramid Model – the Case of Ukraine

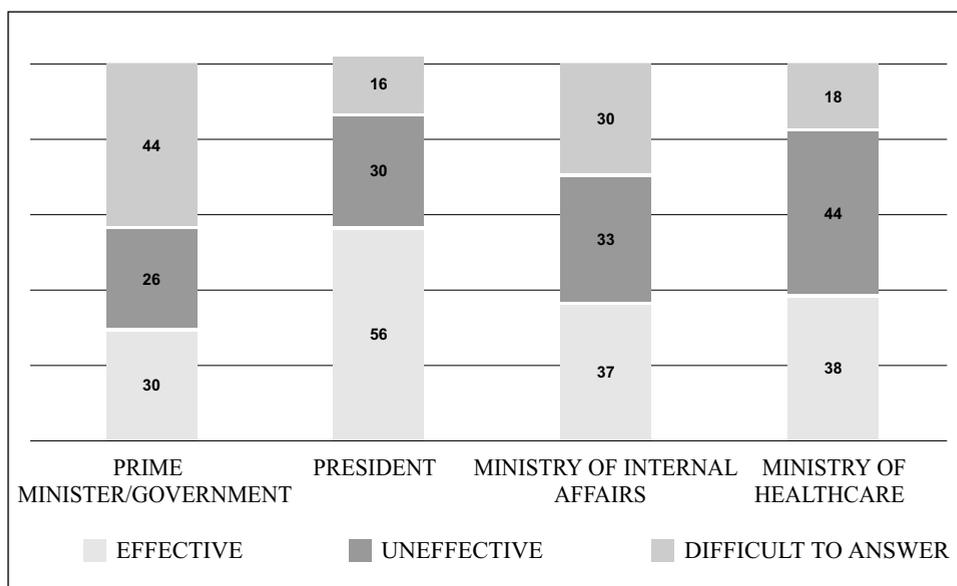


Hence, the key feature of Zelensky's Presidency and the constitutional majority of the "Servants of the People" party in the Verkhovna Rada is highlighted through poorly functioning institutions. Poorly functioning institutions have been continuously present in the Ukrainian type of hybrid regime; however, they became especially vivid in summer 2019. In the Democracy Index of 2018 "the functioning of government" indicator for Ukraine was at 3.21 (Democracy Index 2018: 38); in the following year its value deteriorated to only 2.71, whereas the other indicators for Ukraine demonstrated a positive change (Democracy Index 2019: 12). The chaotic disorder in the public administration realm has consequently led to the decrease of trust in and popular support for the governing institutions, according to an analysis by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation carried out throughout the period of July 9–20, 2020 (Ilko Kucheriv Foundation 2020).

According to the outcomes of a survey carried out by Rating Sociological Group in March 2020, among the governing institutions the most positive assessment was given to the President (a 56% positive assessment), followed by the Ministry of Health (38%), the

Ministry of Internal Affairs (37%) and, finally, receiving the least positive assessment, Denys Shmygal' for both his activities as Prime Minister and his earlier activities in the Government (30%).

Chart 2
Governing Institutions' Effectiveness in Halting COVID-19



Source: Own compilation based on data from a "Rating" sociological group survey, March 2020 (<https://www.ratinggroup.ua/>).

Another survey, carried out by the Razumkov Centre in August 2020, demonstrates that despite the majority of the respondents considering the Ministry of Health as bearing the core responsibility for the effective response to the COVID-19 pandemics (50,7%), some of the respondents feel that doctors and those employed in the healthcare system deserve praise for dealing with the pandemics (34,9%), while the local and central decision-making institutions received approval ratings of only 21% and 19%, respectively (Razumkov Centre 2020).

