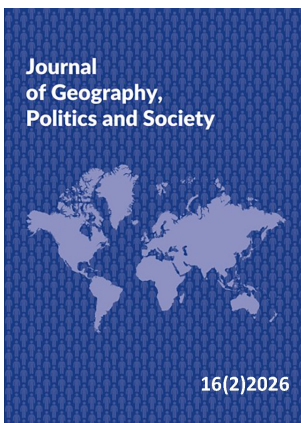




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ARCHETYPAL MECHANISMS OF MICHELS' IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY IN POLITICAL PARTIES VIEWED AS MISSIONARY ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The article examines the archetypal mechanisms that may contribute to the operation of Robert Michels' iron law of oligarchy in political parties analytically viewed as missionary organisations in Henry Mintzberg's sense. It argues that oligarchization should be interpreted not only through bureaucratization, the professionalization of leadership, information asymmetry, and procedural control, but also through group-dynamic and archetypal mechanisms. Within the proposed theoretical framework, ranking conflicts in primary groups may facilitate the emergence of leader–subordinate relations, the delegation of responsibility to leaders, the sacralization of leadership, the ritualization of democratic procedures, and the personalisation of political institutions. These mechanisms are interpreted as factors that can deform the standardization of norms, generate moral duality, and gradually displace the statutory democratic structure with an informal hierarchy. The approach is theoretical and interpretive rather than empirically causal; further research should therefore test the proposed mechanisms comparatively and examine whether variable organisational structures can limit the reproduction of oligarchical power.

Keywords: iron law of oligarchy; political parties; missionary organisation; archetypal mechanisms; group dynamics; organisational oligarchization; variable organisational structure.

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1. Introduction

One of the major problems of contemporary democratic society is the declining capacity of its key governance subsystems to perform the functions of strategic self-governance. This primarily concerns political parties as organisations through which citizens delegate the representation of their interests, formulate political alternatives, participate in elections and, in the event of electoral victory, influence the formation of a parliamentary majority and government.

In a developed democratic society, such organisations should not merely mobilize voters or compete for power. They should also formulate visions of the future, develop strategies for their implementation, organize the collective activity of members and supporters, and contribute to multilevel strategic governance. In this analytical sense, political parties may display important characteristics of what Mintzberg later described as the missionary configuration: coordination through shared ideology, values, identity, and the standardization of norms (Mintzberg, 1989). Political

parties can therefore be examined as institutional environments in which collective, supra-individual intelligence may emerge, understood here as a collective capacity that exceeds the cognitive resources of any single participant and enables many participants to contribute simultaneously to the interpretation of complex current issues, emerging challenges, and long-term problems of social development.

In practice, however, political organisations may lose part of this functional capacity. One classical explanation is Robert Michels' iron law of oligarchy, according to which the development of large organisations tends to be accompanied by a concentration of intra-organisational power in the hands of a leadership core, the professionalization of leadership, and increasing passivity among the broader membership (Michels, 1962).

In this context, intra-organisational power should be understood not only as the formal right to adopt or approve decisions, but also as the capacity to set the agenda, initiate, formulate, discuss, coordinate, adopt, and ensure the implementation of a wide range of organisational and political decisions. The concentration of this capacity within a narrow leadership core is accompanied by a sharp narrowing of the circle of persons involved in these processes. As a result, the organisation loses its collective agency, the quality of its strategic thinking declines, the range of issues it is able to identify, comprehend, and include on the agenda becomes narrower, and democratic procedures turn into formal or ritualized mechanisms for legitimizing the decisions of an already established hierarchy.

From a broader research perspective, this problem is relevant not only to the analysis of political parties in established democracies, but also to the study of political organisations in regions where personalist leadership, patron-client relations, clan-based networks, and the symbolic role of the leader significantly affect the functioning of public governance. In particular, within the framework of Caucasus regional studies, the proposed approach can be used to analyse how missionary or ideologically charged political organisations combine formal democratic procedures with informal hierarchies, the personalisation of power, and the sacralization of leadership.

The problem of party oligarchization was classically formulated by Robert Michels as the "iron law of oligarchy" (Michels, 1962). Its central claim is that the development of mass organisations creates strong tendencies towards the concentration of intra-organisational power in the hands of a

leadership core, the professionalization of the party apparatus, information asymmetry between leaders and rank-and-file members, and declining direct participation by the broader membership. In this sense, intra-party democracy need not disappear formally; rather, it may progressively lose substantive content and become a mechanism for legitimizing an already established hierarchy.

