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Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009). xiii+256 pp. Appendix, Bibliography, Index. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7350-7.

Focusing on strategies of authoritarian resistance this well-researched book offers a new perspective on the process of democratization in the former Soviet area. While traditionally democratization was viewed as a domestic process, the insights presented in Thomas Ambrosio's book suggest that international pressures play a great role in the process, especially in those cases where a country has such a powerful nondemocratic neighbor as Russia. More specifically, Ambrosio attempts to construct a typology of Russia's strategies of resistance to democratization. The author argues that too often researchers have selected on the dependent variable and focused on the successes of international democratic forces in bringing about democratization, but overlooked the failures. Hence, the main thrust of the argument is that authoritarian regimes are not passive actors waiting for democracy to take root in their countries, but work intensively together to ensure their survivability both at home and

abroad. As the author pertinently remarks, this type of study can be extended and similar patterns may be detected in the case of other authoritarian states.

Borrowing the metaphor of democratization waves from Samuel Huntington's works, Ambrosio brings evidence that Russian elites oppose the so-called fourth wave of democratization mainly for two reasons. First, the incumbent elites widely believe that regime change might spread to Russia too. Second, democratization in its neighborhood led to a strategic reorientation of foreign policy toward NATO and the European Union (EU). Ambrosio suggests that, faced with these two conflated threats, Russia employed five distinct strategies of authoritarian resistance: insulate, redefine, bolster, subvert, and coordinate.

The period of analysis does not include Yeltsin's Russia, but mainly Putin's two presidential terms. The reader is not told whether these are long-term strategies ready to be employed by the next president, and thus represent a structural shift in Russia's foreign policy after a period of uncertainty or whether the strategies to resist democratization are short-term and only specific to Putin's Russia. Nonetheless, the author makes a compelling argument showing that authoritarianism became more prominent during Putin's time.

Since the book is organized around the five strategies of authoritarian resistance, I will briefly examine and comment on each of them. Out of the five strategies, the most important is by far the one called “insulate.” It refers to the attempts of the regime to shield Russia from external democracy promotion mainly by severely controlling the activity of three actors: foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), election monitors, and youth movements. The first decisive action regarding the NGOs was the passing into law of a bill regarding NGO activity in Russia. The intelligence officials (the Federal Security Service and Foreign Intelligence Service directors) promoted the idea that there is a link between the foreign-funded NGOs and spying activities – hence, the first targets soon after the bill became law were the employees of the Soros Foundation, the British Embassy, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute. On the other hand, the regime tried to co-opt representatives of the civil society by offering them access to the Public Chamber, created in 2005. This backfired after some of the members of the Public Chamber criticized the government for the proposed modifications of the law on NGOs.

The second line of defense against democratization aimed at

discrediting the process of election monitoring. The final objective was to enjoy the monopoly over the interpretation of the whole electoral process or, in other words, to insulate the elections. While preparations to devise an alternative monitoring system were under way in 2002, the process was catalyzed by the 2004 Ukrainian elections and the critical remarks of the foreign observers during the 2003–2004 electoral cycle. That is when the Russian strategists realized that foreign observers might delegitimize the electoral results presented by the Central Electoral Commission. The alternative monitoring system organized under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) also included authoritarian states and was always issuing favorable reports. Russia worked hard to block the budget of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and protested against the democratization agenda of some European organizations. In July 2004, a letter signed by the other eight former Soviet republics criticized the priorities of the OSCE on three grounds: too much focus on human rights leading to disrespect for sovereignty, the application of double standards, and engagement in activities leading to political instability.

