

Why the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Survived and the Socialist Republic of Romania (RSR) Collapsed Despite Their Similarities

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Abstract

The Socialist Republic of Romania (RSR) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) experienced economic setbacks and had similar leaders, yet both countries have had vastly different outcomes. While Nicolae Ceaușescu and Kim Il-sung had a close relationship and maintained their regimes in similar ways, the RSR and not the DPRK ended up collapsing. Although the reforms of the USSR, the collapse of other Soviet satellite states and the Sino-Soviet split had a profound impact on the RSR and the DPRK, the regime in North Korea was able to maintain its hold on power. The research question we will examine is why, despite their similarities, did the Kim regime survive while Ceausescu's did not? This question will be answered by evaluating five independent variables: strength of ideology and persona, the ability to invoke Stalinist fears, the presence of an asymmetric alliance, the coup-proofing of institutions and the utilization of a class system.

North Korea's Kim Il-sung was more successful than the Socialist Republic of Romania's (RSR) Nicolae Ceaușescu at legitimatizing his authority, rewarding elites and invoking Stalinist fears in citizens.¹ While both countries experienced their own shared

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crisis, with the RSR and DPRK witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), as well as their own individual crises, the DPRK survived. The dependent variable of this study is the outcome of each regime, in which Ceausescu's fell and Kim Il-sung's survived. Namely, the dependent variable takes two values: regime collapse and regime survival. The independent variables are viewed through three periods of each country's history. The three periods are the leader's ascension to power and regime consolidation, the economic success that legitimized each leader and the response of each regime towards economic turmoil that led up to the Cold War. Nicolae Ceausescu engaged in regime consolidation from 1965 to 1968 and Kim Il-sung from 1945 to 1956. Ceausescu's Romania witnessed economic success from 1970 to 1980 while Kim Il-sung's DPRK experienced economic success following the Korean War throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, the third period, which found the regimes facing economic setback, took place in the RSR from 1970 to the early 1980s and in the DPRK from the late 1980s to late 1990s following years of economic growth for both countries. During the first period, the Kim regime was better at legitimizing his authority over the lives of North Koreans and co-opting elites into the party to discourage rebellion.

During the second period, Kim Il-sung shared economic gains with elites and enjoyed an asymmetric alliance, making it easier to insulate elites from famine, deflect blame and ensure information control during the following period. The third and final period differentiated the two regimes the most because the Kim regime enjoyed an asymmetric relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) while the RSR distanced itself from the Soviet Union and therefore was responsible for its presence in the international

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economic system. The Kim regime had more control over the first two periods of its country's history thanks to information control and the ability to keep elites and opportunists at bay. The third period was the most critical for Kim Il-sung because the asymmetric relationship with China protected the DPRK from engaging in debt from western institutions, allowing the DPRK to provide elites benefits to secure their loyalty. The regime in North Korea enjoyed more favorable conditions and was more effective in executing the ideas and information tool, as per Byman and Lind's information control and co-opting of elites within the authoritarian toolbox that aims to coop-proof elites through the establishment of loyalty and use of fear.

The RSR did not do this during the three stages of its history. Additionally, while Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong mention that both countries use ideology, North Korea's national identity is stronger and more ingrained in society compared to the RSR. The three stages are the consolidation of power by each regime, the period of economic success in each country and the struggles each regime experienced leading up to the end of the Cold War. While the Kim regime of the DPRK also experienced serious threats due to North Korean famine of the 1990s, the crisis did not culminate in regime change. The independent variables for the DPRK and the RSR are the strength of each leader's ideology and persona to legitimate authority, the ability to invoke Stalinist fears in its citizens to control information and the rewarding of elites to remain in power.

Contributions to the Comparative Method

This paper will compare the authoritarian regimes of Kim and Ceausescu to show their disparate outcomes. We define authoritarianism by utilizing part of Juan L. Linz's definition as examined in Susan Kaufman Purcell's work on Authoritarianism. As described by Linz, authoritarianism can be described as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism: without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities);

without intensive or extensive political mobilization (except at some point in their development), and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones (Purcell 1973).” While we are not comparing two political systems, we are utilizing the systems theory approach of evaluating political systems utilized by Karl W. Deutsch in order to examine how disparate the outcomes of the two regimes are despite having similar structures. The political systems in the DPRK and RSR are authoritarian regimes that began with similar styles of leadership yet vastly different outcomes by the end of our analysis, given both countries were formed after World War II as electoral authoritarian regimes.

