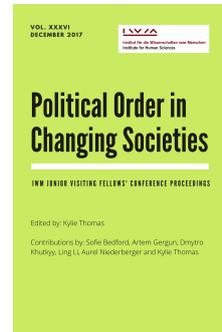


Clowns, Trouble Makers or Freedom Fighters? Understanding ‘Opposition’ in Authoritarian States

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Abstract: This is a summary of my presentation at the IWM Visiting Fellows conference in which I strived to problematize ‘opposition’ and its role in authoritarian regimes. My talk highlighted how in the case of Belarus the concept of opposition is misunderstood and misguides the understanding of political processes. Looking at state, public, and oppositional discourses I showed how they are all reinforcing the image of opposition as ‘failed’ which I argued contributes to the consolidation of the Belarusian authoritarian regime.

Most scholarly interest in Belarusian political life has been in relation to the electoral revolutions that took place in post-Soviet space during the last decade. The notion of ‘success’ versus ‘failure’ is a significant feature in this line of research, which is mainly using the Belarusian case as an example of the latter. This literature particularly stresses the idea of a weak ‘opposition’ being ultimately ‘responsible’ for missing the window of opportunity provided by electoral protests in an authoritarian state mainly as a result of the oppositional actors not managing to be consolidated or creative enough (Bunce & Wolchik 2011; Markus 2010; Marples 2006; Mitchell 2012). While ‘successful cases’ of regime overthrow in the region are referred to in colorful terms – Orange, Rose, Tulip – the political situation in other countries in the region stuck in stagnating transformation, such as Belarus, is suggestively described in the literature as “gray” (Carothers 2002) or “foggy” (Schedler 2002) and a such remains an understudied topic. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise given that in general the political life of the country is, as in most ‘consolidated autocracies’ largely predictable.[1] To this end, my presentation strived to, first, underline that even countries in the ‘gray zone’ deserve our scholarly attention as they can provide useful insights in particular about the nature and process of authoritarian consolidation. Second, to problematize the concept of ‘opposition’ and its role in authoritarian regimes beyond being an instrument for regime change and democratization.

In general the color revolution idea can be said to have done more harm than good for those who work for change in authoritarian states. 'Failing' to overthrow the government made the opposition lose respect in the eyes of a severely disillusioned population who appear to have lost hope and settled into political apathy. The parade of color revolutions, the so-called Arab Spring and the Euro-Maidan protests also made the governments more repressive and pre-emptive, further limiting the space for opposition-mindedness. As a result, oppositional actors today are almost completely marginalized in Belarus. Beyond revolutionary failure the persistent political status quo is usually explained by a combination of structural factors (various types of repression against political opponents, mentioned above, in combination with electoral fraud) and internal shortcomings of the opposition parties, such as their inability to cooperate and renew themselves and lack of political platforms. I would like to stress the importance of another (but of course related) aspect – how the notion of 'opposition,' an institution 'transplanted' in a sense to post-Soviet states, is constructed in three main discourses (state, public, and oppositional) and how all these in different ways reinforce the idea that opposition has 'failed.' This in turn contributes to the consolidation of the authoritarian regime in Belarus.

All three discourses feed into the general understanding of 'opposition' as a specific subgroup of the population with a monopoly to fight a losing game against state actors. The government rhetoric claims they are 'fake' e.g. not 'real' opposition, they are fifth 'columns' 'working for foreign powers'. The non-oppositional part of the population prefers to refer to the opposition in terms of ridicule as 'clowns'. Interestingly, the negative attitude towards opposition in this group on the one hand echoes the state's anti-opposition discourse, but on the other expresses disappointment and disillusion in the opposition being unable to 'deliver' neither revolutionary nor electoral change. In sum it should be noted that although the general population are increasingly distrusting of the authoritarian leaders they do not see the opposition as an alternative. Instead they 'mind their own business' trying to ignore both the government and the opposition as much as possible, which is reinforcing the authoritarian regime. This is not well seen by the oppositional actors that have a tendency to disregard all who are not 'with them' as taking the side of the state. The oppositional discourse is thus focused on terms like 'resistance' and struggle. Importantly even though oppositional actors are aware 'opposition' as such is futile they still persist, if only to be a nail in the eye of the authoritarian government.

By taking part in a political game that everybody understands as fictional, 'their opposition' is increasingly perceived as only a performance starring them and the state actors – totally irrelevant to the 'non-oppositional' public. In this sense the role of the 'opposition,' for good reasons, comes across in society as symbolic, rather than relevant. This fits the purpose of electoral authoritarian regimes, like Belarus, well. The key to their democratic façade lays in displaying necessary institutions, such as elections and opposition, while ensuring the population actually do not have a real choice by restricting general freedoms and rights that are the foundation of a democratic society (Schedler 2011). The continuous 'election game' we see in Belarus and other electoral authoritarian states featuring 'elections for the sake of elections' and 'opposition for the sake of opposition' is the ultimate manifestation of this. The authoritarian system is safe-guarded by the fact that 'opposition' has become seen as merely a joke and politics as a play only

relevant to the initiated players. If politics doesn't matter, changing the government doesn't matter and the authoritarian leaders are safe for the duration (for an extended discussion of the 'election game' in Belarus see Bedford 2017).

I suggest all these three discourses are contributing to the strengthening of the authoritarian regime by reinforcing the image of the opposition as a group of perpetual underdogs, and the relationship between state and this opposition as a zero sum game with a predetermined outcome. This conclusion underlines that it is high time to revise the common practice, both in academia and beyond, of relating to opposition in authoritarian states simply as an instrument for democratization. We need to take a new look at 'failed opposition' and its function in the authoritarian contexts. In fact, as at least partly illustrated by my presentation, in Belarus today, as a result of the distorted political situation, government propaganda and coercion, (often) counter productive foreign assistance, broken revolutionary dreams and path dependency in oppositional activities and leadership, the dynamics of interactions between opposition, state and society has contributed to sustaining and strengthening the authoritarian regime rather than to any furthering of the country's terminated democratization process.

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Notes:

[1] Belarus is consistently is classified as a consolidated authoritarian regime by Freedom House's Democracy Index, and has been so since the indexing first started in 1998.

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