The youth movements were the third force present in all of the colored revolutions including Serbia in

2003. It seems Putin's regime turned on its head the revolutionary potential of the young people by creating a plethora of youth organizations, whose main mission was to prevent and stop a color revolution in Russia. *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Young Guard), *Nashi* (Ours), *Rossiia Molodaia* (Young Russia), *Mestnye* (Locals), *Georgievtsy* (Guards of St. George) are just some of the groups backed by the Kremlin. Initially, *Nashi* and *Molodaia Gvardiia* were the most present in the media, but soon after the 2007–2008 election cycle their coverage in the official media decreased, and Ambrosio implies that after the youth organizations accomplished their mission, they became potential competitors. *Nashi* organized on various occasions protests against Great Britain and Estonia, opposition groups, and they trained themselves as election monitors during the 2005 Moscow Duma elections. Learning from the experience of the colored revolutions, the regime suspected that anti-Putin opposition had to come from the streets, and the role of *Nashi* as a nonparty organization was precisely to prevent the formation of such a street-backed opposition. Internal enemies were framed as traitors, fifth columnists, fascists, and Nazis, while the West, especially the United States was portrayed as constantly menacing Russia's sovereignty. The choice of labels in the

pro-Kremlin press is not accidental, and Ambrosio rightly point out that the Great Patriotic War/World War II is an important reference point in the Russian psyche. Estonians, the "Other Russia" movement, and the West are often lumped under the heading "Nazis," simply because it resonates deeply with the Russian society. While the author claims that the insulation strategy dealt with the three above-mentioned elements, the chapter probably should have covered other activities such as journalism or research. It is often noted that foreign reporters and journalists stumbled upon bureaucratic obstacles, when trying to write about Chechnya, while some Russian journalists allegedly were attacked. After all, Russian government-controlled companies started investing in various Western media outlets like Euronews. The launch of the Russia Today English-language channel is also part of this strategy to deliver a carefully controlled message for Western audiences. One might ask whether insulation will continue to work, especially in a digital age, when access to alternative sources of information becomes widespread.

Redefinition is the second strategy focusing on the rhetorical aspect of resistance to democratization. It rephrases and questions the credibility of the Western discourse on democracy. The main rhetorical trick is to add an adjective to the notion

of democracy. Thus, while during Putin's early period of governing the term "managed democracy" was *en vogue*, currently the official ideology of United Russia is built around the notion of "sovereign democracy." The term sovereign suggests that the Russian democracy should be a homegrown democracy without interference (support or hindrance) from the West, as it happened in the Ukrainian and Georgian cases. Even though, the current Russian president Dmitry Medvedev had initially disagreed with the phrase "sovereign democracy," it was included in 2007 after the perseverance of the *siloviki* as an element of the United Russia's electoral platform to become the official ideology of the Russian Federation (P. 84).

While the West is criticizing Russia's elections and human rights situation, one of the responses heard from Russia is that the West lacks the necessary democratic credentials to preach democracy. As evidence of this lack of credentials, Russian officials like to refer to the racial segregation in the United States back in the 1960s as an example of human rights abuses. Trying to justify the need for a big government in times of crisis, some compare Putin's presidency with FDR's presidency. But by far the favorite attack on Western democratic credentials is the situation of the Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia brought up

as evidence of the democratic deficit in the EU. As shown by Ambrosio, Russia exploited this issue to delay Estonia's and Latvia's accession to the EU. However, Ambrosio concludes that more often than not, "Russia's rhetorical defense ... is based on misinterpretations and exaggerations" (P. 101).

The rhetorical defense also has a domestic component. The most often-heard critique is the association of democracy with the gloomy 1990s; consequently, the powerholders claim that the only alternative to the status quo is the return to the 1990s. It should be noted that the same rhetorical device is often used by the Party of Communists in Moldova and the Party of Regions in Ukraine. No wonder democracy is not associated with Russia, but is portrayed as an American standard (foreign) imposed from outside and thus presented as having meager chances of survival on Russian soil. Democracy promotion is linked with a form of neocolonialism. Whether it is due to the effectiveness of the rhetorical defense or the failure to adjust to the new position of Russia in the world, the Russian elites and the Russian voters do not see democracy promotion as an attempt to help Russia build a more democratic regime, but as an attempt to weaken Russia (P. 77). The statements of various officials including Vladislav Surkov (chief ideologue), Sergei

