One Day Post-Soviet Countries Will Rise Up?

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Andrew Schumann: What is the role of the European Council on Foreign Relations? How does this institution cause decision-making in European foreign policy? Maybe some examples.

Andrew Wilson: The ECFR is a think-tank. It's not a state body, or part of the EU. The web address is www.ecfr.eu because it is pan-European, with offices in seven major European capitals: London, Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, Rome, Madrid and Sofia. Its raison d'être is to influenced foreign policy thinking in the EU by lobbying the main Member States. We do not have an office in Brussels, so as not to be seen as a creature of the EU bureaucracy, but obviously we lobby it too. I think we have influenced the climate of opinion on key issues, such as shaping and reshaping the Eastern Partnership. Media work, op-eds in key papers, etc. all have an affect, but an inside track matters too. The EU works by consensus – the key is to offer policy ideas to the key decision-making points in the policy process. We are very happy for other top take on, even claim ownership of our ideas. We have built up relations with key decision-makers.

Andrew Schumann: For a long time, you have investigated political systems of Eastern European countries. Why can we affirm that Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia are not democratic countries still? Which sophisticated techniques of the "virtual" political system used to legitimize post-Soviet regimes can you describe now? Don't we have the similar techniques in other post-Socialist republics? We face problems with vertical social mobility in different countries.

Andrew Wilson: I tried to address these questions in several recent pieces for Open Democracy. The first is summer 2011 was Political Technology: *Why is it Alive and Flourishing in the USSR*?[1] Which asked two distinct sets of questions. One was why Russia still needed to fix elections, when the system seemed omnipotent. Ironically, the next election cycle in 2011/12 then showed the dangers of hubris – it was precisely because the Kremlin saw no need top steamroller to victory with a hyped dramaturgiia that a space opened up for real opposition politics. I discussed these dilemmas in a second piece written this spring, *Putin Returns: But will Russia Revert to Virtual Democracy*?[2] The answer is that the 'Putin majority' has decayed, but a 'Putin plurality' remains, stitched together by the same old tired tricks. Putin has lost control of the narrative, the national public conversation. He is experimenting with repression at the moment, but the system was more stable in the 2000s, when the Kremlin controlled the narrative as well.

Belarus is a different type of state. Lukashenka has no regime party, there are no fake parties (though these played a role in the past, like the Liberal-Democrats of Belarus). Lukashenka's

favorite method of controlling opposition parties is agents, infiltration, divide-and-rule. The stability of the state depends on other things, namely the flow of rent to pay for the social contract and keep the elite happy.

Virtual politics depends on information control. It is harder to practice in other post-Socialist states; though Slovakia under Meciar came close, as did Romania in the early 1990s. Latvia has oligarchic parties, although these have been on the retreat in recent years.

Andrew Schumann: Probably, Ukraine is the most democratized country in comparison with the other post-Soviet (non-Baltic) countries. What problems does Ukrainian democracy face? Is there a chance that this country will be included into the European Union in the future?

Andrew Wilson: The other set of questions were about Ukraine. First, why was so much political technology able to survive in the years after the Orange Revolution? And second, why has it made such a comeback under Yanukovych?[3]

Re-control of the mass media has been key. Ukraine now has a clone opposition (Forward Ukraine) and a scarecrow opposition (the Freedom Party). The authorities will win the October 2012 elections, whatever happens. Political technology has even extended its reach: divide-and-rule tactics have been applied to the Crimean Tatars, Ukraine invests heavily in PR abroad, fake demonstrations are not only the norm, but have become business.

But Ukraine is still not Russia. The opposition is harder to destroy with political technology, which is why 'legal technology' has been used so harshly as well. And this is what has sunk relations with the EU, who wouldn't notice the more subtle stuff.

Andrew Schumann: In your book *Belarus: the Last European Dictatorship* you state that in the Belarusian history there were a series of false starts in the medieval and pre-modern periods and now there are the many rival versions of Belarusian identity. Were all these circumstances the true reasons of that the last dictatorship appeared in this country?

Andrew Wilson: In part, yes. Belarusian politics isn't really about identity politics in the same way as other, more 'nationalising' post Soviet states. This gives Lukashenka more freedom of maneuver. But it is also true that Lukashenka does play a type of identity politics that suits the average Belarusian more than the *Nasha Niva* project ever did: creolic, Russian-speaking or trasianka-speaking, in a special but still exploitative relationship with Russia.

Andrew Schumann: Recently Belarus is isolated from Europe. Whether it is possible to push forward democratization in Belarus by means of its isolation? For example, communications with official Minsk are extremely weakened at all levels, not only at the political one. Nevertheless, liberal forces in the country are supported, e.g. there is an essential financial support. In the context of weak communications at the official level, it attracts the number of problems. I am describing some. The liberal communities in Minsk have opportunity to master money of sponsors, reporting only to sponsors. It means, for example, that Belarusian NGO, supported by the West, implement principles which are not peculiar for NGO at all: closeness, secrecy, decision opaqueness, non-responsibility for society. In such conditions the realization of many projects can be fictitious. It causes corruption in liberal Belarusian communities. For example, for the reception of financial support the kickback may be up to 60% of the sum or even higher as some participants tell privately. For the liberal circles in Belarus it is a norm now. Money is in suitcases, etc. Another problem is that for Belarusians the participation in the European programs directed on democratization in the country becomes a wide door for the fast career. Very often at home these people possess a weak social capital, sometimes even they are unemployed, but thanks to personal contacts to some euroofficials start to act in a role of experts, heads of serious programs, although

these people have no expert knowledge, no influence in the Belarusian society (e.g. oppositionists have no popularity in Belarus at all). Whether experts of the European Council on Foreign Relations know about all these problems? Could you offer what ways of democratization of Belarus are possible still? It is obvious that all European recent strategies have appeared failed.

Andrew Wilson: Yes, indeed. Regime and opposition mirror one another. Lukashenka is dependent on Russian rents, the opposition on Western funding. One other consequence of this is there is no real interaction between the two. There is no political middle ground. The West should support the NGO sector more rather than opposition parties; funding should be linked to outreach performance, rather than report filing. There should be more technical contacts with the middle ranks of the bureaucracy.

Notes:
1. http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrew-wilson/political-technology-why-is-it-alive-and-flourishing-in-former-ussr
2. http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrew-wilson/putin-returns-but-will-russia-revert-to-%E2%80%98virtual-democracy%E2%80%99
3. http://www.phil.uni-greifswald.de/fileadmin/mediapool/slawistik/Projekte/Ukraine_under_Yanukovych._The_wrong_man_at_the_wrong_time.Andrew_Wilson_.pdf