Subsequent studies of party organisation developed different aspects of this problem. Maurice Duverger analyzed the organisational types of political parties, in particular the differences between cadre and mass parties, as well as the role of the party apparatus in shaping the internal structure of power (Duverger, 1954). Angelo Panebianco examined the processes of party institutionalization, the autonomization of party leadership, and the consolidation of organisational resources in the hands of leadership groups (Panebianco, 1988).

Richard Katz and Peter Mair, in their concept of the cartel party, showed that contemporary parties may increasingly distance themselves from their membership base and integrate with state resources, thereby turning into semi-closed elite formations (Katz & Mair, 1995). Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman, analysing the problem of democracy in organisations, showed that oligarchization is not absolutely irreversible, although its containment requires internal competition, active membership, organized opposition, and independent channels of communication (Lipset et al., 1956). Darcy Leach, in turn, proposed a more precise distinction between hierarchy and oligarchy itself, emphasizing that the problem lies not in the mere existence of leadership, but in the entrenchment of self-reproducing, difficult-to-control minority power (Leach, 2005).

Thus, the scholarly literature has described the organisational, apparatus-level, procedural, and resource mechanisms of oligarchization quite extensively: bureaucratization, the professionalization of leadership, delegation, agenda control, information asymmetry, the centralization of personnel decisions, and the transformation of organisational goals. At the same time, the group-dynamic and archetypal dimensions of this process remain much less developed: how leadership positions crystallize in small groups within a political organisation; how ranking conflict generates hierarchy; how the repeated reproduction of such interaction situations at different organisational levels leads to the concentration of power; and why members of the organisation often perceive this

concentration as natural and appropriate, offering little resistance to it.

To deepen this analysis, it is useful to turn to Henry Mintzberg's theory of organisational configurations. In *Structure in Fives*, Mintzberg's original synthesis centred on five basic configurations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1983). In his later expanded framework, he additionally elaborated the missionary and political configurations; in the missionary organisation, ideology becomes the key organisational component and the standardization of norms the principal coordination mechanism (Mintzberg, 1989). Real organisations are rarely pure examples of a single configuration and may instead combine several structural logics.

The missionary configuration is particularly relevant to the present analysis because it is organized around ideology, a shared mission, and a system of values and norms that integrate organisational members without relying exclusively on direct supervision or material incentives (Mintzberg, 1989). Standardization of norms aligns behaviour through shared beliefs, identities, and a sense of belonging to a common cause. Political parties should not be equated automatically with missionary organisations; however, parties with strong ideological missions, collective identities, and value-based membership can be analysed as organisations with pronounced missionary characteristics.

In its idealized form, the missionary configuration is relatively decentralized because coordination is achieved primarily through shared norms and mission rather than continuous direct supervision. This creates the central theoretical puzzle addressed in the article: why do political parties with strong missionary characteristics so often become centralized over time, develop oligarchical leadership cores, and move towards a leader-centred simple structure despite their formal commitment to shared values and internal democracy?

Within the framework proposed here, such a transition is interpreted as the hybridization of a missionary-type organisation under the pressure of oligarchizing mechanisms. A political party may begin as a relatively decentralized community integrated by mission, values, and shared identity. Over time, intensive interaction in primary groups, repeated status conflicts, informal leadership formation, and the concentration of organisational resources may shift the balance towards a simple, leader-centred

structure. In this process, the mission may become increasingly identified with the leader, while the standardization of norms is gradually deformed: practical rules of behaviour become shaped less by declared values than by proximity to the leadership core, personal loyalty, and position within an informal hierarchy.

As a result, the phenomenon of moral duality, or double morality, emerges as a consequence of the split between the declared norms of the missionary organisation and the actual rules of its internal functioning. At the level of official ideology, the organisation continues to proclaim norms of service to the mission, equality, participation, collective responsibility, and democratic decision-making. At the level of everyday practice, however, other informal norms gain increasing importance: loyalty to the leadership core, avoidance of criticism of the leader, acceptance of ritualized procedures, orientation toward informal channels of influence, and subordination to organisational discipline. Members of the organisation may not perceive this contradiction as a moral problem, since it is justified by the need to preserve unity, protect the mission, counteract "internal enemies", or ensure the effectiveness of action. Thus, not only the party structure is deformed, but also the very mechanism of the standardization of norms: instead of integrating members around a common mission, it begins to ensure their adaptation to an already established oligarchical hierarchy.