Lavrov (foreign minister), Igor Ivanov (defense minister), Vladimir Putin (president) support that assertion. The Russian counternarrative constructed by the Russian elites lacks a solid foundation, insofar as throughout history since Peter the Great, Russian elites have constantly attempted to modernize and imitate European standards. The polemic between the *zapadniki* (Westernizers) and the *evraziitsy* (Eurasianists) continues. However, the number of Russians traveling to the EU, referring to it rightly or wrongly as the civilized world, continues to grow.

“Bolster,” the third strategy, is illustrated by the Russian policy toward Belarus. Despite being so close to the EU, processes that have worked elsewhere in the neighborhood – conditionality, diffusion, and integration – do not work in Belarus. Russia outbids the West and provides stronger incentives for Alexander Lukashenko and his aides to side with the East. The fall of Lukashenko is clearly not in Russia’s interest, argues Ambrosio. For more than a decade, the EU funded the Belarusian opposition and anti-regime media, issuing a visa ban for Lukashenko’s friends, restricting its trade policy. On the other hand, despite the sometimes strained relations between Lukashenko and Putin, Russia managed to counter-balance the EU’s influence by supplying cheap gas or offering media

support to the dictator. So while the EU adopts exclusionary measures, Russia adopts measures aimed at integrating Belarus. However, Ambrosio assumes, rather too easily, that the West acts as a unitary entity toward Russia and Belarus. While most of the EU members favored sanctions against Belarus after the 2010 postelectoral anti-opposition crackdowns, Italy opposed this countermeasure.

The diffusion of democratic norms does not work in this case either because a strong regional identity is missing, with Lukashenko often claiming that Belarus belongs to a different civilization based on a Slavic common identity and Orthodox Christianity. Like many Russian officials, Lukashenko claims Belarus has its own model of political development (P. 126). Being in power for more than a decade, Lukashenko acquired political skills; as the author illustrates, when relations with Russia are strained, the dictator aptly plays the European card. Thus in February 2007, he was claiming that “Belarus is not only a European country, but at the center of the civilized world and interested in joining the EU” (P. 128). Moreover, Lukashenko accepted loans from the International Monetary Fund to survive the financial crisis, and in 2011 Belarus will have to start repaying the loans. Combined with the higher gas prices, it will put

additional pressure on Lukashenko. Despite that, the democratic prospects for Belarus are rather gloomy and Ambrosio eloquently demonstrated that Lukashenko's regime is well consolidated. Whether the "bolster" strategy is a result of the common language and identity of the two countries or explicit support for authoritarianism remains unclear. After all, Yeltsin also supported Belarus, but it would be hard to make the argument that he was supporting authoritarianism for the sake of authoritarianism. However, I would argue that "bolster" was a strategy used not only in Belarus but also in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova prior to the changes in their governments.

"Subvert" is a strategy that was applied toward Georgia and Ukraine after their Rose and Orange Revolutions, respectively. The logic behind it is that if a new democracy fails or is considered as bad as the regime it replaced, then the pattern of regional democratic trends can be halted or reversed. It should be noted here that in the Georgian case, Russia was not inimical right from the start toward Mikhail Saakashvili. In fact, in the period immediately following the Rose Revolution, Russian–Georgian relations improved. However, Russia's support for the separatist regions, the refusal to shut down its military bases, and its citizenship policy in the separatist regions led

to tensions between Saakashvili and Putin. The tipping point was the Orange Revolution, when Russian officials understood that a color revolution might spread to Russia with Georgian support and that a pattern of regime change was emerging in the post-Soviet space.