Two interrelated factors which during the reign of Volodymyr Zelensky became consistent flaws of the Ukrainian political regime should be stressed: the populism and unprofessionalism of the government. Both of these phenomena have created preconditions for the inefficiency of government institutions in fighting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at its early stages. In the same time frame, it became clear that this vital area of state activity was infected with one of the most dangerous diseases of the new government – an excessive fascination with the “demonstrative” and “theater staging” side of the political process, which the newly appointed officials brought in from their previous jobs, which were mostly related to the entertainment business. The journalist Andriy Harasym has aptly called it the “New Sanjar Syndrome”, referring to the performance that was arranged around the observation of the Ukrainian citizens who arrived in Ukraine from the Chinese city Wuhan (Harasym 2020). He makes the relevant argument that this event turned into the starting point for all decisions of the Ukrainian authorities regarding the virus and had a long-term impact on its anti-epidemic policy. It is also difficult to disagree with another assessment by Harasym, which concerns not only the fight against the coronavirus, but also the overall management efficiency: “*there is an*

impression that Zelensky-led governance exists only till the moment of taking a systemic, organizationally difficult decision” (Harasym 2020).

Further developments only confirmed the above-mentioned opinion. Although Ukraine alone introduced the national quarantine early in the second week of March, closed most public places, abolished international and domestic passenger traffic, and restricted the operation of public transport, the more or less organized and well-thought-out action ended there. As Judy Twigg, a professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University, aptly put it, “officials in Kyiv seemed to believe that the quarantine was all they needed” (Twigg 2020). Given the timing of these publications, more recent examples of the inefficiency of state institutions should be added here. First of all, there is the situation with the Fund to Combat COVID-19. On July 24, 2020, the newspaper *Ekonomichna Pravda* reported that only UAH 3.2 billion were left out of the 64.7 billion the Fund originally had in its possession. At the same time, only 16% of the funds spent to combat COVID-19 went directly to healthcare and the improvement of medical infrastructure (*Ekonomichna Pravda* 2020). The data provided by the experts were confirmed by the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine (Ministry of Finance of Ukraine 2020).

The instances of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned above vividly highlight the features of a “dysfunctional state” and “poor leadership”. Two other examples serve as additional evidence: Volodymyr Zelensky’s attempt to transfer a share of the burden of responsibility to oligarchs by allocating certain regions to their supervision, and the new wave of the volunteering movement (the previous one being caused by Russia’s aggression in the east of Ukraine). Both phenomena prove the argument that hybrid regimes are characterized by an interaction of formal and informal institutions (Vorobiov 2020).

As regards “social trust” and the quality of communication between the Government and the population, in the case of Ukraine the conditions have deteriorated under the impact of the already mentioned populism and “staging” approach towards the political process waged by the “Servants of the People” and the Zelensky-led decision-makers. First of all, there are the daily briefings of the Healthcare Minister Maksym Stepanov that mostly stressed the deadlock condition of the Government rather than its effectiveness and did not lead to any increase of trust in it. Furthermore, the trust towards the Government is irrational, as it is caused by populist promises and oligarch-controlled media outlets rather than a values system and ideological beliefs.

Thus, at the moment, the Ukrainian authorities demonstrate a rather reactive stance in the fight against the coronavirus, and a lack of systematic analysis of the situation and strategic planning, resulting in low efficiency and an imbalance, including in the areas of “lives and livelihoods” and “health and GDP”. Limiting the scale of the pandemic is achieved through considerable economic losses with medium-term and long-term negative impacts (including the almost 300 billion UAH budget deficit), which the government is not aiming to recognize and take measures against (so as to avoid the possible future crisis), or productively minimize. The main sources of such an ineffective pandemic policy are, above all, populism and unprofessionalism. In turn, poorly functioning institutions are an important feature of the authoritarian component of the hybrid regime in Ukraine, which suggests a strong correlation between the hybrid nature of the political regime and the level of effectiveness of the pandemic policy.

Despite the proposed argument about the impact of hybridity on the effectiveness of the COVID-19 policy, the answer to the question of the pandemic’s repercussions for the hybrid regime in Ukraine is not as obvious and requires a lengthier perspective to observe the outcomes. It is important not to confuse the consequences for a particular format of power (in this case, V. Zelensky and the ruling party “Servants of the People”) with the consequences for the hybrid regime as such, for its stability. First, although a decline in the popularity of both the President and the party is observed, it is still difficult to single out the contribution of the failed COVID-related pandemic policy to this decline. Despite

the fact that a poll conducted jointly by the Ilko Kucheriv Foundation for Democratic Initiatives and the Razumkov Centre is entitled “Half a Year in a Pandemic: What Has Changed in the Attitudes and Electoral Preferences of Ukrainians”, the pandemic itself and the policies’ effectiveness were not explicitly addressed in the framework of the survey. Second, a change in the “party” affiliation of the government in Ukraine is likely to result in a change in the type of hybridity of the political regime, including the potential vector of transformation (transition to democracy vs transition to authoritarianism). At least for the time being, the sympathies of the population, which President Zelensky and the “Servants of the People” lost, are becoming more evenly distributed between Yuri Boyko and Petro Poroshenko, respectively, between the Opposition Platform for Life and European Solidarity (Ukrayinska Pravda 2020b).