The mechanisms through which oligarchization may deform the standardization of norms in missionary-type political organisations and generate moral duality therefore remain insufficiently explained. Existing approaches describe bureaucratic, procedural, and resource-based manifestations of oligarchy convincingly, but they do not fully explain why members may perceive the concentration of power as natural, why the mission can become personified in the leader, why criticism of concentrated power may be framed as a threat to the common cause, and why formally democratic procedures may survive after losing much of their original participatory meaning.

The aim of the article is to examine the archetypal mechanisms that may contribute to the operation of Michels' iron law of oligarchy in political parties viewed as organisations with missionary characteristics, and to clarify their possible role in deforming the standardization of norms, generating moral duality, and displacing statutory democratic structures through informal hierarchies.

2. Research Methodology

The study employs the methodology of archetypal metaspaces, understood by the author as a transdisciplinary modelling environment for integrating models of behavioural choice in social systems (Plakhtiy, 2026). Within this framework, concepts from organisation theory, social psychology, group dynamics, and conflict studies are brought together through their common focus on recurring situations of social interaction. The framework links organisational-structural, social-psychological, and archetypal levels of analysis, with particular attention to group-dynamic processes in the primary groups of political organisations. Oligarchization is therefore analysed not only as an institutional or procedural deformation but also as a possible multilevel process through which hierarchical patterns of interaction emerge, become consolidated, and acquire legitimacy. The methodological orientation is also consistent with the work of the Ukrainian School of Archetypes, including the long-term theoretical and monitoring research synthesized by E. Afonin and A. Martynov. Their work supports the use of archetypal interpretation for analysing social change, collective meanings, and transformations of public consciousness (Afonin & Martynov, 2019).

In this article, archetypes are neither treated as mystical or metaphysical entities nor presented as empirically verified psychic mechanisms. Instead, archetypal pairs are used as interpretive constructs for describing recurrent psychosocial schemas of positions, expectations, values, and behavioural dispositions in interaction. Accordingly, the pair “leader–subordinate” denotes a relational schema of mutual expectations concerning power, subordination, responsibility, and protection that may extend beyond formally assigned roles. Its analytical correlation with the pair “Father–Child” highlights a possible paternalistic dimension of such interaction, in which subordinates may delegate to a leader not only decision-making authority but also part of the responsibility for uncertainty, risk, and group cohesion.

The link between organisational and archetypal levels is conceptualized through recurring interaction situations. Organisational structure does not determine behaviour mechanically; rather, it repeatedly creates conditions for coordination, subordination, competition, conflict, delegation, accountability, and dependence on leadership. These recurring configurations place participants in specific relational positions and may thereby favour the

activation of particular interpretive schemas. Organisation theory describes the structural conditions under which such situations recur, whereas the archetypal approach is used here to interpret how participants may experience, justify, and legitimize them.

This framework enables the analysis to focus on micro-, meso-, and macro-level mechanisms that may contribute to the reproduction of oligarchization. It does not replace organisational or social-psychological explanation; rather, it supplements those approaches by offering hypotheses about why concentrated power may be perceived as natural, appropriate, or morally justified. The propositions developed below should therefore be understood as theoretical and interpretive claims requiring empirical testing, not as established causal regularities.

3. Results and Discussion

For analytical purposes, a political party with missionary characteristics can be regarded as a complex multilevel social system in which macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of interaction are distinguished. At the macro level, the organisation acts as a collective actor in relation to society, public authorities, other organisations, and the political environment. It is primarily at this level that political science describes general organisational properties and patterns, including the tendencies captured by Michels’ iron law of oligarchy.

Michels’ iron law identifies a macro-organisational tendency towards the concentration of intra-organisational power in a leadership core. Classical and contemporary explanations emphasize bureaucratization, professionalization of the party apparatus, delegation, information asymmetry, procedural control, centralization of personnel decisions, and the transformation of organisational goals. These explanations are indispensable, but they leave open the question of how hierarchical relations are reproduced and normalized in recurrent face-to-face interaction within the organisation.