Deutsch describes state function as “pattern-maintenance, to keep in power those [who] have power, and to keep those who are wealthy in possession of that wealth (Deutsch 1985).” We compare the Kim regime in North Korea to the Ceausescu regime in Romania because both countries sought to maintain those who have power, both regimes rely on an authoritarian persona, both countries aim for self-reliance, both experience economic growth and were formed at the beginning of the Cold War. This paper will rely on secondary sources, allowing us to better understand how the regimes came to power, their leadership styles and the struggles each regime faced. The literature we focus on comes from secondary sources due to information scarcity from North Korea and the reliance on witness accounts of the conditions and decisions made by each regime. Understanding the formation of each regime will consist of party literature and primary sources that discuss the post-war conditions that led to the formation of each country. As we delve into the struggles each regime faced, eyewitness reports and analysis by authors with expertise in these topics become critical.

We base the methodology of this research on David Collier’s examination of the comparative method. David Collier examines that, while “opportunities for systematically testing hypothesis are far more limited than with other methods,” the comparative method can

engage in systematic comparison by “adjudicating among rival explanations (Finifter 1993).” Within the framework of comparing North Korea to Romania, we examine multiple variables and hypotheses by evaluating the utility of the authoritarian toolkit, the uses of ideology, perpetuation of class systems, and treatment of elites and organizations that serve as a potential threat to both regimes. These variables, which affect the ability of the Kim and Ceausescu regimes to remain in power, are treated differently. Therefore, we are able to utilize Lijphart’s approach in observing and utilizing a small N sample. As analysts of the North Korean and Romanian regimes, “can focus on ‘comparable cases (Collier 2017),” in which both countries face the end of the Cold War and existential crisis that threaten the regimes. Additionally, these cases have different variables that “are not central to the study, thus in effect ‘controlling’ for these variables; and... differ in terms of the key variables that are the focus of analysis, thereby allowing a more adequate assessment of their influence (Collier 2017).”³ We can also evaluate different variables, or similarities, that the countries do face and examine how the regimes addressed them. Variables, such as the existence of an authoritarian leader and existence of famine, play less of a role in determining whether a regime survives and are therefore less central to our study. Variables, such as the existence of elite co-optation and the methods leaders undertook to gain power through party or ideology, are more critical to regime survival and therefore a focus of our analysis.

History of Each Country

Before engaging in a comparative analysis of the similarities between the RSR and DPRK, it’s important to present a brief history of the formation of each country. Modern day North Korea, known officially as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and now fallen Romania, also known as the Socialist Republic of Romania (RSR), was founded by Communist fighters, with the latter receiving support from the Soviet Union (USSR) and the former

from the PRC (People's Republic of China). The PRC's aim was to establish a strong ideology to unite the country around one leader whereas the RSR had a Communist government installed by the USSR that did not see ideology and its relationship with the Soviets as important. As pointed out by Chen and Lee in their comparison of Romania and North Korea, the DPRK was "installed with strong Soviet military backing (Chen and Lee 2007)." For North Korea, as we will examine when highlighting the importance of ideology, the country was fragmented ideologically (Tismaneanu 1991). This division is not seen in the RSR, where leaders, such as Ceausescu, compete for the highest position within the party. Since the RSR does not establish its ideology as anti-American and anti-Western, it is free to engage with the West as an independent nation. This leads to the RSR, rather than the DPRK, declaring independence from the USSR, which places it on a course of economic engagement with the west.

The DPRK does not engage economically with the West and instead fuels its pervasive ideology on anti-American/anti-Japanese sentiment. It instead engages in closer ties and reliance on the PRC, which, as we will examine, insulates itself from having to pay back debt with western institutions. In North Korea, the Juche ideology is one of many ideologies in a fragmented North Korea. The fragmentation of ideology was supplanted in North Korea by the Kim regime. Ceausescu, rather than pursuing an anti-Western ideology to unite the country, purged members of his party and became the central commander of all affairs.

Literature Review

Existing literature that compares the DPRK and RSR focuses more on how similar the two regimes operated, the type of economic success that came to fruition and how central planning was achieved. This article explores how each leader's actions, during the three periods of their respective country's history, directly contribute to regime survival. Ceausescu was weaker in consolidating power, delivering economic success and maintaining the capability to retain

elite loyalty. A direct comparison between the DPRK and RSR is introduced by Marcus Noland, who helps begin the analysis of the RSR and DPRK's economic struggles (Noland 1997). Noland notes that both Romania and North Korea "experience economic problems in the 1970s as their central planning approaches began to fail (Noland 1997)." Within Roland's description of each country's economic system, this paper examines the importance of asymmetric alliances for states such as the DPRK to survive. Beyond alliances, the tools these two authoritarian leaders have are critical.

It's important to acknowledge Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind's research on the use of Ideas and Information, as well as the Coup-Proofing of Institutions. The buy-in from elites is a paramount tool for authoritarian survival. As Byman and Lind point out, this allows "regimes [to] distribute economic rewards not to the country as a whole but to a politically important 'selectorate' (Byman and Lind 2010)." This article will examine the ease with which the DPRK implements this critical tool for the establishment of the North Korean state and during the famine, thanks to the solidification of a class system not seen in Romania, along with aid from China. The absence of the elites' support, except direct family members, is a final domino that leads to Ceausescu's demise.

