

DEMOCRATIZATION AND INSTABILITY IN UKRAINE, GEORGIA, AND BELARUS

Robert Nalbandov

After their independence in 1991, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus launched the quest for self-determination, which, apart from a purely territorial meaning, also had political connotation. The three countries decided to start developing as independent modern democratic states, thinking, for a good reason, that what has been working well in the West may as well work in their own environments. Democracy was agreeably viewed as the best possible choice for their institution-building among the new cohort of post-Soviet states. The choice for democracy, as a governance regime, is fully understandable. With all its current attributes and institutions, it was based on the popular views that democracy correlates with high economic standards and helps keep domestic and international peace. It was widely believed that democracy was the most conducive regime to domestic stability by decreasing the propensity for foreign interventions and providing viable business and legal guarantees for the local and international actors.

The results of the present monograph—backed up by multiple statistic indicators in the areas of political stability, democratization, and economic development in Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine—revealed a dramatically different picture. Notwithstanding the similar starting points of departure, in a decade from their independence, the three new nations achieved quite diverse indicators in all three variables. The empirical evidence collected during field trips to these countries, together with the public opinion surveys, show quite a remarkable deviation from the commonly accepted arrangements within the democracy/political stability/economic development nexus.

While Georgia became the beacon of democracy in all post-Soviet space, Belarus has been suffering under the strong authoritarian rule of Alexander Lukashenka. The last country in the list, Ukraine, has been historically struggling with the bifurcate nature of its domestic politics due to the political and cultural East-West divide. Also, Georgia, which is duly viewed as the most democratic state out of the three, has been struggling with multiple sources of domestic and external instability since its independence. The most stable and economically developed of the trio, Belarus, is a single-man authoritarian country. The situation in Ukraine is even stranger: it has weak links between democratization, political stability, and economic prosperity.

The diversity between the variables of democratization, political stability, and economic development can be explained by two large factors: authoritarian resilience of the ruling elites successfully sustained by imposition of a low degree of freedom and disregard for general human rights, and the highly volatile domestic environment and presence of local and foreign actors groups with their parochial interests. The newly independent countries with developing political cultures had to “mimic” the existing democratic practices in order to fit within the rapidly globalizing international environment. However, due to extremely high political volatility in Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus, the success of political stability and economic development has to be based on two elements: the authoritarian resilience of the existing governance and economic support from abroad (Belarus). When these conditions are absent, under the influence of unsettled political

cultures, the regime mimicry is actually detrimental to overall political stability, which, in turn, negatively affects economic development. These countries had to mimic the existing western democratic practices without proper institutional socialization (Georgia and Ukraine).

In 1991, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus embarked on the thorny paths of independently developing their respective political cultures. The resulting state of affairs brings important implications for the U.S. political and military involvement in the region—15 years after, democracy still remains an unaffordable luxury. In Ukraine and Georgia, the choice for democracy brought more political instability than for authoritarian governance in Belarus. The most important factor accounting for this paradox character was their political cultures. To keep political stability, democracies need highly developed political cultures, which would permit the expressions of free will within the democratically accepted frameworks of policymaking. In Ukraine, the political culture is highly bifurcate, leading to the civilizational gaps between the pro-Western and pro-democratic West and pro-Russian East and South. In Georgia, on the contrary, the domestic political culture is rather solid, but, at the same time, is extremely vibrant and easy to reshape. In Belarus, the situation is dramatically different: its

rigid political culture, coupled with chronic popular political apathy, created highly nutritious grounds for autocracy to prosper.

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute’s homepage at www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College.”



This Publication



SSI Website



USAWC Website