

# Voting for Thugs

When Alyaksandr Lukashenka, president of Belarus, claimed 86 percent of the ballots in his country's recent presidential election, observers not only criticized him for cheating but also for doing so unnecessarily. As the *Economist* complained, "It is hard to beat a dictator who would probably win even if he didn't rig the vote." In trying to understand Lukashenka's reasons for excess, observers tended to overlook another, more fundamental question of motivation: why would citizens support a leader with so little regard for the voters that he would rig his own re-election? Nor are Lukashenka's voters particularly unusual. A long list of post-communist leaders—including Franjo Tudman in Croatia, Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin in Russia—have achieved substantial popular support despite a clear distaste for any electoral rules except those that worked to their own advantage.

For those who seek the spread of democracy, these leaders are a constant reminder that voters may freely elect dictators—a phenomenon that Karl Popper referred to as "the paradox of democracy"—and it is more important than ever to understand why. A degree of genuine popularity has always helped strongmen stay in power, but in recent decades, even leaders of extremely repressive states allowed at least the illusion of electoral competition. The rise of such "competitive authoritarianism" opens opportunities and dangers for both strongmen and democrats. In Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, perceptions of electoral fraud were instrumental in mobilizing large-scale public protest and ousting autocratic leaders. In contrast, when large numbers of voters genuinely support the regime, it is easier for a government to conceal fraud and to prevent the kind of public protest that can spark a restoration of political balance.

While this problem is not unique to post-communism, the close similarities among would-be authoritarian leaders in Central and Eastern Europe provide a convenient laboratory for understanding why voters prefer leaders who do not themselves prefer democracy. Although political analysts and scholars offer a variety of different perspectives, it is possible to identify four useful reasons that together explain why voters choose authoritarian leaders.

## Some Like Strongmen

Since the end of World War II, social scientists and policy-makers have debated the existence of an "authoritarian personality type" among citizens. Such a type—if sufficiently widespread—might explain the phenomenon of "voting for thugs." Bojan Todosijević's exhaustive analysis of political attitudes in Serbia identifies support for authoritarianism not as a personality type but as a worldview—an enduring but not unchangeable "perspective on how the world is and ought to be organized, about the individual's place in it and about the relationships between the individuals and groups" (Todosijević 2005). In Serbia, Todosijević finds a widespread worldview involving "resistance to change, preference for order, obedience to rules and established authorities." Public opinion surveys spanning 12 years—1990, 1996 and 2002—show this worldview to be stronger among Milošević supporters than among those of other candidates. The same dynamic appears to be true for Slovakia's Mečiar, Croatia's Tudman, Belarus' Lukashenka and Ukraine's Kuchma and Yanukovich (though survey evidence in the latter two cases is rather limited).

At the same time, the surveys suggest that the number of voters with authoritarian worldviews is not always sufficient to elect strongmen. New Democracies Barometer surveys conducted between 1991 and 1998 asked respondents in post-communist Europe whether it would be "better to get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide everything." (Such multinational surveys are notoriously difficult to interpret given different domestic contexts, but the results are still useful.) Average support for a strong post-communist leader ranged from 7 percent to 60 percent, but not all countries with authoritarian leaders appeared at the top of the range. Indeed, while more than half the populations in Belarus and Ukraine were willing to accept the dismissal of parliament, the rates of support for this prospect in Slovakia and Croatia were among the lowest, with authoritarian-sympathetic populations that were far too small to elect a strongman on their own.

However, to rely only on the explanation of an authoritarian personality assumes that all strongman supporters think alike. In fact, the segment of the population supporting most of these leaders overlaps only imperfectly with the population that prefers order, obedience and authority. For example, Mečiar's partisans were twice as likely to agree that (1) a firm hand was more important than patient negotiation, (2) political opposition was unnecessary, (3) political leaders could justifiably break the law in the public interest and (4) all power should be placed in the hands

of the winner of elections. Yet between one-third and one-half of those who supported these authoritarian opinions chose some party other than Meciar's (including a small but significant share who opted for Meciar's archrivals). Although most authoritarian voters opted for the strongmen, not all of them did, which would seem to weaken their chances for political success. Even more significant, however, is the evidence that not all strongman voters shared authoritarian values. In Croatia and Slovakia, evidence suggests that fewer than half of the strongman voters held values that were consistent with strongman rule. In Serbia, Belarus and Ukraine, the ratio appears to have been somewhat higher, but still not enough. To win, these leaders must attract the votes of non-authoritarians.

### **Some Have No Choice**

One advantage of political authority is that it can promote political success by suppressing alternatives. State power may magnify the vote totals of those in power by making it impossible for opposition supporters to cast ballots in secret (or to cast ballots at all). Where governments have a high degree of control over employment, entire communities may be aware of the economic penalties that await them should votes for government candidates fall too low.