This paper also aims to contribute to Cheng Chen's and Ji-Yong Lee's research by arguing that while the RSR and DPRK did use ideology, the former's use of ideology is weaker. Byman and Lind are correct to point out that "authoritarian regimes also use ideas and the control of information to legitimize their rule," as well as ideology (Byman and Lind 2010). This study first highlights the importance of ideology within the ideas and information tool. To show the importance of ideology, we will compare the success of ideology in North Korea to the shortcomings of it in the RSR. The party in the RSR is weaker in terms of ideology than North Korea because the RSR is propped up by the Soviet. This paper adds to the ideas and information tool the importance of tying ideology to the survival of the nation. This ensures adherence and, given ideology is

stronger in the DPRK compared to the RSR, is critical to the creation of the nation and survival of it for years to come. Additionally, the paper adds to the Coup-proofing of Institutions tool by arguing that this not only prevents a coup d'état, but also allows future leaders to share blame with officials who could one day pose a threat to leadership. The paper will expose this additional benefit both, during the famine, when Kim Jong-un blamed the party for the famine and, as recently as 2021, when Kim Jong-un addressed both the failures of the party and blamed the country's economic guidance organs from the previous year.

Ronald H. Linden's work on the history of Romania is a major starting point for understanding the historical events that led to Ceausescu's rise and downfall. This article builds on Linden's analysis of Ceausescu's purging of party members to secure loyalty and difficulties in co-opting elites once the RSR is opened up and paying off debt to the West. Similar to the DPRK, Linden points out that Ceausescu significantly weakened the opposition and attempted to reward elites closest to him. His work also examines Ceausescu's decision to engage in trade with the west and the decisions that led to the RSR having to pay off its debt by cutting consumption. This study builds on these points in Linden's article and argues that the decision to engage with the west was fatal to Ceausescu's ability to co-opt elites.

This article also contributes to an explanation of regime survival and collapse by building on explanations surrounding the presence or existence of competing interests, the normative behaviors of state actors and the ability of organizations to create dependence in political systems. In understanding the elements of regime survival, Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán provide a starting point that the paper builds on. Mainwaring and Perez-Linan point out that "if some actors want an immediate change of the policy status quo, the compromise and negotiation demanded in competitive regimes may become unsatisfactory (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014)." In other words, leaders can enact change faster

compared to democracies. When doing so, it allows the leader to appear more effective and makes regime change less necessary. While most of Mainwaring and Pérez-Linan's work utilizes case studies in Latin America, North Korea and Romania serve as cases that support these points within the context of the end of the Cold War. For North Korea, as we will examine, elites favor the status quo because they receive coveted positions in government and privileges that those outside of the inner circle cannot obtain. To keep power, we also examine how the Kim regime is effective at delivering "an immediate change of the policy status quo" without a change in regime leadership or the introduction of a competitive regime (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014).

Within Romania, elites were estranged from the regime towards the end of Ceausescu's life, where Mainwaring and Pérez-Linan examine that "if some actors believe that the incumbent regime will impose irreversible or very costly policy changes to the status quo, they may conclude that the regime is no longer acceptable (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014)." North Korea and Romania serve as excellent case studies for Mainwaring and Pérez-Linan because both regimes are remnants of the Cold War, with one preventing regime change and adapting to demands of actors while the other does not. The normative behaviors of state actors are subsequently addressed in North Korea because demands are addressed without the need for regime change.

The cases of North Korea and Romania also test the importance of organizations because organizations (or parties) in North Korea, within the context of Mainwaring and Pérez-Linan's analysis, "rarely undertake profound changes in their policy positions – and in their attitudes towards dictatorship and democracy (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014)." In the case of Romania, this is not the case as elites and organizations become estranged from the Ceausescu regime due to consumption cutbacks following the opening of trade with the West.

Similarities of the Regimes

To understand why one regime was more successful at deterring economic and geopolitical struggles compared to the other, it's important to compare the two leaders. The regimes in the RSR and DPRK have several similarities that sought to establish themselves as independent and sustainable nations separate from the USSR's control. In fact, Romanian-American Political Scientist Vladimir Tismaneanu points out that Ceausescu was fascinated by Kim Il-sung, which led to his limiting "liberalization and [reimposing] rigid orthodoxy (Tismaneanu)." According to CATO Institute's Doug Bandow, Nicolae Ceausescu sought to "establish the most totalitarian European communist state, while maintaining independence from Moscow (Bandow 2019)". Kim Il-Sung's regime, through an ideology known as Juche, "stresses self-reliance and political independence from super-powers, to triumph over rival factions and obtain absolute political power in the North (Lee et al. 2009)." Similar to Nicolae Ceausescu's desire to establish a populist persona through the banning of opposition factions, maintaining independence from Moscow and utilizing the media and nationalist symbols to develop a personality cult, Kim Il-Sung sought to create a personality cult to ensure his status as the "'cerebral core' (noesu) of the regime (Lee et al. 2009)."