The Orange Revolution alarmed Russia because Ukraine was traditionally considered as very close to Russia in terms of identity. The countries have had unresolved issues for decades, such as the status of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, the rights of the Russophone population in Eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian dependence on Russian energy supplies. Ironically, as the author mentions, Putin might have contributed to the success of the Orange camp in Ukraine by prematurely congratulating Viktor Yanukovich for victory; this backfired because the Yushchenko supporters rallied behind their leader. Both in the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, the regime change brought along a strategic reorientation toward NATO and, as the author excellently highlights, it is difficult to conclude whether the Russian resistance was a reaction toward the democratic changes or a reaction against the pro-NATO course of the new power-incumbents.

The last strategy dubbed "coordinate" led to the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

(SCO), used as an example of authoritarian alignment in international relations. Stability became the password for joining the SCO, after the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan events in Uzbekistan. At that time, the Uzbek leader explicitly linked the Orange and Rose revolutions with the Andijan events and claimed that they were all part of the same pattern. The American military presence in Central Asia after 9/11 might have helped the consolidation of this authoritarian club. The SCO leaders link stability with diversity rejecting the models of political development advocated by the West, including human rights and democracy, and they praise noninterference and the defense of absolute sovereignty. One wonders, as does the author, whether the ideological conflicts are a thing of the past. The cooperation between Russia and China, Russia and Iran, Russia and Belarus, Belarus and Venezuela indicates that the resistance toward democratization is gradually becoming a concerted and more sophisticated effort, although, rhetorically, all autocrats claim to build democracies. However, the empirical evidence suggests that, rather than cooperate, authoritarian states tend to conflict more often than democracies. More attention to the economic integration projects initiated by Russia might enhance the author's argument.

The last chapter of the book is in fact an analysis of the 2007–2008 elections using the insights from the chapters on insulation and redefinition. The authorities carefully orchestrated the election monitoring, with CIS and SCO monitors reaching favorable conclusions. Perhaps, the most noteworthy detail is related to the preparation of the streets for the aftermath of the elections. According to several sources cited by Ambrosio, on the day following the parliamentary elections, the pro-Kremlin youth organizations were ready to occupy potential opposition rally points and were even advised to use violence against their political opponents (Pp. 196-197). Finally, media bias, blocking opposition parties from protesting, harassing regime-critical NGOs, and the refusal to participate in debates, all added up to a perfect recipe to preserve the status quo.

The fundamental question about the importance of these strategies in determining regime change and regime survivability in Russia's neighborhood was answered carefully in Ambrosio's book. However, more refinement is needed and more attention should be paid to the causal mechanisms, since it is not completely clear what lies at the bottom of this authoritarian backlash. "Insulation" and "redefinition" clearly worked in the Russian case, "subversion" might have contributed to Ya-

nukovich's victory, but Saakashvili is still the Georgian president, "coordination" is in the incipient stage, and "bolstering" leads sometimes to rapprochements with the EU. An explanation of the authoritarian backlash that would complement the one presented in the volume would also look at the fragility of the new democracies in the region, the often deep-rooted corruption, the use of separatism as a foreign policy tool, and the disappointment with the West as additional factors aiding the support for authoritarianism in the former Soviet Union. One has to give due credit to the author, who is careful in wording his conclusions and avoids the trap of definitive answers, specifying that the regime type is not the sole determinant of Russian policies toward neighboring countries "other factors such as geopolitics, strategic or national interests, elites, and national identity are, of course, important" (P. 7). As a final note, one might ask whether the inclusion of Armenia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan as case studies would have led to the development of a different typology of authoritarian resistance strategies, since it is not clear where those three cases would fit in the overall structure of the book. In terms of data collection, it is likely that some personal interviews and more reliance on Russian-language sources might have offered a more fine-grained picture.

By and large, this is a well-written and coherent book on a topic too often neglected by political scientists, who focus too much on domestic determinants of regime survivability and leave aside the pressures coming from authoritarian states. It is a must-read for those interested in Russian politics, and more broadly, also for those researching how authoritarian regimes survive and interact with both democratic and other authoritarian regimes.

