

Patronage Networks in Ukraine: A Case Study

This case study is focused on the broader phenomenon of patronage networks and how they play a part in different countries and their governments. The dimensions I am focusing on to best understand patronage networks are the types of networks there are, the benefits of the patrons within the networks, and the consequences of these networks. For a more specific case of patronage networks, I will be examining the Donbas region of Ukraine. The main question I look to address is how both internal and external patronage networks have played a role in the conflicts that have occurred within the country over the past decade.

Types of Patronage

Patronage can be seen in many different ways, as the general meaning of “patronage” itself is very broad. In simple terms, patronage is the encouragement or monetary support that one gives to another. The idea of patronage originates from feudalism and was initially used as a way of maintaining a balance of power between peasants and their lords. Having patronage between the two groups made it so that production was overall cheaper for the lords, and it led to peasants becoming more dependent on lords. This was especially seen in rural communities where feudal lands were grouped together, making the monopolization of production easier to achieve. Today, patronage often arises in situations of poverty or low economic stability. It can be used to stabilize the economy and alleviate financial stress in some situations, but can also lead to the exploitation of laborers and corruption of the government.¹

Today, patronage works with the same base that it began with, but has changed slightly. The people who manage patronage networks are known as patrons, while the people who receive them are the clients. Patronage often promises the exchange of goods and can sometimes be

¹ Hall, Anthony (July 1974). "Patron-Client Relations". *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. London: Taylor & Francis. **1** (4): 506–509.

enacted with threats or punishment.² No matter which way the patronage network leans, it always includes coercion and involves more personal relationships between the patron and client(s). In some countries, patronage networks are legal and can be seen as beneficial for certain sectors of government and commercial production. However, they are illegal in many others and are often seen as a corrupt force within the government. The most common types of patronage that can be seen and will be addressed in this study are political patronage and economic patronage.

Political patronage networks, also referred to as patronal politics, are the politics in countries where people sculpt their political interactions around personal exchanges, usually consisting of money or other rewards. In addition to this, political patronage is often seen as “the appointment or hiring of a person to a government post” based on their loyalty to particular parties and people. Elected officials at any level of government will help with these people receiving appointments as a type of reward for helping them remain in their office.³ This is a practice that is commonly seen throughout different governments, with the United States being the prime example of this. Economic patronage is closely related to political patronage and the two often overlap. The main difference between the two is that economic patronage is solely centered around money and the economy of the region in which it occurs. It is often fueled by political patronage, as it allows people seeking economic patronage to easily gain the influence they need to accomplish their economic goals. In economic patronage, people are often rewarded with monetary, political, or social rewards, and the patron receives high financial benefits.

Benefits of the Patron

² Hale, Henry E. *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³ Baracskey, Daniel. “Political Patronage.” *Political Patronage*, 2009.

Patronage networks always consist of a client-patron relationship, where the patron holds some sort of power over their client. Because of this power dynamic, it is understandable that patrons reap many benefits from these relationships and are able to use their power over the client to their advantage. Clients benefit from these relationships as well, but it is the patron that has the most to gain. The benefits of the patron can come in many forms, whether social, economical, or political. Socially, they could climb the social ladder and become a more prominent figure. Economically, they could be receiving money from their clients or money from the networks they have established through their clients. Politically, they could gain political backing and support that would offer them positions within the government.

Around the world, the benefits of the patron in patronage networks can be seen. A primary example would be in South Africa, where patrons have benefitted politically. In South Africa, there is a political group known as the African National Congress, or the ANC. This group was very important in the development of South Africa following apartheid and has been in place since apartheid ended in 1994. In the early years of the ANC, there were already patronage networks being established and these are what made up the core of alliances for the ANC. This made it so that many people within the ANC had connections set in place for when it came to power. Once it did, it gained a much greater opportunity to follow patronage networking models and quickly led to corruption. There were many new resources available to members of the ANC and a variety of new connections they could make, and they used this to their advantage. Many members used their already existing and now expanding networks to boost themselves into higher positions of power, and they were supported by the ANC as a means of

making sure that it could influence the development and transformation of South Africa. Having such control over this development would allow for the group's personal agenda to be met.⁴