Both regimes also witnessed economic growth at the beginning of their rules. Linden describes Romania's economic performance as a mechanism for Ceausescu to both "increase his power" and reap all the benefits for himself and those closest to him (Linden 1986). Similarly, Kim Il-sung's legitimacy, according to Rudiger Frank and Phillip H. Park, was "based on economic performance to one based on ideological achievements (Frank and Park 2012)." While rapid economic growth was achieved in each country, Kim's mechanism would help him strengthen his effectiveness. With Ceausescu setting ambitious five-year plans and Kim Il-Sung engaging in land reform, Kim's legitimacy would be strengthened more early on by engaging in redistribution and being

viewed as the savior of the North Korean people following Japanese imperialism.

Consolidation of Power through Juche Ideology

For a regime to successfully implement the authoritarian toolkit of ideas and information, the ideas must also be able to withstand the test of time and remain critical to the survival of the regime as seen in the DPRK. Kim-il Sung, from the beginning of his regime in 1948 to the end of his consolidation of power in 1956, has been more successful than Ceausescu at creating a strongman persona through ideology and narratives. Ideology, in its simplest term, is a system of beliefs and ideas that help a nation create and execute policy. Kim Il-sung's persona, as a strongman anti-imperialist leader, is critical to the Juche ideology, which aimed to become the dominant ideology in a fragmented Korea following the defeat of Japan. North Korea "appeared deeply divided along ideological lines, with each faction having its own input into building the newly established state (Lee et al. 2009)."

However, according to Tyler Lutz of Arcadia University, the Juche ideology is framed around a leader whose "parents were important members of the anti-Japanese movement" before organizing and leading anti-Japanese movements of his own (Lutz 2015). As pointed out by Byman and Lind, this ideology is taught in North Korean schools and instills the notion that North Korea was founded and liberated from imperialists thanks to Kim Il-sung. While Byman and Lind correctly point out the importance of national narratives, it should be noted that these narratives and ideology must survive over generations and appear critical to the survival of the nation. The Suryong system "established Kim-il Sung as the 'sun of the nation' and the 'eternal President of the Republic (Byman and Lind 2010)'" while in the RSR a similar system did not exist. With the anti-Japanese sentiment and revolutionary fervor that followed the end of Japanese colonization, the Juche ideology described itself as a revolutionary movement where "the popular masses, as masters, wage

a solemn worldwide struggle for national, class and human emancipation (Exposition of the Juche Idea 1983).” The Korean people, successful at deterring Japanese imperialism through leaders, such as Kim Il-sung, would become independent and chart their own destiny, as a nation, through “great revolutionary ideas and united into an organized political force (Exposition of the Juche Idea 1983).”

Kim’s Stronger Use of Ideology for Consolidation

Byman and Lind’s point concerning the importance of ideology is also seen in North Korea, where it is used to this day, compared to the RSR. The Juche ideology, which is tied to Kim Il-sung, would be critical to the survival of North Korea because it united the country against an enemy that ostensibly still exists and can only be deterred through the leadership of Kim Il-sung. This leadership would be successful through the centralization of power around a strongman persona. This persona was one of a leader who “battled against the Japanese army and contributed to the overthrow of Japanese imperialism, [organized] combat guerrillas, and [presented] reform policies for communist society (Yun 2021).” Citizens were also taught that Kim Il-sung “was the sole commander” of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army, despite the fact that it did not exist and that “the only army waging war against Japan in Korea was the Red Army of the Soviet Union (Tertitskiy 2018).” Whether this was true or not does not matter. As pointed out by Lutz, Kim Il-Sung would be successful at creating a strongman persona fabricated by blatant lies because his guerilla comrades “would not dream of speaking out against any inaccuracies (or outright lies) they might have noticed (Lutz 2015).” Therefore, from the start of North Korea’s existence, the Kim regime was able to fabricate a strongman persona to help unite the people around one individual. The Kim family is able to remain in power because the threat that Kim is protecting North Korea against still exists. This would help Kim il-Sung strengthen the Kim dynasty, which would make it easier for him to choose his son as

his successor, Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il's persona is, therefore, strong, as the father of the North Korean people, as he attempts to maintain control over elites and rally North Korea forward during the famine.

