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Is the West serious about the "last European dictatorship"?

The moral repugnance felt by the West towards the Lukashenko regime in Belarus is not matched by policy ideas. Civil society in the West should stop tolerating cynical realpolitik and put pressure on their governments to blacklist offending officials, says Ukrainian analyst Mykola Riabchuk. As the example of Yugoslavia shows, more sticks for the government and more carrots for the nascent civil society could well bring about positive results.

Travelling from Budapest to Belgrade a few years ago, I found myself in a compartment with two other passengers. They were conversing; one spoke Bulgarian, the other Serbian. The Bulgarian was telling the Serb stories about Russia, a subject about which he was pretending to be an expert. Finally, the Bulgarian changed the subject: "Well, there's even a stranger country called Belarus. They have a president who banned anybody else from using the title 'president'. Nobody may call themselves president of a company, an institution, or whatever. His name you know is... er... Shevchenko!"

The Bulgarian was probably confusing the name with that of the Ukrainian footballer rather than the nation's most venerated nineteenth-century poet. So I was amused by the thought of the Serb coming to the Ukraine and finding monuments to the latter everywhere. Puzzled, he would wonder why the Ukrainians were so eager to celebrate the Belarusian dictator...

This story provides a graphic example of how a serious situation can be trivialized. We can easily label a country a "pariah state" or a "rogue regime", but what are the consequences of this, apart for some jokes and a kind of orientalizing? The real problem is that a pariah state is very difficult to influence. They are highly independent.

The common wisdom about Belarus as the "last European dictatorship" reveals a lot about the essence of the regime and prompts a clear-cut moral stance vis-à-vis the dictatorship, but gives little indication of any practical policy that could and should be applied towards the country. First, it would be difficult to impose political and economic sanctions against the regime without harming society at large, even if this policy were completely value-motivated. Second, it would be almost impossible to assist civil society, to encourage dissent within the ruling elite, and to facilitate a transformation and/or collapse of the rogue regime if, in response to international isolation, the regime imposed similar sanctions, pursuing a policy of autarchy and limited contact with similar "pariah states". Third, Western policy vis-à-vis rogue regimes has never been coordinated, coherent, and completely value-motivated. Rather, there has always been, and there always will be, opportunism, particularism, one-off deals, double standards, and other distasteful things euphemistically

called realpolitik.

Finding a proper balance between these factors and circumstances would certainly not be easy; however, two major imperatives should be clearly pursued. First, Western civil society should put pressure on governments and businesses to make their policies vis-à-vis undemocratic regimes more coherent and less hypocritical. They should not tolerate cynical statements from their own politicians or journalists, such as the piece of wisdom expressed by *French News* in 2006 on the eve of elections in Ukraine and Belarus: "From the Baltic to the Black Sea, Russia is faced with Nato or would-be Nato states, and, as a much invaded country, feels nervous about the future. Paradoxically, in this situation the best option for the people in [Belarus and Ukraine], at least in the short term, would, be to vote against the Western tendency."¹ Second, while sanctions against rogue regimes should be limited and fixed, sanctions against government officials should be extensive and flexible. Visa denial and freezing of bank accounts is the main and probably most effective way to punish rogue officials. Every human rights infringement, be it the harassment of the opposition or acts of lawlessness, by the police, the border guards, or the judiciary, should prompt Western governments to blacklist the names of the guilty officials. Lawlessness in Belarus is neither anonymous nor committed by Alexander Lukashenko alone. The list of official "pariahs" should be extended daily, top down, person by person. Coordinated, coherent international pressure is certainly not the only factor that may ultimately facilitate regime change. However it might be the most effective and the easiest to employ.