Consequences of Patronage

Despite there being great benefits for patrons within patronage networks, these networks are not always beneficial for the majority of people within a society, state, or country. Patronage networks have often been associated with corruption, as they make way for relationships that have an unbalanced power dynamic. This is especially the case in South Africa. While patronage networks began taking hold in the ANC, many of its leaders, including Nelson Mandela, spoke out about their worries pertaining to the expansion of power for the members. It was clear that corruption was taking place, as people who originally fought for the mission of the ANC were now only in it as a way of making money and using it for their own personal gain. What this developed into was ANC members exploiting those beneath them in order to maintain their status. This led to factionalism within South Africa and caused separation among the people in both the ANC and the wider community. From this branched a type of political violence that was harmful to South Africa in its recovery from apartheid. The factionalism that was created through the ANC can still be seen in South Africa today and, while not outright harmful in the present, it has been lacking in achieving its original purpose and message: to promote social justice in post-apartheid South Africa.⁵ This, in the long run, will prove to be harmful to South Africa as a whole.

While countries like South Africa have seen negative consequences of patronage networks, there have also been good consequences of them in other parts of the world. Whereas

⁴ Beresford, Alexander. "Power, patronage, and gatekeeper politics in South Africa." *African Affairs* 114, no. 455 (2015): 226-248.

⁵ Beresford, Alexander. "Power, patronage, and gatekeeper politics in South Africa." *African Affairs* 114, no. 455 (2015): 226-248.

corruption can lead to imbalance and corruption in some regions, it acts as a checks and balances system in other regions that benefit the greater majority. In China, patronage networks are seen to be helpful in the development of China and are supported by the government. Granted, patronage networks have been helpful because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is in power currently (the CCP is an authoritarian government, with its citizens having no direct influence on the power distribution of the CCP or the leaders that are chosen within it). Patronage networks have found popularity in China due to the promotion of complete devotion to the state and, therefore, a decrease in opposition to the CCP and more subordination from the citizens of China toward the CCP.⁶ Patronage networks have led to an increase in competent people being placed in China's government. Those who are working their way up through the government have heightened performance due to the promise of rewards from their higher-ups. This leads to harder workers that the higher-ups can then feel confident putting into positions of power, as well as leads to a stronger commitment from those workers.⁷ In addition to this, it is argued that patronage networks have assisted in holding people accountable for the work that they are expected to do because, if they do not do it, there will be punishments from either the government or the general public. One's reputation politically and socially could be mangled if one were not to keep up with the expectations from the patron-client relationship they have established. Overall, there is a constant sense of accountability within the structure of the CCP due to patronage networks which has made it so that those working under it produce better outcomes to receive better incentives, and therefore benefit the government and the way that China is functioning. While the CCP is still authoritarian and that itself can lead to problems of

⁶ Jiang, Junyan. "Making bureaucracy work: Patronage networks, performance incentives, and economic development in China." *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 982-999.

⁷ Jiang, Junyan. "Making bureaucracy work: Patronage networks, performance incentives, and economic development in China." *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 982-999.

corruption for the citizens of China, patronage networks have benefitted the CCP and are seen to have more positive outcomes in China than if they were not being utilized. Overall, patronage networks have both positive and negative effects depending on how they are implemented.

Patronage Networks in Ukraine

Types of Patronage

The patronage that is seen in Ukraine is both political and economical. There are networks set in place to allow political advancements of Russia and subnational elites that are tied to Russia, which have made way for these people to influence the economy and reap the benefits of those influences. Having been a former Soviet state, there were many connections established between Ukraine and Russia. Russia, as a result of once having power over Ukraine, had many patronage networks set in place to maintain its control over the region. This patronage was used to benefit Russia both economically and politically and led many rebels of Ukraine to go against their own country for Russia. These patronage networks have lasted long since the fall of the Soviet Union, and can still be seen today. The greatest example of this lasting influence of Russia through patronage is the war in Ukraine that began in 2014, in the Donbas region.

Although patronage was heavily influenced by Russia in 2014, there were also patronage networks set in place by the subnational elites of Ukraine. Subnational elites are elites that maintain power in governments that are the sum of state and local governments.⁸ The subnational elites that are most prevalent in Donbas are Viktor Yanukovich, the former president of Ukraine, his son Oleksandr, and Rinat Akhmetov, the wealthiest oligarch in all of Ukraine.⁹ These figures had formed a very wide clientelist network that centered around Akhmetov, later to be called

⁸ OECD (2018), “Subnational government investment”, in OECD Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁹ Laryš, Martin, and Emil A Souleimanov. “Delegated Rebellions as an Unwanted Byproduct of Subnational Elites’ Miscalculation: A Case Study of the Donbas.” *Problems of post-communism*. 69, no. 2 (2022): 155–165.