Ceausescu's Weaker Use of Ideology

However, Byman and Lind's toolkit should prioritize a strong ideology, as seen, when comparing the Socialist Republic of Romania to North Korea. Primarily from 1965 to 1968 when consolidating power, Ceausescu used Romanian nationalism and defiance against the Soviet Union to strengthen his strongman persona. However, his method of obtaining control contains weaker national narratives. Ceausescu did want to follow Byman's and Lind's tool of information control by traveling to North Korea and China, where he witnessed "social experiments and cultural conversions" in the hopes of bringing them back to Romania to establish more control (Phillips 2010). Similar to North Korea as an independent Communist state with its own ideology, Ceausescu was able to make the Socialist Republic of Romania independent from other Soviet satellite states by criticizing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

As Allan Chet Emmons describes Romania in the 1990s, "nationalism led Ceausescu to distrust other members of the Warsaw Pact," as well as pursue an "independent path from the Soviet Union in directing Romania's domestic and international policies (Emmons 2016)." However, it is only through this criticism of the Soviet Union and his ability to move up the ranks of the Communist Party that allow him to obtain and remain in power. His leadership did not establish or liberate the RSR and contained no narratives of national salvation. Rather, he exploited an issue that was important at one moment in time. Therefore, Byman and Lind's tool of Ideas and Information within the authoritarian toolbox is used, but the narratives and ideology are not critical to the foundation of the Romanian nation and the continuation of the RSR, especially once the Soviet threat was gone. If there were not a continuing threat from the West outside the country as there was for North Korea,

there was no longer a need to follow these narratives or rely on Ceausescu to protect the RSR against the Soviet threat. While he did serve in the Army, his persona is created because he opposed control by the Soviet Union.

Ideology Less Important in Romania

Ceausescu relies more on party than ideology to gain power and unite Romania. Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee are correct to point out that there is nationalism in both Romania and North Korea. However, their analysis should further note that ideology is not as critical in Romania due to a lack of endemic factions that actually did exist in North Korea following Japanese colonization. Adherence to ideology is less important in Romania and, therefore, less integral to the formation of Ceausescu's leadership. Rather than creating an ideology that becomes integral to the survival of the nation, such as Juche, he obtained power by perpetuating an issue important to "large social segments [that] found themselves stirred and exhilarated by what they saw as Romania's prospects for grandeur, the conductor's defiance of the Soviet controls (Tismaneanu 1999)." Once the Soviet threat is over, however, so is the use of information control. He isn't seen as the father of the nation or as the leader of a guerilla movement as Kim Il-sung was.

The Party Is Weaker than Ideology.

The agent that Ceausescu uses to gain control is also weaker and because he is not guaranteed to remain in power or remain integral to the survival of the nation. Rather than relying more on ideology to gain power and separate himself from factions as Kim did, he served through the control of his party, which is not critical for the survival of the country. Additionally, Kim Il-sung can blame the party rather than himself for famines. The previous leader of the Romanian Communist Party, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, often struggled to maintain control of the party. According to Dennis Deletant, "in the span of ten years, [he] oversaw the removal of three potential rivals

for power (Deletant 1995)” while having to rely on new ways to weaken opposition. Therefore, Ceausescu would also risk facing removal.

Kim’s Strategic Purging for a Unitary System

Before evaluating how Kim Il-sung shared economic gains and power with elites, it’s important to note that both Kim Il-sung and Ceausescu engaged in purges to consolidate their power. Kim Il-sung’s purging and threats, however, was met later with rewards for elites who followed the party line while Ceausescu’s was not. James Person, in his publication on the establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System, notes the purging of “several senior members of the KWP [Korean Workers Party] Central Committee (CC) [when they] began to challenge the policies advanced by Kim Il-sung (Person).” These individuals included Pak Geumcheol, a “fourth ranking member of the KWP CC’s Political Committee,” Ri Hyosoon who was a fifth ranking member, “Kim Doman, Secretary of the Central Committee” and Vice Premier Ko Hyeok (Person). According to Person, Pak Geumcheol “positioned himself as the champion of the North Korean masses” by criticizing the expansion of the “cult of personality surrounding Kim Il-sung (Person).”

Pak and others were trying to either position themselves in the party or escalate the frustrations of the Korean people due to the diminishing living standards following the Korean War. In response, Kim Il-sung “delivered a speech entitled ‘On Improving Party work and Implementing the Decision of the Party Conference (Person).’” The speech is described by Person as “an attack on Pluralism in the Party,” which led to the purging of “Pak Geumcheol, Ri Hyosoon, Kim Doman, and others (Person).” The speech established a Monolithic Ideological System to ensure the party’s success in “lead[ing] the revolution and construction” by “supress[ing] policy debates within the KWP (Person).” Kim Il-sung was able to further consolidate power, in a later speech following the implementation of this system, by “applying the principles of Juche to all fields of

governance (Person).”

Ceausescu’s Purging

Once solidified in power around 1968, Ceausescu was successful at removing elites through the manipulation of the media and the dissolution of the Romanian Communist Party. He later replaced the party apparatus with family members and left no room for elites to receive benefits, positions or blame to protect the regime. According to Vladimir Tismaneanu, “representatives of the party apparatus were replaced by local members of Ceausecu’s immediate and extended family,” such as Ceausecu’s wife, Elena Ceausescu, who served as second-in-command and the decision-maker for the appointment of chief personnel (Tismaneanu 1991).