The sustainability of authoritarian regimes

In a series of groundbreaking articles, Lucan Way has examined the trajectories of various competitive authoritarian regimes (authoritarian regimes which permit some political competition — e.g. Russia or Azerbaijan) and outlined three variables that are of particular importance in explaining the outcome of the regime: (1) the capacity of the incumbent government; (2) the unity and strength of the opposition; and (3) the international context. His analysis is based on the assumption (empirically confirmed) that "incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes seek to remain in office, and extra-legal tactics (such as electoral fraud and various forms of repression) are among the options they consider as they pursue that goal".² He proposes a model that explores in detail the interaction of the three major variables and explains "why some competitive authoritarian regimes democratize in the face of crisis while others remain stable or experience authoritarian retrenchment". The model provides students of semi-authoritarian regimes with a useful instrument for the analysis of probable developments and for making appropriate policy recommendations.

According to Way, incumbent capacity has three main dimensions that are particularly important to regime survival: elite cohesion, coercive capacity, and electoral capacity. Elite cohesion indicates the degree of discipline and loyalty that executives can command from other regime elites. Coercive capacity indicates a government's ability to control and repress opposition forces; it requires both an infrastructure of surveillance and repression and effective control over that infrastructure. Electoral capacity indicates governments' ability to win elections through a combination of voter mobilization and fraud. Both ventures require an organizational infrastructure — a formal or informal "party of power".

Opposition capacity is measured along two variables: cohesion and mobilizational capacity. Cohesion primarily means the opposition's ability to unite into a broad anti-authoritarian coalition and to defy the government's strategy of divide and rule. Mobilization capacity stands for the ability of the opposition to mobilize citizens against the government. This depends on the strength of opposition party organizations, the strength and independence of civil society (particularly labour, student, and human rights organizations), and the degree to which civil society organizations are aligned with the political opposition.

All these elements are extremely important, since an opposition victory in a semi-authoritarian regime "requires a level of mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for a victory in a democracy"³. Often, it also requires international observation and intervention to preempt and prevent, or expose and delegitimize, electoral manipulation by the authoritarian regime. International context, or more specifically, Western influence, is therefore the third key variable determining regime change or persistence.

Levitsky and Way contend that, in the post-Cold War period, ties to the West increase the cost of authoritarian entrenchment and strengthen incentives for elites to play by democratic rules. The authors divide Western influence into two dimensions: linkage and leverage. Linkage includes geographic proximity, economic integration (actual and desirable), military alliances, flows of international assistance, penetration of international media, ties to international NGOs and other transnational networks, and networks of elites employed by multilateral institutions and/or educated in Western universities. Leverage indicates the ability of Western governments and international bodies to influence non-democratic regimes, which are certainly more compliant if they depend on the West economically and/or militarily.

The model outlined helps interpret developments in virtually all post-communist countries as a complicated interaction of three variables. Developments can also be represented as a close contest between the authoritarian state and international civil society, which has a "catalyzing" effect. Such a conceptual framework allows a better understanding of why democratic transition was successful in central eastern Europe and the Baltic states, where society was strong enough to take over and transform the Leninist state. By the same token, it explains the aborted transition in Central Asia, where civil society had been meagre at best. Finally, it enables a conceptualization of the processes in the Balkan republics [including Bulgaria and Romania] and western post-Soviet republics [Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova] as a protracted struggle between two equally strong or, rather, equally weak rivals — the dysfunctional authoritarian state and an underdeveloped civil society.

The case of the Balkan republics and the western post-Soviet republics are the most complicated and therefore, from an analytical point of view, the most interesting. When juxtaposed, the role of Western influence is revealed — highly positive in the case of the Balkan republics, neutral or negative in the case of western post-Soviet republics. It is worth recalling that all these countries had very similar levels of democracy in the first half of the 1990s (at the time, western post-Soviet republics were in an even better position than the post-communist Balkan republics⁴). These relatively competitive political regimes emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet empire and were mostly mutations of the *anciens regimes* rather than

the triumphant product of strong and resolute civil societies. They had in common the continuing dominance of an old elite with a weak democratic commitment, a lack of democratic history, a weak tradition of civility, and weak rule of law. The Balkan states, however, received long-term EU membership prospects via the Stabilization and Association Agreements, and eventually improved their rating from "non-consolidated authoritarian regimes" (regimes in which elections are manipulated and harass the opposition) to "non-consolidated democracies". The European post-Soviet states, on the other hand, received no EU incentives and in the second half of the 1990s moved in the opposite direction — from "non-consolidated democracies" to "non-consolidated authoritarian regimes". This just confirms the earlier observations of many experts:

