

THE POWER AND AUTONOMY OF A SMALL STATE: A REVIEW



Adrian-Eugen PREDA, Hegemony and national elites: Romania and the Great Powers during the 20th Century (Hegemonie și elite naționale: România și marile puteri în secolul XX), Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024, 378 pages¹.

A deep-held Romanian tradition states that the nation's fate is determined by its relationship with the great powers of the day. In recent decades, as the study of International Relations has developed as an autonomous field, a different idea has emerged, namely that small powers are more important than previously thought (A. Miroiu 2005). Between these interpretations, Adrian-Eugen Preda's work argues that the relationship is flexible, contextual and involves two sides, from the hegemon to the smaller actor and vice versa. I recommend the book to any reader interested in world politics, Eastern Europe, Romania's history or even current affairs².

The author draws on the International Relations (IR) literature, which he expands by using economic institutionalism. The inclusive political institutions are about pluralism, equality of chance and strong states (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015, 94-98) and they lead to similar economic institutions, which comprise property rights, impartial justice, honest administration, and so on (Ibidem, 88-91). The main method is the longitudinal, historic case-study, a methodological trend which retained its importance in the last decades. For Adrian-Eugen Preda, there are two main partners, the hegemon and local elites, whose reciprocal relationship forms the central focus of the book.

¹ Image source: <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/4295.pdf>

² To state my bias, the author is a personal friend of mine, and I am mentioned in the acknowledgements section. He also suggested the terms loose and tight hegemony as translations for the Romanian equivalents.

The first influence is top-down and it depends on the form of rule. Following the Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's thesis on the influence of inclusive and extractive institutions, Adrian-Eugen Preda distinguishes between tight and loose hegemony (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015)³. The former is the classical interventionist model, where the dominant power controls both the foreign and the domestic politics and structures of the minor power, relying more on force and coercion. The latter is based on influence and ideas, and focuses more on foreign affairs (Preda 2024, 31-69).

The flexibility of this relationship is highlighted in the analysis of Romania's past. Out of the five case-studies, the German hegemony during the occupation in World War I (WWI), the one during most of World War II (WWII), and during the Soviet occupation was tight (Preda 2024, 166-167, 285-287). There are commonalities between them, but only the communist regime directly changed Romanian's political elite, while the others found segments of the ruling class willing to collaborate (Ibidem, 285-287). Adrian-Eugen Preda points out that, even in this case, starting from the 1960s, there was a growing tendency of autonomy (Ibidem).

The lax hegemony is less rigid by definition. The author takes into account the French hegemony during the interwar era of the 20th century and the post-Cold War bilateral enlargement and policies of NATO and the EU (Preda 2024, 205-206, 314-325). They relied more on diplomacy and ideology, even if force was not absent, as a guarantee. An extra in this study is that the condominium between Berlin and Vienna in the late 19th century and early 20th century also falls into this category (Ibidem, 121-139).

The second influence is the one that flows from the small power to the hegemon. Adrian-Eugen Preda reviews the theories of alliances from the International Relations literature, focusing mostly on the dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning (Preda 2024, 87-105). In this context, it is about either allying against a threatening power or joining it, and other possibilities are also mentioned (pass the buck, transcend, evade) (Ibidem). The author discovers that, between 1913 and 2000, the Romanian elites more frequently bandwagoned (Ibidem, 327-339).

Let us look at the most controversial case. Before WWI, Romania was part of the Triple Alliance, alongside Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy. When the war began in 1914, Bucharest proclaimed its neutrality and negotiated with both sides. In 1916, the new king, Ferdinand I, along with Prime-Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu and the majority of the political elite, decided to join the Entente. After two costly military campaigns and a controversial peace, the state rejoined the combat at the end of 1918 and gained a significant increase in both population and territory (Preda 2024, 119-168).

³ Inclusive political institutions are about pluralism, equality of chance and strong states (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015, 94-98). They lead to inclusive economic institutions, which include property rights, impartial justice, honest administration, and so on (Ibidem, 88-91). According to the literature, it is doubtful that Romania was inclusive from an institutional point of view before it started the process of Euro-Atlantic integration (Murgescu 2010, Miroiu 2016). There were tendencies, but with many limitations and failures, and some problems still persist. This restricts the author's ability to test part of his thesis.