At the meso level, a missionary organisation appears as a set of subdivisions, governing bodies, working teams, local cells, informal coalitions, and communication networks. It is at this level that interaction takes place both between subdivisions and within them; that the actual distribution of influence is formed; that leadership cores emerge; that informal rules of behaviour become consolidated; and that it gradually becomes clear who is actually able to shape the agenda, initiate

decisions, control communication channels, and mobilize support.

However, the micro level is of decisive importance, since primary groups are continuously formed at this level. They emerge both within individual subdivisions and between them — as working groups, initiative teams, informal milieus, situational coalitions, communication circles, or leadership groups. Each such group is unique in its composition, duration, reasons for emergence, and specific content of interaction. Nevertheless, all of them are subject to the general regularities of group dynamics.

Classical models of small-group development describe recurring phases of formation, conflict or “storming”, norm formation, effective performance, and, in later formulations, adjournment (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). For the present analysis, the conflict phase is particularly relevant because status, influence, coalition formation, and the direction of collective action often become contested during this stage. Conflict is therefore treated here not merely as a destructive deviation but as a possible structure-forming process through which roles, status positions, and channels of influence become more clearly differentiated.

Within the proposed model, conflict may also function as a mechanism of status ranking. During confrontation, participants reveal different capacities to mobilize support, frame the situation, maintain coalitions, and influence collective action. Some participants may consequently acquire informal leadership positions, while others assume follower, peripheral, or auxiliary roles. The initial pattern of relatively horizontal interaction may thus give way to more hierarchical relations such as “leader–subordinate”, “leader–followers”, or “centre of influence–support group”. This is an interpretive proposition to be tested empirically rather than a universal law of small-group development.

This process may be described as the structural crystallization of the primary group — a transition from a relatively amorphous or horizontal configuration of interactions to a more defined, hierarchically ordered form. Importantly, such crystallization does not necessarily coincide with formal positions. It may occur even without the official institutionalization of power, if participants in fact begin to orient themselves toward a particular leader, coordinate their actions with him or her, accept his or her interpretations of the situation, or recognise his or her ability to determine the direction of group behaviour.

In a political party with missionary characteristics, repeated processes of this kind may acquire systemic

significance because primary groups emerge continuously at different organisational levels. The same participant may belong to several such groups or influence them indirectly. If that participant is repeatedly recognised as a leader across different interaction settings, local influence may accumulate and become networked. The article describes this process as cumulative legitimation of leadership: informal recognition in multiple primary groups may create favourable conditions for later formal authority through statutory procedures.

From this perspective, hierarchy in a political party may arise not only from statutory design, leaders' personal ambitions, or bureaucratization, but also from repeated processes of status differentiation in primary groups. Formal democratic structures may provide for congresses, conferences, general assemblies, elected bodies, and collegial decision-making, while an informal hierarchy of influence develops beneath them. The proposition is not that such hierarchy necessarily emerges in every party, but that recurrent group dynamics can constitute one mechanism through which it does.

This is where the structural trap of the traditional political party becomes apparent. At the macro level, it declares collective agency, internal democracy, and the accountability of leadership to the broader membership. At the micro and meso levels, however, its actual group dynamics continuously generate leadership positions, leadership cores, and personalised centres of influence. As a result, the democratic form of the organisation is gradually undermined by its own microdynamics: the agency of large statutory bodies is narrowed, while actual decision-making agency shifts to small leadership groups or a single leader.

Michels' macro-level thesis can therefore be supplemented by a micro- and meso-level hypothesis: party oligarchization may be reinforced by repeated hierarchical structuring in primary groups, the cumulative accumulation of leadership status, and the gradual displacement of statutory democratic procedures by an informal leadership hierarchy. This interpretation complements rather than replaces the classical organisational explanations of oligarchy.

In this context, Christopher Boehm's approach is important. In his work, Boehm (1999) examined the evolutionary mechanisms for restraining dominance in human communities. He proceeded from the assumption that humans are not “pure egalitarians”: they possess both a tendency to form hierarchies and the capacity to collectively limit the excessive dominance of particular individuals.

A central concept in Boehm's account is the "reverse dominance hierarchy": egalitarianism is maintained not through an absence of power, but through collective constraints imposed by the group on would-be dominants. In the small-scale societies examined by Boehm, such constraints could include criticism, ridicule, refusal to obey, collective sanctions, expulsion, and, in extreme historical cases, lethal sanctions (Boehm, 1999). For the present argument, the important point is not the specific sanction repertoire but the general principle that hierarchy can be restrained by institutionalized or collective counter-power.