Transitions with the prospect of European integration in sight are clearly more prosperous and secure than transitions without it. This is not just a matter of increased foreign aid or direct investment, though both matter greatly. The incentive of European accession changes the political climate within applicant countries, overriding nationalist appeals and luring elites from almost all parties.⁵

EU conditionality differs fundamentally from other less successful forms of international pressure [...] Unlike all other Western states or transnational agencies, the EU demands full compliance with democratic norms and uses extensive and highly institutionalized monitoring. Perhaps most importantly, in contrast to standard political conditionality, the (real and perceived) benefits of EU membership are sufficiently large as to induce far-reaching concessions on the part of broad groups of the elite. The result is that countries such as Romania, with an equally troublesome post-communist legacy, have democratized to a remarkable extent. To date, the EU has not seriously considered Ukraine for membership. However, if this were to change, the prospects for democracy would improve dramatically.⁶

Still, the trajectories of the western post-Soviet republics diverged substantially in the second half of the 1990s, not only from the Western-guided Balkans but also from each other. At the beginning of the decade, all four countries — Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova — had been relatively open and exhibited dynamic and competitive politics that resulted in overthrowing regimes in all except Russia, where change was prevented by Yeltsin's anti-parliamentary coup and subsequent redrafting of the constitution. Competitiveness, however, was "rooted less in robust civil societies, strong democratic institutions, or democratic leadership and much more in the inability of incumbents to maintain power or concentrate political control by preserving elite unity, to control elections and the media, and/or to use force against opponents."⁷ It resulted primarily from the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, which deprived authoritarian rulers of the organization, skill, and finances necessary to maintain power and/or concentrate political control.

In other words, the post-Soviet regimes in these countries emerged less as struggling democracies, where leaders strove to build more pluralistic institutions, and much more as failed authoritarianisms, aptly defined as "pluralism by default" — a form of political competition specific to weak states:

Pluralism by default describes countries in which institutionalized political competition survives not because leaders are especially democratic or because societal actors are particularly strong, but because the government is too fragmented and the State too weak to impose authoritarian rule in a democratic international context. In such cases, leaders lack the authority and coordination to prevent today's allies from becoming tomorrow's challengers, control the legislature, impose censorship, manipulate elections successfully, or use force against political opponents. Such countries are caught in a paradox: the same state weakness and governmental fragmentation that promotes pluralism also undermines effective governance and may ultimately threaten long-term democratic consolidation.⁸

Over time, however, the post-Soviet elites gained substantial wealth through shadow privatization and other dubious channels; they learned how to manipulate elections, the mass media, and political opponents; and they transformed state weakness into a specific strength, namely scope for coercion.

To understand the last change as the real (and central) part of "transition", one should recall that the weakness of the post-Soviet states resulted not so much from the institutional void that allegedly emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rather from the essential dysfunctionality of all Soviet institutions inherited by the post-Soviet republics. Those institutions, which included parliaments and governments, local councils and executives, courts and customs, police and security services, played a peripheral role vis-à-vis the real centre of power, which animated the entire system, making it effective if not efficient. It was the Communist party that made all the important decisions, initiated all the changes, and extorted loyalty and obedience from its subjects. By the end of perestroika, the dysfunctionality of the Leninist state became obvious. The failed communist coup and the ultimate removal of the Communist Party from the political scene deprived the communist state of its driving force and made the collapse of the Soviet Union inevitable.