The literature is divided on this point, and the author offers a specific interpretation, based on his theory. Adrian-Eugen Preda considers that these decisions reflect a form of bandwagoning, motivated by territorial goals and the expectation of Entente's victory (Preda 2024, 157-159). For him, the initial position of neutrality is a manifestation of elite's autonomy, and reflects a growing departure from the Triple Alliance. The decision to enter the war in 1916 was a culmination of a longer process of political realignment, in which national ideals played a significant role, alongside negotiations and pressures from both sides (Ibidem, 165-166).

Another interesting case is the interwar period. At the end of World War I, France had the strongest active ground force and the author considers it the hegemon, at least in terms of its relationship with Romania. Towards the end of 1930s, both Nazi Germany and Soviet Union pushed an assertive revisionist agenda. After Paris's capitulation and the territorial demands that followed, Bucharest entered the political, and especially military sphere of control of Berlin (Preda 2024, 169-240).

The author states that Romania went from a junior partner in a lax hegemony to a satellite in a tight domination. Paris relied on a partnership with Great Britain, promoted the League of Nations, supported a network of Alliances in Eastern Europe, but with many hesitations and it was affected by internal divides and a defensive strategy (Preda 2024, 169-206). In Adrian-Eugen Preda's opinion, Paris was not very interested in Romania's domestic affairs and it kept its distance from Bucharest (Ibidem). Nazi Germany interfered in both, even if it was less moved by ideology, in this case, and worked with the local leaders, who changed the political regime three times, in 1938, 1940 and 1941, pursued anti-Semitic policies and took part in the Holocaust (Preda 2024, 207-240).

The author argues that hegemony is a spectrum that leads to an unavoidable ambiguity (Preda 2024, 112). Force is a necessity in world politics, thus the great powers can impose their will, while the smaller actors may adapt, manipulate and sometimes, deny or oppose the stronger actors⁴. It is not clear when and how this happens, since even tight dominion can be outmaneuvered from inside, as it was the case of August 23, 1944, or Nicolae Ceausescu's policy show. The IR research is still unclear at this point, mostly arguing that the smaller powers are not very important and Adrian-Eugen Preda acknowledges that his findings cannot be generalized (Ibidem, 115-118).

Another ambiguity refers to the relationship between external rule and internal institutions. It is unclear whether loose hegemony always leads to inclusive domestic institutions, or if tight dominion means dictatorship and economic abuse within the small power. Totalitarian powers such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union supported or imposed local strongmen and repressive regime, while Imperial Germany during the World War I occupation accepted some degree of liberalization.

⁴ An objection to the whole trend which emphasizes the autonomy of small powers is that the major actor set the terms of the interaction and that is contradictory to rely on power as the main variable (Radu Ungureanu, personal communication).



The loose variant was sometimes related to more inclusive regimes (Romania after 1995), and sometimes, to extractive institutions (most of the interwar period).

The last ambiguity concerns the role of local elites. Adrian-Eugen Preda argues that they decide both in terms of foreign affairs and domestic institutions, unless the hegemon intervenes directly (Preda 2024, 71-80). Nevertheless, in moments such as 1914, 1916, or 1940, they either followed the public opinion, or they were pushed away. Without a more general societal perspective, there are questions regarding the source and the limits of elite's agency, even in smaller powers⁵.

Thus, hegemony is a flexible relationship: small powers have more agency than their name suggests, but this ability has clear limits. This is the main idea I have gathered from this work, and it holds true even today, when the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the rise of China and the changes in US domestic and foreign attitudes pushed the theme back on the international relations. The book main drawback is an overly ambitious attempt to integrate external and domestic structures and events. This does not affect much the quality of its main arguments and the usefulness of a broad perspective for the reader interested in Romania's past and present, or in understanding regional diplomacy and security.

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Mihai ZODIAN, PhD*

⁵ This is similar to the arguments made against neoclassical realism, which state that this perspective relies to ad hoc factors taken from domestic politics (A. Miroiu, *Despărţirea de realism sau despre sărăcia realismului neoclasic* 2007).

*** Mihai ZODIAN, PhD, is Researcher at the Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies within the “Carol I” National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: zodian.vladimir@unap.ro**