Third, a rather specific format of communication between Zelensky's government and the population should be taken into account. This mode proved to be flawed in the arrangement and planning of the fight against the pandemic, but is quite effective in creating public illusions related to the activities of the government, which has been systematically elaborated in another area presenting a systemic challenge for Ukraine's type of hybridity, namely, the area of countering the Russian-led aggression since 2014.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the COVID-19 pandemic's outcomes for political regimes' trajectories worldwide in the mid-term and long-term perspective are yet to be witnessed, our inquiry into the post-Soviet hybrid regimes' response to it, particularly utilizing the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, contributes to an in-depth understanding of internal regime dynamics throughout the systemic crises (such as COVID-19). First, in spite of their common features and similar positioning as hybrid regimes in the democracy measurement datasets, Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate different outcomes in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic with the former standing out as the first wave success story in the post-Soviet area, while the latter joins the majority of the other post-Soviet countries with mostly ineffective responses to the spread of the virus. Second, in light of Morlino's conceptualization of hybrid regimes, we depart from the dichotomous understanding of the typology of political regimes along with a simplified understanding of hybridity as the transitional condition in-between democracy and authoritarianism.

Thirdly, in line with the organizational approach discussed in the scholarly polemics on hybrid regimes' features as well as Henry Hale's concepts of “single and competing pyramid models” of hybridity, Georgia's Georgian Dream-led government being praised for its effective handling of the pandemic adds to its legitimacy and staying unchallenged in its dominant-party status after the decisive October 2020 parliamentary elections and recent electoral reform. Georgia's brand of hybrid regime rests upon three pillars: the ruling party's unchallenged role, a weak and fragmented opposition and increased social trust towards the Government, which is perceived as an effective decision-maker in the eyes of the population. As these pillars were combined with a still immature civil society that is still rather too weak to mobilize a significant part of the population in criticizing the flaws and dubious features of the Government, Georgia managed to present itself as an effective role model due to the readiness of each of its institutional and social actors to cooperate in order to preserve its own survival in the complex pattern. Finally, Georgia stands out as a case of stable and lasting patronage networks with the single-handed informal rule of Bidzina Ivanishvili overseeing the actions of the ruling party and ensuring the enhanced centralization of the decision-making process.

As regards the case of Ukraine, its lack of an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to the following factors: the dysfunctional state apparatus demonstrating a low capacity to address potential systemic challenges in the face of a polarized society, the condition of the protracted war in the east of Ukraine, and

competing patronal networks posing more challenges for the Government in which it has to present itself as an effective manager, unlike in the case of Georgia. Furthermore, a readiness of the institutional and social actors to cooperate is not observed in the case of Ukraine. Hence, compared to Georgia's case, in Ukraine the lack of effective communication between the President, the Prime-Minister and local governors protesting against the quarantine measures, has contributed to the decrease of the Government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population. The major finding, which the "most similar systems" comparative research of the two cases suggests, rests on the intersection and symbiosis of an informal governance network and formal institutions under the "single pyramid model" overseen by the single most influential informal leader. Meanwhile the competitive character of the "competing pyramid model" observed in Ukraine contributes to a protracted and predominantly ineffective crisis communication strategy due to the plurality of informal actors as well as their clustered influence over the formal decision-making institutions. We believe that further observing the COVID-19 pandemic-related developments in hybrid regimes allows one to explore new patterns of patronal networks' dynamics, making it a continuously curious case for research and further generalizations on the topic.

¹ For more detailed information, classification criteria and changes in the scores see Freedom House, Nations in Transit report (2020), Georgia.

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