Local elites in the post-Soviet republics that inherited the dysfunctional pieces of the dysfunctional empire had two options: to build new state institutions based on the rule of law, democratic procedures, and civic mobilization; or to re-animate the dysfunctional quasi-institutions of the Leninist state by informal methods and semi-legal bodies. Only the Baltic republics clearly chose the first option. All the other post-Soviet states chose the second. Thus, Presidential Administrations replaced the Central Committees of the Communist party, while presidential representatives ("governors") with the similar apparatus assumed the role of the local communist bosses. This was all that was needed to make the modified system work.

The shadow power of the Communist party was based on the communist ideology, which was compulsory for everybody who held any more or less important position and/or strove for social advance. It was an effective tool of state domination, since loyalty could be extorted from any subject by "ideological blackmail". In post-Soviet regimes, loyalty is achieved by other means — partly, as usual, bribery and cooptation, and partly a new sort of blackmail: economical, facilitated by the advent of oligarchic capitalism.⁹

Western linkages and elite defections

Most scholars agree that in countries where civil society is underdeveloped and democratic traditions weak, radical change is a direct or indirect consequence of fragmentation within the ruling group. As Lucan Way writes: "Elite defection is an important component of pluralism by default"¹⁰; and, "a highly divided elite is likely to undermine authoritarian consolidation by reducing the incumbent's control over subordinate state agencies necessary to impose non-democratic rules of the game. Orders to the media to provide biased coverage, to security agencies to repress opposition, or to local governments to steal votes are more likely to be ignored."¹¹

The consequences of the elite contestation are exacerbated by the fact that the main rivals of authoritarian rule usually emerge from within their close circle: in Ukraine, not only was Viktor Yushchenko Leonid Kuchma's prime-minister, but Kuchma himself was a prime-minister under Leonid Kravchuk; and Kravchuk was one of the Communist party bosses under Volodymyr Shcherbytsky. All benefited from their top positions, where they could hone their political skills, forge their public images, and establish reputations as moderate and competent politicians. These features would have been impossible to acquire had they started their careers in opposition, since opposition leaders have always been either denied access to the main media, demonized as dangerous radicals, or worse still, ridiculed as infantile and incompetent idealists.

Elite defection certainly played a decisive role in the peaceful overthrow of the Milosevic and Shevardnadze regimes, as well as the fall of communist regimes between 1989 and 1991. A natural fragmentation of the ruling group would not necessarily have led to overt defection by some of its members or even to hidden sabotage. To make this possible, two more factors were usually needed — powerful pressure from "below", from the politically mobilized public, and perceptible pressure from "above", from international governmental and non-governmental bodies able to legitimize or delegitimize an authoritarian regime.

Levitsky and Way point out at four arenas of contestation that exist in competitive authoritarian regimes due to the persistence of meaningful democratic institutions, and through which opposition forces may periodically challenge, weaken, and occasionally even defeat autocratic incumbents: the electoral arena, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media.¹² In Ukraine — unlike in Belarus — these institutions were never fully subjugated by the authorities. Elections were always competitive and vote counting more or less fair, despite major abuses of state power during election campaigns. The national parliament did not become a puppet of the president, as in Russia or Belarus. Even though the Ukrainian parliament had little power over government policy, it still "functioned as a key staging ground for opposition activity by giving deputies relatively easy access to media and immunity from prosecution".¹³

The judiciary, albeit manipulated, oppressed, and often corrupt, retained some degree of independence, especially on the top level of the Supreme Court where judges could not be removed from their position until the retirement age (65). And finally, the independent media, however harassed and marginalized by the government, still disseminated uncensored information within the society. Even in the worst months of 2004, the opposition still had access to high-circulation newspapers such as the pro-Socialist *Silski visti*, the pro-Yushchenko *Ukraina moloda*, the pro-Tymoshenko *Vechernie vesti*, the independent *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*. Access was also available to a number of

FM–radio stations, including TV5. This station, which provided objective information and gave a voice to the opposition, was squeezed out from most regions, but could still be received, albeit via cable, in one third of the country, including in Kyiv.