In other cases, votes for those in power are supplemented by "Chicago-style" repeat voting among government supporters. In many eastern Ukraine towns in 2004, voters with ample supplies of "out-of-district" voting permissions were bussed from village to village, contributing to a turnout well above 100 percent in many polling places. Votes for those in power can also be works of pure fiction, originating in the process of counting and reporting. More subtle is the use of (1) false or "paper" candidates to confuse and divide opposition forces, (2) heavy administrative burdens imposed on opposition candidates and (3) limited access to state-owned mass media. These methods, too, undercut the ability of voters to choose anyone other than the government candidate.

While these methods are extremely important for the success of many power-abusing political leaders, they are also the most expensive and potentially the most fragile. Systematic vote fraud, candidate harassment and censorship require an extremely high degree of state control, including control over economic activity, a large and disciplined security apparatus and a similarly tight hold over mass media (including often overlooked mechanisms such as controlling the supply of newsprint). Leaders have indeed managed to achieve this degree of control in some regions of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, but such successes are much more sporadic in Central Europe and the Balkans. Furthermore, elections are the point at which foreign and domestic observers are most likely to become involved. In recent years, election observers have become more sophisticated in the degree to which they evaluate the political environment leading up to elections.

### **Some Do Not See**

Some of the mechanisms for magnifying government support are designed to elude even careful electoral observers. Those who abuse power often do so in such a way as to hide the abuses themselves. This, too, requires a firm grip on power, but in this case power is used not to interfere with voters' choices but to shape their impressions and prevent bad news from reaching their ears.

The methods post-communist strongmen use to hide abuses are strikingly similar. Their first and most important priority is to prevent the detection of abuse. For example, they might exclude opposition from key parliamentary committees and oversight bodies, particularly those concerning sensitive areas such as privatization, police/intelligence services and state-owned media. Since independent-minded state officials might nevertheless seek to pursue criminal investigations, leaders find it necessary also to control police and prosecutorial services down to the lowest level.

Leaders must also muzzle any media reports that suggest the abuse of political power. A coordinated message from a variety of state-owned sources may create an atmosphere of plausibility that can undercut other conflicting messages from fragmented private media. Through its use of unsigned but obligatory talking points, Kuchma's state apparatus in Ukraine managed to convey a common message through a variety of superficially unrelated media. When such control proves insufficient, governments may need to resort to other means; it is no surprise that reporters have been among the main victims of political violence in competitive authoritarian regimes.

But can abuse of power succeed in obscuring the abuse itself? The record seems mixed. Some recent scholarship suggests that it can within certain narrow limits. A 1997 survey of Slovak voters revealed that frequent viewers of state television were more likely than others to believe that "the government obeys the law." Exposure to state media even had a small but significant persuasive effect on those who otherwise distrusted Slovakia's government. The main impact of media control was its ability to tranquilize the population by offering reassurance that despite rumors and allegations emerging from unofficial sources, things were not that bad. A recent analysis of media in

Ukraine by Marta Dyczok of the University of Western Ontario argues that state control of media did help limit "large-scale public protests" (Dyczok 2006), but it did not actually increase support for the Kuchma government and did little to protect that government once obvious electoral fraud (and careful political organization) sparked large-scale protest. In fact, the concealment (once publicly known) may have helped make protests even more vehement. Thus, in the post-communist region, as elsewhere, a government's cover-ups may prove more damaging than its crimes.

### Some Choose Other Goals

While revealing a government's abuse of power may push some to protest, there seem to be many others who already know about it or who would support the government even if they did know. For these voters, a leader's abuse of power is simply a price that must be paid for some other good, the nature of which can vary widely. Martine van Woerkens notes that in colonial India members of the sect of alleged assassins from which we derive our word "thug" often disguised themselves as traders, soldiers and men of God. Support for many post-communist strongmen relies on strikingly similar appeals: voters tolerate their thuggery as a regrettable necessity essential for achieving economic prosperity, attaining group security or following a moral imperative.

In their recent study, "Feeding the Hand That Bit You," Amber Seligson and Josh Tucker find that authoritarian inclinations are not enough to explain why people in Bolivia and Russia vote for members of their countries' previous authoritarian governments (Seligson and Tucker 2005). In this work and Seligson's analysis of Argentina's regional elections, economic incentives play a strong role, and leaders of previously nondemocratic regimes benefit from perceptions that those regimes offered more financial security. Evidence from Serbia, Belarus and Ukraine show a similarly important role for economic questions. Milošević, Lukashenka and Yanukovych successfully presented themselves to voters as guarantors of economic stability and guardians against the uncertainties of the free market. However, such appeals do not appear essential: Slovakia's Meciar and Croatia's Tudman did not tend to rely heavily on economic appeals to the disadvantaged.

An even more pervasive explanation for these leaders' support lies in their appeals to ethnic or national insecurity. In Croatia, Tudman's support began not primarily with authoritarianism but with nationalism. As a strong advocate for Croatia's independence, he attracted the support of those who had come to see themselves in terms of their Croatian national identity. Furthermore, since Croatian identity within Yugoslavia was tightly bound to Catholicism, he was also able to make successful appeals to religious conservatives on moral issues. Todosijevic's study of Serbia shows that although Milošević's early political appeal depended largely on his supporters' desire for socialism and authority, nationalism played an increasingly strong role. In Slovakia, Meciar's initial appeals rested primarily on his defense of Slovak sovereignty, first against the Czech majority in Czechoslovakia and later against the Hungarian minority and Western interference in independent Slovakia.