“The Family”. Another person that stands as an emblem of subnational elites with patronage networks in Donbas is Oleksandr Yefremov. Yefremov is a former politician in Ukraine and acted as the governor of Luhansk Oblast from 2010-2014. Like Akhmetov, Yefremov had been building a clientelist network around him. Specifically, Akhmetov had more established networks in Donetsk while Yefremov had networks in Luhansk. Whereas Yefremov held more power in political patronage, Akhmetov held more power in economic patronage. As a result of both of these networks, the clients of these two men ended up controlling dominant parties, councils, and mayoral offices throughout Donbas. This allowed them to maintain a high status within the government themselves and aided them in becoming stronger oligarchs overall.¹⁰ Through Russia and subnational elites that maintain patronage networks in Donbas, one can see a different side to patronage networks that is not commonly seen in the broader phenomenon. This is the factor of an external patron. Whereas countries like South Africa and China have internal patronage networks that are not influenced by outside forces, it is the opposite for Donbas. Russia has many networks in this region, and even has some control over the subnational elites that represent the internal networks of Ukraine.

Benefits of the Patron

Russia is a prime example of how a patron gives to a client in return for great favors from said client. The Donbas region, which is geographically neighboring Russia, has been very accessible to Russia and, therefore, has become a focal point for Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian conflicts that have occurred over the past decade. In Donbas, there was an increase in pro-Russian sentiments from Ukrainians in the region and this created the perfect environment for Russia to initiate strong political patronage networks within the region. There were many

¹⁰ Laryš, Martin, and Emil A Souleimanov. “Delegated Rebellions as an Unwanted Byproduct of Subnational Elites’ Miscalculation: A Case Study of the Donbas.” *Problems of post-communism*. 69, no. 2 (2022): 155–165.

ways in which Russia supported the pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. There was first an offering of leadership and protection. At the time that the war was taking place, this was very attractive to those who were in support of Russia. Beyond this, Russia provided training for the rebels and supplied them with weapons, which they also trained the rebels to use. Later, there began to be an influx of funding for better weapons than what the rebels had had before and forces from the Russian army were deployed. This support for funding and an increase in forces was attractive to the rebels, as they felt reinforced and supported by Russia in what they were doing. What completely furthered rebel support was the funding that Russia provided for the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic.¹¹ Funding them gave these republics an upper hand and led them to fully commit to Russia's cause, fighting harder than before to help Russia win the Donbas region of Ukraine. This is of significant benefit to Russia because it is now having to exert fewer resources to maintain its power in Donbas.

When it comes to the subnational elites in Donbas, they have used their patronage networks in a way that allows them to maintain their power. They have worked to convince the general public that they are acting to protect them and their interests. Additionally, they have created a sense of exceptionalism and exclusiveness that is attractive to the general public, claiming that the Donbas region is self-sufficient and the powerhouse of Ukraine's industry and economy.¹² However, this is not necessarily true and pushes for unfounded nationalism. How, then, do these elites convince others of these myths? There are two approaches. First is a friendly approach, where the elites establish friendly and healthy relationships with other political figures of importance as a means of achieving their desires. Second, there is an approach of

¹¹ Gunes, Tugba. "Civilians in the borderlands-a case study of rebel organization in the war in Donbas." Master's thesis, 2017.

¹² Laryš, Martin, and Emil A Souleimanov. "Delegated Rebellions as an Unwanted Byproduct of Subnational Elites' Miscalculation: A Case Study of the Donbas." *Problems of post-communism*. 69, no. 2 (2022): 155–165.

blackmailing, where elites have threatened to go to Russia if anything did not go their way.¹³

This shows an interconnection between internal patronage networks in the Donbas region and Russia, despite external patronage from Russia being a separate entity from the internal patronage I have just discussed. If these patronage networks were not to have been established under Akhmetov and Yefremov, they would not have been able to maintain their power in the ways they have. As a result of their positions of power, they are able to have more control over the Donbas region, as well as remain in a high-income bracket and have influence over the policies that impact the economy.