Additionally, the party apparatus that was present at the beginning of Ceausescu’s term would further assist his consolidation of power. As pointed out by Mainwaring and Perez-Linan, “unions, militaries, business associations, and other organizational actors also create continuity in normative preferences toward democracy and dictatorship and in policy preferences (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014)” By incorporation, rather than replacing, the party apparatus, norms can be created that finds Ceausescu remaining in power over a long period of time. While the present-day Kim regime finds itself with Kim Yo-jong, the sister of Kim Jong-un, as effectively second-in-command, elites from the military receive positions in government and privileges unlike in Romania. Not only were underground markets not allowed in Romania for elites as tolerated in North Korea, “Party leaders were humiliated, and the apparatus was increasingly upset with this catastrophic course,” leading them to “hate the man they had long adored (Tismaneanu 1991).” Ceausescu would have further difficulty appeasing elites that were closest to him when faced with debt due to economic engagement with the west.

Class Systems

Before examining how North Korea gains loyalty from elites, it’s

important to explore the system that provides the mechanisms for rewarding those most threatening to the regime's survival. As explained by Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch, the Songbun system was established "between 1957 and 1960 as North Korea founder Kim Il-sung consolidated power (Robertson 2016)." It is a system used to separate the elites from others in North Korea in order for the Kim regime to consolidate power. Those of the "core" were "closest to Kim, their relatives, and anti-Japanese resistance fighters (Robertson 2016)." The "wavering" class was those in the middle, comprised of "peasants, laborers, and workers [that] were lifted up from the bottom of the social order (Robertson 2016)."

Those of the "hostile" class included people who "opposed Kim's ascent to power or collaborated with South Korea or Japan (Robertson 2016)." Thanks to this class system and the rewarding of elites, the government, during the crisis in the 1990s, "redirected scarce rations to North Koreans with good Songbun, such as party officials and members of the military (Robertson 2016)." In Romania, however, a class system did not exist to reward those most loyal to the regime and punish those who threaten it. As we examine later, Ceausescu had less capacity to shield people from economic setbacks and did not receive emergency aid due to the RSR's independence from the USSR and adoption of western practices. Elites, when faced not only with the purging of their positions but also having to face the effects of economic turmoil, were incentivized to demand regime change

Kim Il-sung Shares Economic Gains

Despite Kim Il-sung's purging of elites to ensure a unitary system, economic gains were shared during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During the famine, the use of force and the rewarding of elites were critical to the continuation of the Kim regime, with dissent prevented among citizens out of fear of repercussions, and a revolution was seen as less desirable for elites who receive benefits first. The North Korean famine, from 1994 to 1998, would be a major challenge to

the Kim regime as citizens could turn against officials and elites could exploit the famine for control. While dissent is more well-known in North Korea, it's the rewarding of elites, during this period, that differentiates North Korea from Romania to help it survive. As pointed out by Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "dissent is detected through an elaborate network of informants working for multiple internal security agencies," with punishments imposed by individuals and their families (Byman and Lind 2010). Less commonly acknowledged and somewhat antithetical to Ceausescu's consolidation of power, however, was the rewarding of elites. Elites "receive more and better food, in addition to the most desirable jobs working for the regime (Byman and Lind 2010)" while Ceausescu humiliated them and controlled the party after installing himself and other family members as leaders of the party. Therefore, there was no opportunity for him to create underground economies to keep challengers at ease.

The creation of separate economies formed "a small elite economy [that sustained] Kim Jong-il and the core party members, a group that may comprise as many as a million (out of 23 Million) North Koreans (Oh and Hassig 1999)." During the famine, as noted by Mike Aaltola, who analyzes the distribution of aid as a means for political persuasion, the international community struggled to supervise the distribution of food aid during the famine, which raised questions as to "whether or not a significant quantity of the aid was being diverted to feed the North Korean elite and army (Aaltola 1999)." The distribution of food aid perpetuated the willingness of the regime to reward elites to prevent a coup. This is an important risk that Mainwaring and Perez-Linan examine, as "differences in policy preferences lead to conflict about the regime when some actors conclude that their policy goals cannot be pursued under the incumbent regime, and that the cost of such a limitation is unacceptable (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014)." In other words, if elites were not given food additional aid, these actors could conclude that receiving food aid, which in this case serves as a "policy goal,"

can only be achieved if rebellion against the Kim regime occurs. Romania, on the other hand, not only does not receive food aid to reward elites first but fails to reward those outside of the Ceausescu family to remain in power, resulting in actors desiring a new regime.