For the analysis of political parties, this insight suggests that democratic or networked organisation cannot be reduced to the mere "absence of hierarchy". Its stability depends on mechanisms capable of limiting the conversion of functional leadership into entrenched domination. If group dynamics tends to generate temporary leadership positions, democratic resilience requires procedures that disperse influence, preserve accountability, and prevent the long-term closure of authority within a self-reproducing leadership core.

In this sense, Boehm's approach makes it possible to soften a fatalistic reading of Michels' law. Oligarchization is a probable trajectory of organisational development in the absence of special safeguards, but it is not absolutely inevitable. It can be limited or blocked when the organisational structure ensures the systematic dispersion of influence, collective control over leadership, the accountability of leadership roles, and the impossibility of their long-term closure in the hands of a single leadership core. This creates a theoretical bridge to the development of organisational structures capable of institutionalizing collective control over domination and preventing functional leadership from turning into self-reproducing oligarchical power.

Thus, the group-dynamic approach explains how hierarchy emerges in primary groups, while Boehm's approach shows that its dominant consolidation can be limited by special mechanisms of collective control. However, several questions remain open: why, in the absence of such mechanisms, the concentration of power is often perceived by members of the organisation as natural and appropriate, and why its acceptance encounters little resistance; why the mission begins to be identified with the leader; why criticism of the concentration of power may be marked as a threat to the common cause; and why democratic procedures may be preserved while losing their original meaning. To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to the analysis of archetypal mechanisms operating at the

micro, meso, and macro levels. These mechanisms include the following:

1) Micro level: activation of the archetypal pair "leader-subordinate" in the primary group.

Within the proposed interpretive framework, the conflict phase of group development may create conditions in which relatively horizontal interaction is replaced by "leader-subordinate" relations. The article hypothesizes that such relational differentiation can make the archetypal pair "leader-subordinate" psychologically salient and activate corresponding expectations concerning authority, responsibility, and protection. If participants come to regard the concentration of informal influence in a leader or leadership subgroup as normal or appropriate, resistance to further concentration of power may decline. This proposition requires empirical verification and should not be read as an automatic or universal psychological mechanism.

If this mechanism is repeatedly reproduced across primary groups and organisational levels, it may contribute to the hierarchical structuring of the organisation and thereby become one possible micro-level mechanism of oligarchization.

The pair "leader-subordinate" is further interpreted in relation to the paternalistic schema "Father-Child". From this perspective, subordinates may delegate to a leader not only decision-making authority but also part of the responsibility for coping with uncertainty, resolving conflict, and preserving group cohesion. Oligarchization would then be supported not only by leaders' pursuit of power but also, under certain conditions, by members' willingness to transfer responsibility upwards. Again, this is advanced as a theoretical hypothesis rather than as an empirically established universal response.

In organisations with strong missionary characteristics, such a mechanism may be reinforced by the subordination of individual agency to a collective mission. Organisational discipline can then be interpreted not as submission to a particular person but as service to a higher goal. Under these conditions, members may voluntarily narrow their own autonomy, critical engagement, or readiness to dissent, thereby creating more favourable conditions for the legitimization of an informal hierarchy.

The voluntary limitation of participants' autonomy and critical capacity undermines the very possibility of forming the collective supra-individual intelligence that should emerge within a missionary organisation. In such a situation, the plurality of expert positions required for the production of complex decisions is gradually replaced by unanimous subordination to the leader or the leadership core.

2) Meso level: sacralization of the leader, ritualization of procedures, and closure of the elite.

Repeated leader–subordinate interaction may also contribute to the symbolic elevation of the leader, particularly when the leader becomes identified with the organisation's mission, history, and collective identity. In a missionary-type organisation, the leader may move beyond the role of functional coordinator and be represented as a bearer or guarantor of the mission. The analytical consequence is that criticism of the leader or leadership core may be reframed from ordinary intra-organisational disagreement as a threat to the mission itself.

The formation of a leading oligarchical core is often accompanied by the search for, or construction of, a real or imagined "internal enemy". In a missionary organisation, this is particularly significant, since criticism of the concentration of power may be marked not as normal intra-organisational disagreement, but as betrayal of the mission.