This resulted partly from the relative strength of society, which had a tradition at least in central and western Ukraine, and which proved to be more resilient under authoritarian pressure than many expected. The polarization and fragmentation of the Ukrainian elite was also of paramount importance, since it effectively hindered the consolidation of a presidential autocracy by creating an informal system of checks and balances. The competing oligarchic clans on the one hand, and the appreciable democratic opposition on the other, interacted in multiple ways, making and unmaking situational alliances between various groups and members.

Good relations with the West, meanwhile, has become a priority for many oligarchs who, at a personal level — in other words, at the level of their bank accounts and real estate portfolios — have undergone profound "Euro–Atlantic integration". For the oligarchs, integration also includes the charming post–communist habit of educating their children in good Western universities, undergoing healthcare treatment in Baden–Baden rather than at the Kremlin hospital, and enjoying *la dolce vita* at the best international resorts. Ukrainian elites were reluctant to undertake any radical steps that might have weakened these "relations" with the West. For many, including the metallurgical magnate Victor Pinchuk, Kuchma's son–in–law, the loss of power and economic privileges was considered a far less catastrophic prospect than international sanctions, including visa denials and, as Madleine Albright hinted, freezing of bank accounts.¹⁴

A corridor of opportunities

The successful "electoral revolutions" in Ukraine and other post–communist countries that had long been written off the list of potential democracies prompted lively discussion about the possible spread of the "democratic contagion" across the still dictatorial landscape of the former Soviet Union. The Belarusian analyst Vitali Silitski remains sceptical about the prospects for new democratic breakthroughs in the post–Soviet space. Ironically, he says, the democratic revolutions of recent years will make it harder, rather than easier, for further revolutions to occur. He raises two major arguments: that the remaining post–Soviet countries are not semi–authoritarian but wholly authoritarian, facing virtually no meaningful political competition; and that their leaders have learned from the "coloured" revolutions how to further tighten their grip on power.

Most of the remaining ex–Soviet states simply do not possess the basic social and political features seen in competitive authoritarian systems. Authority is firmly concentrated in the hands of the president. Representative institutions serve largely as window–dressing. Control of economic resources is much more concentrated, partly owing to the availability of easily controlled natural resources. The elites have been thoroughly purged and rotated to prevent the rise of internal opposition, and dissenters are quickly punished. Civil society and political opposition is weak (if it exists at all), and wherever it has managed to develop into a sizable community, there is a growing tendency to destroy and discredit it.

[A] more consolidated authoritarian system still conducts elections but, rather than relying on the vote-rigging and post-election repression applied in softer versions of non-democratic rule, they destroy their opponents and [...] wipe out the belief that political change can be achieved. They carefully nurture the myth that there is no alternative to the system's leaders and, in a broader sense, to the political order itself [...] Repression in these systems is not a way of salvation; it is a way of life.¹⁵

Even though some regimes, such as the Armenian or the Russian, still look pretty "liberal" if compared with Central Asian "sultanates", they also are quickly learning that "too liberal" autocrats may not last long. Their survival tactics, so far, are simple: harsher laws, tighter control, and more preemptive strikes on the opposition. As a result, concludes Silitski, "it will be more dangerous to run for elections, more dangerous to organize, more dangerous to vote for the opposition, more dangerous to admit it publicly, and more dangerous to go out onto the streets and defend one's vote." Ultimately, the autocrats may simply abolish actual vote counting and just rubber-stamp election results prepared beforehand.

In such circumstances, the democratic opposition, even if it does manage to win hearts and minds, may not be able to do what their colleagues in "soft" autocracies have just managed: to back their claims to power with the law. With no ballots available for recount, no protocols given away and signed, no commission members ready to publicize the fraud, no courts daring to hear the cases, there will be little opportunity to check the official numbers. Exit polls may be one — but those can easily be disrupted (or silenced with "official" exit polls showing nearly unanimous endorsement of the incumbents).