Consequences of Patronage Networks in Ukraine

As I have mentioned previously, there are pro-Russian rebels in the Donbas region as a result of the patronage networks that have been established in the region. These rebels have greatly impacted Russo-Ukrainian conflicts and have completely altered the result of this war, making it so that the Donbas region is controlled by Russian separatists. Russian separatists are groups of armed militias that are being worked into the Russian army.¹⁴

Militias in Donetsk and Luhansk that consisted of rebels were growing in numbers and there was an imminent threat posed against Ukraine as a whole. Eventually, the militias from both of these regions joined together and tensions increased. Because of these threats and tensions, the Ukrainian government decided to launch an anti-terrorist mission against the militias. This is what ignited the Donbas War in 2014. While Russia denied any involvement with Russian separatists, it later came out that they had been funding them and established the patronage networks with them that I mentioned previously.¹⁵ Seeing that Russia was heavily

¹³ Laryš, Martin, and Emil A Souleimanov. "Delegated Rebellions as an Unwanted Byproduct of Subnational Elites' Miscalculation: A Case Study of the Donbas." *Problems of post-communism*. 69, no. 2 (2022): 155–165.

¹⁴ Kitsoft. "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine – Temporary Occupation of Territories in Donetsk and Luhansk Regions". *Mfa.gov.ua*, 2021.

¹⁵ BBC. "Ukraine says Donetsk 'anti-terror operation' under way". *BBC News*. 15 April 2014. Retrieved 22 April 2022.

involved with separatists, it is argued that they are the main reason this conflict resulted in the way that it did. Overall, these rebels have been at the center of attention in this conflict and have been a defining feature of it. During this war, a large amount of violence was targeted at civilians, with 2,500 dying, and over 7,000 sustaining injuries. This attack on civilians also led to many Ukrainians fleeing Donbas, heading toward Russia or other parts of Ukraine.¹⁶ Over the course of the Donbas war, there were also many war crimes committed on the part of the rebel forces. These crimes were cited by the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine as attacks on journalists, attacks on supporters of Ukrainian unity, targeted killing and torture, and abduction. Anyone who was thought to be in support of Ukraine staying united or was against the rebel forces fell victim to these war crimes.¹⁷ This had a great overall impact on Ukraine and has resulted in Donbas being isolated from the rest of Ukraine despite still being a part of the country. The consequences of the actions of rebels have far surpassed the Donbas war, though. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This has been an ongoing conflict and has tainted the months following. Putin has not eased up on his attack and the conflict has resulted in much violence and death. Because of the already-established connections with pro-Russian rebels through patronage networks, Putin has begun recruiting men from Donbas, those of whom have been very willing to aid his efforts. This has given Russia an upper hand throughout the conflict and has made consequences even heftier on Ukraine.¹⁸ While other factors have played a part in these consequences, it is arguable that patronage networks have contributed greatly to them and, without the external patronage of Russia in Ukraine, these consequences would not be as great as they have become.

¹⁶ Gunes, Tugba. "Civilians in the borderlands-a case study of rebel organization in the war in Donbas." Master's thesis, 2017.

¹⁷ "Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine" Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 15 May 2014.

¹⁸ "Ukraine: Anti-Kyiv Forces Running Amok". Human Rights Watch. 23 May 2014.

Comparison of Ukraine and Worldwide Patronage

Types of Patronage

Around the world, there are many different types of patronage. The most common are political and economical, with both types consistently overlapping throughout different parts of the world. Examples of this can be seen in Africa and China, with Africa having political patronage and China having economic. Africa and China are clear examples of what patronage is and how it can be seen in reality. In Africa, there are instances of political patronage that are woven into the government of South Africa. This patronage has led to favored clients coming into positions of power within the government and has caused corruption, which has been viewed unfavorably by those living in the country. In China, patronage networks are economic and have, unlike in Africa, been used in a more positive way. Patronage in China holds its ground in accountability and makes checks and balances a lot easier for the government to have. These are just two prime examples of patronage, and they display how patronage can take form across the world. At its very base, patronage is simply used to hold power over others through a patron-client relationship. It is typically corrupt, as seen in South Africa, but can also be used to benefit countries depending on who is in power and what government is in place, like in China. When it comes to the Donbas region of Ukraine, it more closely resembles what can be seen in South Africa. The Donbas region has an incredible amount of patronage networks, those of which are heavily dependent on Russia and its economy. Donbas has only seen patronage networks being used to assist Russian efforts of reclaiming Ukraine and to help corrupt elites stay in their positions of power. This is a huge point of concern for Ukraine, as it allows for the control of Russia to take hold with ease. This can be seen in the Ukraine-Russia war of 2014, with the main hindrance of Ukraine being the rebels in Luhansk and Donetsk that were involved

in patronage relationships with Russian leaders and elites. Ukraine shows an extreme of patronage networks and just how far the relationships that are created by patrons can go. This strays away from the broader phenomenon only slightly, as there have been other similar events due to political patronage, but it rarely ever goes to the extent of creating entire rebel forces that aid in the invasion of their own country. This is where this case is more unique and stands out from the broader phenomenon and other cases of patronage that can be seen.