Within an archetypal interpretation, this process may be described as a projection of the Shadow onto internal opponents. Here, the Shadow denotes contradictions, doubts, conflicts of interest, and impulses that are incompatible with the organisation's official self-image and therefore risk being displaced onto figures represented as "traitors", "splitters", "enemies", or "agents of external influence". This is used as an interpretive metaphor for exclusionary organisational dynamics rather than as a clinical psychological diagnosis.

As a result, the democratic structure of party or organisational subdivisions is gradually displaced by a de facto hierarchy. At the same time, democratic procedures do not necessarily disappear. On the contrary, they may be preserved in the form of congresses, conferences, votes, reports, and elections, yet they gradually lose their original meaning. Their function shifts from the actual formation of collective will to the ritual confirmation of loyalty to the leader, the leadership core, and the proclaimed mission. In this case, the formal statutory structure is preserved, but it turns into a symbolic shell that legitimizes an already established informal hierarchy.

This does not mean, however, that the ritualization of procedures is an unequivocally negative phenomenon. It is necessary to distinguish between simulative ritualization, in which democratic procedures retain their external form but lose their original meaning and turn into a mechanism for confirming loyalty to the leadership core, and substantive ritualization, in which repeated

procedures of collective activity consolidate real practices of participation, discussion, coordination, and accountable implementation of decisions. In the latter case, a procedure gradually acquires the qualities of an organisational custom that reproduces itself inertially and can restrain individual leaders' attempts to absolutize their own power.

A further consequence may be the closure of the elite: the leadership core becomes increasingly insulated, while access to the leader and the informal decision-making centre turns into a scarce organisational resource. Proximity to the leader may then displace competence, representative mandate, or capacity for productive collective work as a criterion of influence. Power consequently becomes concentrated not only in formal bodies but also in a narrow circle controlling communication, information flows, and authoritative interpretations of the mission.

At the meso level, the combined effect of these processes manifests itself in the classic forms of oligarchization described by Michels' law: bureaucratization, the professionalization of leadership, deepening delegation, the formation of information asymmetry, procedural control, the centralization of personnel decisions, and the transformation of organisational goals — from the realization of the original mission to the preservation of the organisation itself and its leadership core.

3) Macro level: normalization of leader-centred parties through the personalisation of political institutions.

At the macro level, the normalization of leader-centred parties may be reinforced by the personalisation of political institutions. Political audiences often identify parties more readily through prominent leaders than through complex systems of rules, procedures, internal balances, and collective decision-making. Social demand for a "Hero", a guide, or a "strong hand" can therefore increase the legitimacy of organisational forms in which leaders acquire exceptional symbolic importance. In the framework proposed here, this external personalisation may interact with internal processes of oligarchization by encouraging the perception of a party as an extension of its leader rather than as an institutional mechanism of collective action.

Research on political personalisation supports the broader relevance of this mechanism. Rahat and Kenig (2018) analyse the shift from party-centred to personalised politics, while Rahat (2024) identifies party types characteristic of an age of personalisation, including leader-centred and owner-centred forms. Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis (2022) likewise show that partisan

dealignment is associated with the growing personalisation of politics in Western European parliamentary democracies. These findings do not demonstrate the archetypal mechanism proposed here, but they provide empirical support for the broader trend towards the increasing symbolic and organisational centrality of political leaders.

Within the proposed approach, it may be assumed that the personalisation of political institutions facilitates the social acceptance of leader-centred parties, since the figure of the leader is a psychologically simpler and more intelligible object of identification than a complex system of rules, procedures, and internal balances. At the same time, it is precisely through the personalisation of political parties that the social environment becomes an external factor in the reproduction of Michels' law. The external expectation of personalised leadership increases the symbolic value of the leader within the organisation, strengthens the desire for proximity to him or her, contributes to the hermetization of the elite, and facilitates the transformation of democratic procedures into rituals confirming unity around a personalised centre.

Consequently, Michels' iron law remains primarily a concept of specialized scholarly discourse, whereas broader political discussion often interprets party oligarchization as the product of individual leaders' shortcomings, managerial errors, or exceptional historical circumstances. The approach developed here instead treats oligarchization as a recurrent organisational risk that may be reinforced by the interaction of structural, group-dynamic, and symbolic mechanisms.