Kim Deflecting Blame

An additional benefit to Kim should be acknowledged within Byman and Lind's toolkit of Coup-proofing of elites. Despite the need to reward elites in order to retain control, the Kim regime was masterful at appointing elites to coveted positions because it places them in the line of fire when famine or internal struggles occur. He strictly follows Byman and Lind's tool of Coup-proofing institutions but exposes a useful benefit that should be added. During the famine, the military became more influential as "the only functioning organization in North Korean society," which caused Kim Jong-il to rely on the military "for the survival of the regime (Lee et al. 2009)." However, by integrating a powerful organ of North Korea into the politburo, the military could share blame for the famine. According to a North Korean Review article, "Kim Jong-il blamed the party for the failure of government functions" despite "popular support for Kim Jong-il [decreasing] since the mid-1990s (Lee et al. 2009)."

As recently as last year, we've seen Kim Jong-un's announcement, during a ruling party meeting, that "the county's policies in the past five years [have] ended in abject failure (Kuhn 2021)" while not necessarily taking direct responsibility. Additionally, in November of 2020, "the politburo harshly criticized the economic guidance organs for failing to provide scientific guidance for economic tasks (Cha 2020)." Therefore, there is an additional benefit to the Coup-proofing strategy that should be pointed out in Byman and Lind's toolkit. Elites cannot only be appeased by positions of power to prevent a coup but also placed in lines of fire, as scapegoats, to protect the regime from blame. Ceausescu, by centering political control around himself and his family, was seen as responsible for Romania's economic misfortunes and, therefore,

unable to not only co-opt elites but also shared blame and could not absolve himself from responsibility. Ceausescu did not have the ability to blame the country's economic struggles on the party, thereby making himself responsible. The consolidation of political influence in the party for the military also allows North Korea to switch to a military-first doctrine that continues to this day and has led to the manipulation of the geopolitical environment.

DPRK Enjoys an Asymmetric Alliance

During the DPRK's economic struggles from the late 1980s to late 1990s, the regime was protected from the international system because it enjoyed an asymmetric alliance with China and viewed any trade with the U.S. or the west as a threat to its existence. Best described by Sangit Sarita Dwivedi, this relationship in which the DPRK finds itself is "essential to maintain economic relations with China in order to manage internal economic activities (Dwivedi 2012)." Unlike the Soviet Union's willingness to allow the RSR to become independent and eventually form economic ties with the West, China finds its relationship with North Korea as critical to national security. The relationship between the DPRK and PRC is "based on common ideology, anti-Japanese sentiment, and anti-U.S. sentiment (Dwivedi 2012)," as well as a geopolitical strategy that protects the PRC from a bordering U.S. ally.

Therefore, China "is expected to seek the maintenance and expansion of its influence on North Korea through food and energy assistance (Dwivedi 2012)." This provides the DPRK more leeway to reward elites, during economic turmoil, because China would provide aid to fill gaps in production. While the amount of aid given by China is unclear, Jiyoun Park and Eunsuk Kim note that there was a spike in aid from China following the famine. Just three years after the famine, "US\$348 million worth of official grants were given to North Korea, but this plunged to US\$248 million given in 2000 (Park and Eunsuk 2017)." Ceausescu, however, did not receive aid, demanded more production to pay off debt and faced reforms from

a working class growing in power.

Ceausescu Engaging in Reforms To His Demise

The Soviet Union did not value its relationship with Romania the same way China valued its relationship with the DPRK. Romania was successful at becoming independent from Russia, through de-Stalinization and anti-Sovietism, as described by Romanian-American political scientist Vladimir Tismaneanu. This led to Romania's economic independence and pressure to abide by economic agreements, which place resources away from serving elites and others to prevent rebellion. Ceausescu introduced capitalist tendencies into the RSR, which damaged his ability to retain power over the economic system to reward elites. When the RSR faced an economic setback from the 1970s to late 1980s, Ceausescu was unable to protect those who hold the greatest threat to his regime from economic setbacks.

As pointed out by Linden, Ceausescu engaged in economic ties with the west, which opened the country to risks, such as falling into debt with other countries or economic institutions.⁶ Unlike the DPRK, the RSR did not have a trade partner that would support and prevent the country from collapsing. Therefore, the RSR began “participating in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1971” and “joined the IMF and World Bank in 1972 (Linden 1986).” However, after the second oil crisis, “Ceausescu began to see the Romanian economy [become] hostage to the very economic forces that had helped it develop” by acquiring debt from institutions, such as the IMF (Linden 1986). By opening up the economy to western institutions, Ceausescu was also placing the RSR at risk of having to pay back the debt. This would cause Ceausescu to demand higher production quotas, at a time when the regime experienced its “first serious labor strike [which] brought into question the regime’s ability to push the work force to ever higher levels of production (Linden 1986).” These difficulties were present because Ceausescu was opening the country to western institutions

and giving workers more power in “financing and planning and in the distribution of the profits of enterprises (Linden 1986).” While Ceausescu was trying to control quotas to pay off debt, the government was already losing control when workers sought self-management. Despite a willingness to engage in trade with capitalist countries, Ceausescu was not ready to concede power. For example, Ronald H. Linden points out that despite “workers’ self-management [that] was introduced as part of a broad economic reform,” the reforms were difficult to implement because there was “an increase in direct party influence either through cadres, directives, or both (Linden 1986).” Unlike Kim Il-sung, Ceausescu had to move forward with reforms and subsequently relinquish power once the country opened up to the West.

