

### Reclaiming Democracy: Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe

By Joerg Forbrig, Pavol Demeš (eds). Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund, 2007.

A Europe 'whole, free, and at peace' is tantalizingly close, but remains out of reach. Given the overt dictatorship in Belarus, the gutting of democratic standards in Russia under President Vladimir Putin, and the difficult to outright reversed transitions in Moldova and the Caucasus, it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Also included in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the former Soviet 'stans' of Central Asia remain almost a total democratic black hole. From the brutally violent dictatorship of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan to the petroauthoritarianism of Nursultan Nazerbayev in Kazakhstan, Central Asia is the land 'transition' forgot.

Yet in a number of Central and Eastern European countries which stalled after the heady days of 1989 – 1991 managed to achieve democratic breakthroughs, all involving elections, the latter cases relying on nonviolent 'street power' to ensure victory over 'semi-authoritarian' regimes. The rapid progression of 'electoral revolutions' from Slovakia in 1998, Croatia in early 2000, Serbia in late 2000, Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004 generated hope that the wave could continue

through democracy-deprived post-Soviet states. Why did these peaceful cases of 'democratic breakthrough' succeed? And what lessons could be learned for democracy promotion by the established democracies of Europe and North America? And most important of all, once defined, have any such lessons actually been learned and reflected in policy?

*Reclaiming Democracy*, a collected volume of five case studies and six comparative essays, attempts to explain each of the five cases and the role of civil society actors in each, how the revolutions related to one another, and if they might have lessons for other cases in Europe and Eurasia.

It is a rich, thought-provoking, and well-documented volume that is a must-read for all those interested in the mechanics of democratic breakthroughs. Case studies are authored or co-authored by direct participants, and relate fascinating aspects of the events in question. The comparative studies are penned by prolific scholars and analysts, many hailing from Central and Eastern Europe. Commendably, the editors included authors who did not necessarily agree with their own analytical conclusions

on the phenomena at hand or what they portend.

Contributors universally agree that the cases were connected, with the process of civic mobilization toward democratic regime change around scheduled elections beginning in Bulgaria and Romania in 1997. Editors Forbrig and Demeš state that "civic activists from Bulgaria and Romania inspired their Slovak colleagues, who, with 'OK '98' (OK for 'civic campaign' in Slovak), pioneered large-scale civic pre-election campaigns and went on to train and support civic activists in other countries in the region and beyond, as did OTPOR veterans in Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere later." A bit more detail on how civic campaigns in Romania and Bulgaria developed and why they were inspirational would have been welcome and useful for understanding the demonstration effect that is on display throughout the book.

Most contributors agree that the first two cases were significantly different than the latter three, seeing as the election results were accepted and mass mobilization was not necessary to ensure the popular will was respected. Vitali Silitski calls the Slovak and Croatian cases 'transformative elections' and those following in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine 'electoral revolutions'. It's worth noting democracy is more firmly established in the former two: one has already entered the EU, with the other in a holding pattern for membership.

Initially, donors like the US Agency for International Development

(USAID) encouraged Croatian civic activists seeking to unseat President Franjo Tudjman and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) to learn from the Slovak example of mobilization around a scheduled election. But this process took on its own momentum, with initiative both on the growing supply side and increasing demand. Forbrig and Demeš point out that the collaboration among civil society actors throughout Central and Eastern Europe was "an enormous learning process" which began immediately after 1989, facilitated by donor support from foundations (especially noteworthy and generous was Soros' Open Society Institute) and western democratic governments. Going back to the 1970s, dissidents and civil society activists in the region have inspired and supported each other.

Editor Pavol Demeš and a number of his Slovak compatriots were active in Croatia, Serbia, Belarus and Ukraine. Alumni of these electoral revolutions can be found much further afield, in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond to the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia. This network of democratic activism veterans turned trainers continues to grow – one I have taken to calling the 'Demintern', or democratic international. Activists can seek their more experienced counterparts and engage with them for advice and ideas, a process accelerated by the internet.

But dictators learn too, helping one another maintain power and even repress each others' opponents,

to the extent of repatriating them to certain torture, in the case of Uzbek oppositionists in Russia following the Andijan massacre in 2005. Silitiski in his brilliant chapter discusses 'regime preemption' and terms this collaboration the 'Authoritarian Internationale'. Ousted leaders such as Vladimir Mečiar and Eduard Shevardnadze have met with authoritarians still at the helm and advised them based on their own failures to crack-down on civil society – a theme Putin has taken to heart and institutionalized.

The Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and especially the Orange Revolution in Ukraine the following year convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin to radically change Russian foreign policy to resist what he sees as an encroachment by the West into Russia's rightful sphere of influence. To counter it, he has directed a full spectrum of countermeasures. Among these is pressure within the OSCE to de-emphasize election monitoring and to alter its comprehensive methodology, including the long-term observation and media monitoring which expose many fraudulent methods employed to slant the playing field well before election day. Putin has also decided to mimic election observation through the Commonwealth of Independent States and murkily associated 'NGOs' as well as kept 'civil society' activists like his Putin-youth 'Nashi' group. Such efforts and 'political technology' (to use the Russian term) are disseminated throughout the post-Soviet space and

even beyond, with more attention being vested in the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, which brings together Russia, China, the Central Asian States, as well as observers such as Iran and Pakistan. This dictators' international is engaged in what amounts to an arms race with a network of democracy activists, and brings its collective state repressive machinery to bear against them.

Which leads us to 'what next?', to draw from the title of Ivan Krastev's final chapter. The remaining non-democratic regimes have further consolidated political and economic power in presidential hands, leaving civic activists with few of the possibilities available to previous civic revolutionaries, for example, at least some alternative media outlets. He concludes that violent overthrow of these regimes might be their ultimate downfall, noting that such regime change is far less likely to deliver democratic governance. He concludes that firm western democratic commitment to democratic electoral change (and standards) is essential, and presently lacking, as the shameful U.S. and European responses to deeply flawed electoral processes in countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan attest (despite damning reports by OSCE observers). Similar commitment and encouragement to countries that have had breakthroughs is also essential, he writes, to demonstrate the benefits of the risk that promoting nonviolent democratic change. Finally, he advises that the democracy promotion

community reassess and update its toolbox in light of the different nature of the remaining undemocratic regimes, which are not 'semi-' or competitive authoritarianisms, but the full-blown variety, akin to the pre-1989 Soviet Bloc.

Krastev gives a contrarian assessment of the three 'electoral revolutions' in question, contending that "in their nature, these color revolutions (may) have more in common with the recent populist revolutions in Latin American than with the liberal revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe of 1989." While none of the three has seen full democratic consolidation, his argument that in these revolutions "democratic ideals played a limited role in mobilizing support" because they were not future-oriented and aimed at removing an incumbent rather than espousing a "clear project for transforming society" fails to convince. The fact that they followed mass mobilization for an electoral campaign, not some other trigger, with adherence to the constitutional order, would seem to indicate a deep vein of democratic commitment. As to future orientation, the desire to live in a "normal country" was a common locution in all of these cases. And cases like Bolivia, populist though they may be, were far from agnostic on social vision. Krastev also decries what he sees as self-serving claims by NGOs and their donors that they were the *drivers* of these revolutions, though he acknowledges that they had an important role in

enabling them. This role was sometimes pivotal, as with OTPOR in Serbia.

But in closing, Krastev devastatingly diagnoses problems that will beset democracy activists in the remaining former Soviet republics and beyond for the foreseeable future. He notes the precipitous decline of U.S. moral authority as a democracy promoter, despite (and also because of) the Bush administration's pronouncement of its "freedom agenda." He cites Vice President Dick Cheney's strong criticism of Russia's declining democratic standards, immediately followed by his uncritical embrace of Kazakh dictator Nazarbaev, hot on the heels of yet another crooked election. "Double standards' will no longer just be an 'accusation' ... It will be the reality... This... will fuel anti-American sentiment and will make democracy assistance much more vulnerable to criticism and denunciation." Dictators will exploit this sentiment to discredit democratic activists, who will in turn be inclined to eschew assistance from without 'for fear of losing legitimacy'. The effective abandonment of Azeri, Kazakh, Egyptian, and other democrats sends the message the U.S. doesn't *really* mean what it says about democratic values. And governments like the genocidal one in Sudan have employed the shameful spectres of *Guantanamo Bay* and *Abu Ghraib* to deflate U.S. criticism in such bodies as the *UN Human Rights Council*.

All authors noted, the attractive force of the EU motivated youth in these

countries who saw their futures being stunted by isolation due to authoritarian governance. Krastev notes the paradox that “the EU’s soft power, its ability to mobilize and empower people...affect change via civic example not physical force, itself derives from its soft and shifting borders... At the moment when soft borders are replaced by hard borders, the ability of the EU to inspire will dramatically decline.”

Even within the areas where the possibility to join the club is explicit (such as here in Bosnia and Herzegovina), appetite of current members for further enlargement is seen as weak. For those consigned to the periphery, the EU’s “neighborhood,” like breakthrough countries Ukraine and Georgia, this prospect is even less proximate, with negative repercussions for reform

and democratic consolidation. While the EU is an amazing attractive pole for democratic breakthroughs and consolidation, the EU shows no will to maximize this with the real prospect of membership for countries like Georgia, Ukraine, and Turkey, leaving aspirant democrats in Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan with less to work with. And beyond those countries who at least are debatably in “Europe,” the EU effectively doesn’t *have* a democracy promotion policy. Civic activists in these countries are between the Scylla of U.S. hypocrisy and the Charybdis of EU ambiguity.

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