In Ukraine, the voting for Kuchma showed less distinct patterns, but support for his prime minister, Yanukovych in 2004, showed a strong pattern of support in the country's East, particularly among its Russian-speaking population (though dominance of state-owned industry in the same region makes it difficult to disentangle national and economic appeals). Initially, Belarus appears to offer an even stronger exception to the nationalist-authoritarian linkage, but closer examination shows an underlying similarity to the other cases. Unlike Tudman, Milošević or Meciar, Lukashenka failed to find common cause with those who embraced the symbols and language of his country's 19th century national movement. But his Soviet-style anti-nationalism actually involved an emphasis on group solidarity in the face of overwhelming external and internal threats that made it almost indistinguishable from the nationalisms employed by other strongmen in the region.

Nearly all post-communist strongmen thus relied on national appeals to some degree, and memories of 20th century fascist movements lead us to expect that nationalism is inseparable from the demand for order and stability. But it is important to note that the affinity is neither automatic nor inevitable. Public opinion surveys from the early post-communist period show that nationalism bore only a weak connection to the authoritarian worldview. This separation was actually extremely useful for would-be authoritarian leaders. As long as they were careful, they could focus on identity questions with nationalist audiences, emphasize order with authoritarian audiences and thereby attract large segments of both. Over time, however, the leaders intertwined the two audiences as they justified political abuses in "defense of the nation." Many voters accepted the link, and authoritarian attitudes became increasingly tied to nationalism. Those who did not drifted away to other parties, and strongmen found themselves with electorates that were more devoted but ever smaller. It is ironic that the stronger the bond between nationalism and authoritarianism, the more dangerous political life became for national-authoritarian leaders: Meciar lost a 1998 election, Milošević was deposed after covering up his loss in 2000 and Tudman appears to have been headed for one or the other of these fates when death intervened.

## Stopping Strongmen

It would be nice if we could categorize people who vote for strongmen neatly into these four groups, but even though scholarly research on these questions is still limited, we do know enough to say a few things.

First, as the international community has realized, leaders who abuse power tend to abuse electoral processes. Cleaner elections generally mean fewer votes for thugs. But election monitors are not enough. Abuses of power begin to affect voters long before election day by limiting voters' options and concealing crucial information. There is probably little that outsiders can do about this directly, but they can provide resources and support (moral and financial) for local journalists and community leaders who seek to expose abuses of state power.

Second, although there will always be voters who prefer thugs, they will not usually constitute a majority. Unless would-be strongmen have another source of political appeal to draw upon, they will usually lose (and in most countries of post-communist Europe, they usually did). This means that those inclined toward democracy must figure out how to compete against authoritarians on at least some portion of their home ground. The authoritarian nationalists who took power in Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia faced relatively weak competition on nationalist and economic issues because many democratically inclined candidates rejected nationalist, socialist or religious appeals. It is perhaps dangerous to encourage democrats to take up nationalism or its like, but democratic candidates must weigh the relative danger of ceding such issues to the other side. If a candidate's goal is not only to curb abuse of power but also to achieve other aims—ethnic tolerance, free markets, secularization—then his/her task becomes more difficult, and the thugs have greater freedom in their campaigns. In nearly every country studied here, the successful ouster of a strongman required a broad coalition of those who, regardless of their other deeply held opinions, believed that they could not achieve their goals without first ending the monopolization and abuse of power. Of course, the example of Belarus demonstrates even a broad, committed coalition may not succeed if it faces a sufficiently entrenched regime. Furthermore, as the Ukrainian example shows (and Belarusians may yet learn), the victory of a broad coalition may result in such chaotic infighting that voters find themselves nostalgic for the thugs they just voted out. Even in Slovakia, the most hopeful of examples, it took the greater part of a decade for fractious post-Meciar coalitions to settle down into something more reassuringly dull.

*Kevin Deegan-Krause is assistant professor of political science at Wayne State University. His book, *Elected Affinities: Democracy and Party Competition in Slovakia and the Czech Republic* (Stanford University Press, 2006), analyzes why Slovaks supported Vladimir Meciar.*

## References

Dyczok, Marta. 2006. "Was Kuchma's Censorship Effective? Mass Media in Ukraine before 2004." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58:2.

Seligson, Amber and Josh Tucker. 2005. "Feeding the Hand That Bit You." *Demokratizatsiya* 13:1.

Todosijevic, Bojan. 2005. "Structure, Determinants and Political Consequences of Political Attitudes: Evidence from Serbia." Doctoral Dissertation, Central European University, Department of Political Science.

© 2006 IFES

**[If you enjoyed this article, please consider subscribing](#)**

**We'd love to hear from you. Share your thoughts by emailing [editor@democracyatlarge.org](mailto:editor@democracyatlarge.org)**

** [Go Back](#)**

**Copyright © 2006 by IFES. All Rights Reserved | [Privacy Policy](#)**