

Are reformers rational? Evidence from the post-soviet states, 2010-2019¹

Anna A. Dekalchuk (Associate Professor, National Research University Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, Russia. E-mail: adekalchuk@hse.ru)

Ivan S. Grigoriev (Associate Professor, National Research University Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, Russia. E-mail: igrigoriev@hse.ru)

How and why reforms fail or succeed is one of the fundamental questions in political science. Not surprisingly, the research into reform failure is very extensive and covers entire regions (Hellman 1998; Cook 2007; Fish 1997; Gereffi and Wyman 2014; Drysdale 2000), countries (Shleifer and Treisman 2000), and specific reform areas (Rozelle and Swinnen 2004; Caiden 1999; Dollar and Svensson 2000). The interest towards the correlates of reform success stems from the normative understanding of government as a mechanism used by the society to achieve collective goals through public policies. Reforms are a way to introduce new policies or modify the existent ones, and as such reform success can be perceived as a measure of the political system's value and usefulness for the society.

Unfortunately, the downside to the deserved breadth of attention towards the problem of reform success is the extreme diversity of explanations sometimes bordering with a differing understanding of what is meant by reform success. Indeed, two schools of thought seem to exist here. The maximalist definition seems to take a successful reform to mean a reform which installs a policy better than the status quo. The measure of success here is the policy outcome. Thus, it is obviously a failure when a reform aims at achieving certain societal or economic goals, but does not bring the expected results owing to flaws in the design of the new policy. But it is also a failure when the cleverly designed policy which could in principle solve the problems the society faces does not achieve its goals because politicians fail to adopt it, or because bureaucracies fail to implement it properly. In both cases the outcome is the same: the society fails to achieve a better policy, and this is considered a reform failure.

The maximalist approach is intuitively attractive exactly because it defines the reform failure the way that makes establishing the sources of such failure relevant and practically interesting from the perspective of social development. However, to do so this approach has to embrace all possible sources of reform failure, which, as we show below, is unpractical methodologically. This is why at some point a narrower minimalist understanding of reform success has been introduced which only deals with whether the reform succeeds at installing the policy envisaged by the reformers (and leaves aside the consequences of the policy introduced that way to the society). We discuss the methodological advantages of the minimalist approach below. Note, however, that normatively the implications of such conceptualization can be contradictory in the sense that even a reform which leads to societally adverse results could still be deemed successful.

One aspect of reform success understood minimalistically that we focus on in this paper is whether the new policy sticks. Indeed, Theda Skocpol (1992) defines a successful policy as the one which “enhances the kinds of state capacities that can promote [this policy's] future development” and which “stimulates groups and political alliances to defend the policy's continuation and expansion” (Skocpol 1992, 59). Whether a reform provides a policy it promotes with appropriate means of enhancing the state capacity to implement this new policy, and with political stimuli for groups and reform constituencies to defend the new policy from future reversal, is a sine qua non condition of reform success here. This understanding provides for a distinct methodology of reform analysis which emphasizes the role of such reform reinforcements in its future robustness.

We compare the minimalist and maximalist approaches in more detail and discuss their implications in section one below. As we show, it is hard to argue conclusively in favour of either of these approaches from the normative perspective as both seem substantively equivalent. At the same time we note that the minimalist approach methodologically relies on an additional assumption about the nature of the reform process – namely, that the reformers share the researchers' concern for reform

1 The research leading to this paper was generously funded by the Center for Advanced Governance, Moscow.

robustness and put an effort into supplying the policy with the so called policy reinforcements designed to protect it from reversal in the future. We discuss various possible types of policy reinforcements in section two below by referring to the so called policy feedback literature (Pierson 1993; Schneider and Sidney 2009, 108–11). Importantly, as we show, only if the reformers embed reinforcements into the policies they promote should the minimalist approach be considered equivalent with the maximalist approach, but if they actually do is an empirical question. To answer this question we focus on the new unique evidence collected in several post-Soviet states in 2019 (altogether around 100 in depth interviews with reformers, bureaucrats, NGO and advocacy group activists, and policy area specialists from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Armenia, and Belarus). The main question we ask is how rational are the reformers, and do they care for their reforms' robustness? Do they introduce "reinforcements" in practice, and how they do so?

Literature

- Caiden, Gerald E. 1999. "Administrative Reform – Proceed with Caution." *International Journal of Public Administration* 22 (6):815–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900699908525406>.
- Cook, Linda J. 2007. *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Dollar, David, and Jakob Svensson. 2000. "What Explains the Success or Failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes?" *The Economic Journal* 110 (466):894–917. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00569>.
- Drysdale, Peter. 2000. *Reform and Recovery in East Asia: The Role of the State and Economic Enterprise*. Taylor & Francis.
- Fish, M Steven. 1997. "The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Post-Communist World." *East European Politics and Societies* 12 (1):31–78.
- Gereffi, Gary, and Donald L Wyman. 2014. *Manufacturing Miracles: Paths of Industrialization in Latin America and East Asia*. Princeton University Press.
- Hellman, Joel. 1998. "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions." *World Politics* 50 (2):203–34.
- Pierson, Paul. 1993. "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change." *World Politics* 45 (04):595–628. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2950710>.
- Rozelle, Scott, and Johan FM Swinnen. 2004. "Success and Failure of Reform: Insights from the Transition of Agriculture." *Journal of Economic Literature* 42 (2):404–56.
- Schneider, Anne, and Mara Sidney. 2009. "What Is Next for Policy Design and Social Construction Theory?" *Policy Studies Journal* 37 (1):103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2008.00298.x>.
- Shleifer, Andrei, and Daniel Treisman. 2000. *Without a Map: Political Tactics and Economic Reform in Russia*. MIT Press.
- Skocpol, Theda. 1992. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge University Press.