Benefits of the Patron

Patronage networks are particularly beneficial to the patron within the relationship. The patron is the person who holds more power and wealth and establishes a relationship with their client. The patron often gives protection or promotions to those beneath them in exchange for goods and services that can be easily molded to fit the patron's needs. As discussed in the previous section, these benefits on both ends can be political and economic, and often intersect with one another. The case in the Donbas region looks extremely similar to the broader phenomenon of patronage networks, with patrons that are benefitting and clients that are being rewarded for their deeds toward the patron. What is unique about Ukraine compared to other parts of the world is that Russia has a heavy stake in the patronage system of Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region. Patronage networks can be seen on an interstate level, but it is not as common as interior patronage. In countries like South Africa and China, their patronage networks are primarily contained within their borders and are run by people who are native to the country or live there. In the Donbas region, however, Russia is the primary patron that benefits. Most of the money that flows through economic patronage networks in Ukraine goes to Russia, and even subnational elites will shift money outside of Ukraine as a means of reaping better benefits. This is a very interesting case when talking about the benefits of the patron because as it

can be seen, Russia gains more from patronage than any Ukrainian would on their own land. Russia not only benefits monetarily but also in terms of garnering political support within Ukraine. On top of the help that has been received by pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine, Russia also now has an advantage within Luhansk and Donetsk in Donbas. Throughout these regions, pro-Russian sentiment has reached an all-time high and there are citizens in these areas who would prefer to be under Russian authority rule than Ukrainian. While this mostly has to do with cultural contexts and the history of the region, patronage networks have only added fuel to the fire, with Russia now acting as an economic savior for Luhansk and Donetsk in a way that takes financial stress away from Ukrainians and their families, as well as funding their social benefits in a way that Ukraine has not been able to. This has led to many benefits for patrons in Russia, as they are now more equipped to fight a war in Ukraine and have the resources to back them up, including people who are in high support of them and Russia's fight.

Consequences of Patronage

Along with patronage networks come consequences. Consequences will typically rise from the corruption that patronage networks present, as there are many players involved that, depending on their position, can cause problems for the wider region. The Donbas region is the perfect example of the consequences of patronage networks. I have already described a few consequences of patronage in Donbas, including the 2014 war, pro-Russian rebel troops, and urging for the secession of Luhansk and Donetsk from Ukraine. These consequences highly favor Russia and have given them an advantage point, especially now in the 2022 war between Russia and Ukraine. There still remains an air of support for Russia due to their client relations, and Ukraine has still been trying to recover from the 2014 war, putting them in an especially high state of vulnerability. In the 2014 war, the support garnered by patronage networks can be

said to be a reason why Crimea was fully taken over by Russia. Had it not been for the consequence of built support for Russia, there may have been a higher chance of Crimea remaining a part of Ukraine and a lesser chance of Ukraine having been as badly affected as it was by the war. Overall, the patronage networks that have been established in Ukraine, specifically in the Donbas region, have been leaving Ukraine in a position of weakness to Russia and have made them an easier target. Every day Ukrainians are suffering, while subnational elites from Luhansk and Donetsk and Russians are benefitting politically and economically.

Conclusion

Patronage networks have many different shapes and sizes. They mold around the society that they are integrated into and can have both positive and negative consequences. They can be internal, external, or both, and whoever heads these networks has benefits as a patron. In Ukraine, there has been an increasing problem of conflict and corruption due to the high amount of patronage networks within the country. Most of these networks are placed in the Donbas region, where Russia has established external networks that have helped to turn citizens of Donbas against their own country of Ukraine. This has aided in Putin's war efforts against Ukraine and has had, and will have, dire consequences for Ukraine and its prosperity against Russia. From looking into the broader phenomenon of patronage and the specific case of patronage in Donbas, I can conclude that the Donbas war of 2014 and the current Russian and Ukraine war of 2022 are the results of patronage networks that were established by Russia and subnational elites that were under Russian influence. If it were not for these networks and the allowance of external influence within them, the consequences of these conflicts would not have been as great as they are, and Ukraine would have a better chance of standing against Russian forces.

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