Economic Gains Unstable in Romania

As mentioned early regarding their similarities, both regimes witnessed economic success in the early stages of their existence; however, the DPRK was effective at decentralizing enterprises to encourage productivity while retaining control over the elite’s access to products. As pointed out by Joseph S. Chung, “many Western economists agree that highly centralized planning is positively advantageous during the early period of economic development (Chung 1972).” This construct applies to the DPRK, Romania and Soviet satellite states. According to Linden, industry in RSR “was the most rapid in the region” in which “net material product grew by more than 11 percent per year” from 1970 to 1975 (Linden 1986). This, however, was due to a reliance “on its own resources” while “financial demands were met by restricting consumption” with only “8.4 percent of all funds invested in industry to the production of consumer goods (Linden 1986).” This growth also relied on “an expanding supply of imported machinery and raw materials, both of which came in increasing amounts from capitalist countries (Linden 1986).” In the DPRK, workers were motivated for growth through “reorganizations in the [Machine Tractor Systems] in 1960 and 1966

[which] provided, among other things, added incentives to tractor operators by paying them according to their contributions (Chung 1972).” This was soon followed by the decentralization of local industry and rewards to workers who “show reduction and economic utilization of inputs (Chung 1972).” However, despite decentralization and “considerations of locational economics,” the party still had control over “local agricultural decision-making (Chung 1972).”

Elites Are a Threat

Elites in the DPRK are more likely to toe the party line and remain loyal to the Kim regime because the regime is better equipped with its ideology, cult of personality and support from China. Romania fell because protestors were able to gain the support of elites. As pointed out by Steven D. Roper, “Ceausescu’s circulation of party members, extreme nepotism, and co-option of the military was resented among the ruling elite (Roper 1994).” Ceausescu had alienated elites, unlike Kim, so much that “in essence, Ceausescu had removed all the political alternatives to revolution (Roper 1994).” A class system also did not exist in the RSR, in which case certain people would prefer revolution more than others. In the case of the RSR, everyone suffered, including the elite. Within the Kim regime, not only is disloyalty to the party punished, elites had no other option but to either support the regime, lose their privileges or become a member of the lowest “hostile” class.

Conclusions

In conclusion, my analysis and argument as to why North Korea’s regime survived are centered around Daniel Byman’s and Jennifer Lind’s tools of controlling ideas and information, as well as the rewarding of elites. Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee’s findings show how the North Korean and Romanian regimes both used ideology while also including the use of ideology, which was clearly stronger in North Korea. The ideas and information tool should include the

importance of a strong ideology and persona that can survive the test of time for the tool to remain useful. The ideas should be centered around an issue that is critical to the continuing survival of the nation, rather than one that becomes unimportant once the threat is gone. Ideology in this case is more important than party because it serves as a way of thinking and helps create an independent state out of an environment of fragmented turmoil. An additional benefit of Coup-proofing of institutions is also found when Kim is able to blame party officials or economic organs for difficulties facing the regime, both during the famine and into the future with the COVID-19 pandemic. The co-opting of elites and survival of a regime can also be insured, during economic turmoil, thanks to asymmetric alliances that keep regimes afloat.

Additionally, a strong ideology that is anti-American and anti-West, as we see in our case with the DPRK, allows a regime to pursue without question a military-first policy. This study serves as a contribution to comparative methodology and politics by comparing regimes that began in a similar fashion, yet resulted in different outcomes. While the paper relies on a small-N sample, we compare the various tools within the authoritarian toolkit and how each regime utilized them by following Arend Lijphart's examination of the comparative method. The limitations to this paper range from the small-N sample we utilize and the confounding variables within each country that could play a greater role in the longevity of each regime's existence. Additionally, this paper does not engage in an analysis on the difference in cultures in Romania and North Korea, which may play a greater role in determining how each regime withstands the test of time. Further analysis can build off of this comparison to examine cultural differences, comparison with other authoritarian regimes from around the world and external factors that play a greater role than examined in this paper. The focus of this study was a comparison of the regimes of North Korea and Romania and the different decisions each regime made to maintain power. These differences in how the regimes established their control

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through either party or ideology, their value of elite loyalty and opportunities in an asymmetric relationship are why the Kim regime in North Korea still exists while Ceausescu's is a page in history.

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