In this sense, oligarchization may be interpreted as a probable trajectory of intra-organisational development where deliberate safeguards against concentrated and self-reproducing power are weak or absent. This formulation avoids a deterministic reading of Michels while preserving the analytical force of his argument: formal democracy alone does not guarantee substantive internal pluralism, accountability, or distributed agency.

It is therefore essential to distinguish functional hierarchy from oligarchization. Functional hierarchy is temporary, task-limited, and accountable coordination used to implement specific executive or project functions. Oligarchization begins when hierarchical authority becomes closed and self-reproducing, loses effective dependence on the organisation's collective agency, and increasingly serves the preservation of the leadership core itself. The leader-subordinate schema may operate in both contexts, but in functional hierarchy it remains an instrument of coordination, whereas in oligarchical

structures it may contribute to legitimizing durable domination. This distinction provides a bridge to the concept of variable organisational structure (Plakhtiy, 2025), in which temporary executive and project hierarchies may be created for specific tasks without becoming permanent sources of self-reproducing power.

4. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

The article has proposed that Michels' iron law of oligarchy in political parties with missionary characteristics can be interpreted through two complementary analytical levels. At the organisational level, oligarchization is associated with bureaucratization, professionalization of leadership, delegation, information asymmetry, and procedural control. At the psychosocial level, the article advances a set of archetypal hypotheses concerning how concentrated authority may become normalized and symbolically legitimated.

A political party can be analysed as a multilevel social system in which the macro level of interaction with society and the political environment is connected with a meso level of subdivisions, leadership cores, and informal coalitions and with a micro level of recurrent primary-group interaction. The analysis suggests that group dynamics at the micro level may contribute to the emergence of informal leadership positions and initial centres of influence that can subsequently be amplified across organisational levels.

Oligarchization should therefore not be explained solely by leaders' personal ambitions, imperfect statutes, or weak democratic culture. The theoretical model developed here proposes an additional mechanism: repeated situations in which horizontal coordination gives way to leader-subordinate relations may allow informal influence generated in small groups to accumulate and, under certain organisational conditions, be transformed into durable authority at the level of the party as a whole.

Three main archetypal mechanisms are proposed. At the micro level, leader-subordinate relations may become associated with a paternalistic Father-Child schema and facilitate the upward delegation of responsibility. At the meso level, leader sacralization, ritualization of democratic procedures, projection of the Shadow onto internal opponents, and elite closure may strengthen informal hierarchy. At the macro level, political personalisation and social demand for personalised leadership may normalize leader-centred party forms. These

mechanisms are analytical hypotheses and should be subjected to empirical testing.

The analysis further suggests that oligarchization can deform the standardization of norms that is central to the missionary configuration. Rather than integrating members around a shared mission, values, and collective agency, informal norms may increasingly orient them towards loyalty to the leadership core, avoidance of criticism, personalised authority, and ritual confirmation of unity. This divergence between declared and operative norms is described in the article as moral duality.

Oligarchization is therefore best treated as a recurrent organisational risk rather than as either an inevitable destiny or an accidental breakdown of intra-party democracy. The distinction between functional hierarchy and oligarchization remains crucial: the former is temporary, task-specific, and accountable, whereas the latter involves the closure, self-reproduction, and legitimation of leadership power increasingly detached from collective control.

The identification of these mechanisms creates a basis for examining organisational safeguards capable of limiting self-reproducing leadership power. In this context, the author's concept of variable organisational structure (Plakhtiy, 2025) may

be investigated as a possible organisational analogue of Boehm's reverse dominance hierarchy. Such a structure would seek to combine functional leadership with systematic dispersion of influence, rotation of roles, accountability of temporary executive and project groups, and institutional barriers to the long-term appropriation of leadership functions. Whether these mechanisms actually restrain oligarchization is an empirical question for further research.

The proposed approach is theoretical and interpretive. Its central propositions require empirical verification through comparative case studies of concrete political parties, analysis of intra-organisational procedures and communication networks, longitudinal observation of leadership change, and, where possible, social-network analysis of the accumulation and dispersion of influence.

Future research may also apply this framework comparatively across regional political contexts, including the Caucasus, where the interaction of formal institutions, personalist leadership, patron-client relations, and informal networks provides a particularly relevant setting for examining how organisational and symbolic mechanisms of oligarchization interact.

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