In such circumstances, the paths to political change may not lie through polls, and, whatever those alternative paths are, they may take longer. Nowhere in the post-Soviet space is the death of the president, a palace coup, or a popular revolt a realistic prospect at present.¹⁶

Silitski does not claim, however, that all efforts are doomed, that no silver lining exists among the heavy post-Soviet clouds. He just reminds us that the promotion of democracy is hard, mundane, and sometimes risky job with no guarantee of immediate results. While the development of post-Soviet countries depends primarily on their own people, Western assistance of respective civil societies would certainly be beneficial. Western sanctions against post-Soviet "elites" would in many cases dampen authoritarian zeal. Human rights and democracy issues in Russia or Azerbaijan should not be bargained for gas and oil, and even less for personal political benefits of Western leaders.

The successful political and economic development of the post-revolutionary countries such as Ukraine and Georgia might substantially influence all the post-Soviet nations, providing a viable and persuasive example that can be more realistically replicated than those of the remote Czechs and Slovenes. This means that the West should become actively engaged in the development of these countries, giving them the same incentives as Albania, Serbia, and Macedonia. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has been very critical about the

Western policy vis-à-vis the post-Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Russia, still believes that things can change — "especially if the West assists Ukraine in its westward trajectory".¹⁷

Clearly, the possible and/or desirable development of every country is subject to certain restraints imposed by political culture and tradition, location, patterns of regionalism, national identity and many other factors. The adherents of the path-dependence theory are right when they claim that the point of arrival depends on the point of departure. They are wrong, however, when they represent the entire trajectory of development as a straightforward line. Rather, development evolves within a "corridor of opportunities" that can be broadened (or narrowed) by citizens themselves. There are clear determinants to be counted on, but no crude determinism to be sanctified. This is perhaps the major lesson imparted by the "coloured revolutions" in the post-Soviet states.

By way of conclusion

The consolidated authoritarian regime, which is fully established in Belarus and in other post-Soviet republics, tends to be a stable, albeit stagnant phenomenon that can persist for a long period of time. Since those best positioned to change the system are those most interested in preserving it, a vicious circle takes hold that can be broken only by a strong civil society. Though the regime does its best to arrest the development of the latter, there are signs that the situation is not completely hopeless.

First, the authoritarian regime, however despotic, is not totalitarian. It leaves some room for different views, ideologies, even for some political and economic freedom. Second, the authoritarian regime, however unified by corporate interests, is not monolithic. It consists of competing groups that have their own economic interests and political preferences. Moreover, since Belarus' natural resources are fairly limited, its economy cannot sustain the society, and even less the elite, which is growing in number and in consumer demands. While the dominant parasitic group remains satisfied with Lukashenko's autocracy, "inner dissidents" will inevitably emerge within the ruling elite and, sooner or later, bring about a kind of Khrushchevian thaw, a Gorbachovian perestroika, or an Atatürkian revolution.

Finally, Belarus' European location inevitably makes it an object of Western attention and influence. With regard to the mass media, human rights, and the rule of law, Western assistance would primarily mean the monitoring of the numerous violations in these fields and the exertion of pressure on the Belarusian government, including personal sanctions against every official involved. As the example of Yugoslavia dramatically shows, more sticks for the government and more carrots for agents and institutions in the nascent civil society could well bring about positive results.

True, Western leverage in Belarus is limited, since no large-scale privatization has occurred in the country, no oligarchies have emerged, and consequently no "pluralism by default" has evolved. Belarusian authoritarianism is largely personified in the figure of the erratic dictator: but this does not mean he is omnipotent and unchallengeable. The Belarusian elite will inevitably fracture — as occurred even in more consolidated dictatorships such as Romania or the Soviet Union. Western linkage in Belarus is fairly strong, since Belarusian society is basically European, the flow of information and people is relatively high (proportionally more Belarusians travel to the West than Ukrainians), and

the invisible hand of the free market operates, albeit limitedly, in trade, services, and small-scale manufacturing. The West certainly cannot do the job of the Belarusians, but it certainly could and should do its own job with regard to Belarus much better.

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