

Dr Ben Noble,
Herbert Nicholas Junior Research Fellow,
New College, University of Oxford,
Holywell Street,
Oxford
OX1 3BN

benjamin.noble@new.ox.ac.uk

Way, Lucan, *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, xiii + 257pp., £29.00/\$44.95 p/b.

Why has the political regime in Belarus undergone authoritarian consolidation at the same time as Moldova and Ukraine have experienced higher levels of political competition? In this excellent book, Lucan Way proposes a theory-based account of divergent post-Soviet political trajectories, arguing that variation in regime closure can be explained by levels of state coercive and economic control, party organisation, and national identity. Way's central argument is that competitive politics can result from autocratic weakness rather than democratic strength. In other words, moments of political competition can best be understood as resulting from frustrated 'authoritarianisation' rather than successful democratisation. Although the basic claim will not be new to many – Way published a widely-read article in 2002 introducing the phrase 'pluralism by default' with a focus on Moldova, followed by a less well-known paper from 2003, comparing the cases of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine – the current book sharpens the theory and updates the story, most importantly incorporating information on the events leading up to, and following, the downfall of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine.

Chapter 1 provides a very accessible account of Way's argument. Way proposes a number of causal mechanisms – including elite defection, nationalist opposition mobilisation, and foreign support for the opposition – that translate state disorganization and divided titular national identities into political competition in the form of media pluralism, political opposition, parliamentary assertiveness, and an impaired ability of the regime to manipulate election results. The outcome is 'pluralism by default', which 'describes a range of democratic, competitive authoritarian, and soft authoritarian regimes in which political competition

survives, not because leaders are especially democratic or because institutions or societal actors are particularly strong, but because the government is too fragmented and the state too weak to monopolize political control' (p. 2). This leads on to another important and distinctive claim of the book: that 'the same factors that facilitate democratic political competition may *also* thwart the development of stable, well-functioning democratic institutions' (p. 3).

Following a brief historical account in chapter 2 of how *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union set the stage for subsequent regime paths, chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide engaging and richly detailed accounts of differing regime trajectories in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, respectively. The case-selection strategy is straightforward: 'these countries were chosen because they provide analytical leverage to understand the sources of post-Cold War regime competition: they are similar across a range of factors considered important for regime outcomes but exhibit key variations in identity and party and state capacity' (p. 24). And yet, Way steps back somewhat with footnote 108 immediately following this research design rationale: 'This comparison [of country-cases] has a purely heuristic value. It does not allow me to control for variables that are similar among my cases. Instead, causal factors are assessed through process tracing in the case study chapters.' Although the focus on process tracing is welcome, the apparent relegation of the comparative design in terms of causal leverage seems unnecessarily cautious. No doubt in response to concerns of external validity, chapter 6 applies the theoretical account to the remaining non-Baltic states of the former Soviet Union, and chapter 7 ends with a brief discussion of states outside Eurasia. In these broader discussions, Way is refreshingly candid about the limitations of his approach, noting cases which do not fit into his narrative. In most instances, Way points to foreign-power support or pressure to explain these anomalies – a factor external to the theory proposed in the book, but consistent with Way's work with Steven Levitsky on 'leverage'. (See p. 155 for a discussion of Georgia and the fall of Mikheil Saakashvili, and p. 161 for a discussion of Tajikistan and the rise of Emomali Rahmon.)

This is not a book about democratisation, although the concerns of both the target audience and the related literatures mean that Way peppers the book with references to democracy, sometimes to the detriment of conceptual precision. For example, while Way writes at one

point that the 'book examines the origins of competitive and sometimes democratic politics' (p. 5), at other times his goal appears to be to explain varying levels of regime 'closure' – a concept that, according to Way, 'heavily overlaps with but is not the same as regime type' (footnote 44, chapter 1). In the same vein, Way refers to politics following the Orange Revolution as 'highly democratic' (p. 90), but by what metric? Why not simply 'highly pluralistic', since he goes on to note that this was 'dysfunctional rule'? Moreover, 'pluralism' is described very briefly in footnote 5 of chapter 1 as 'political competition broadly understood'. For a concept that is so central to the book's argument, this is a swift treatment.

The small number of errors and editorial oversights do not detract from the book's overall impact. It is unfortunate, however, that a case of 'the Ukraine' (p. 50) slipped through the net, given the negative political connotations of that formulation. In addition, whereas Way begins the book by stating that sources were consulted in four languages (p. 29), this number mysteriously changes to five by the end of the book (p. 143). Finally, although a certain amount of repetition is inevitable, and even desirable, in such a book, at times the word-for-word replication of text gives the impression that the country-specific chapters were assembled from pre-existing, self-contained texts (see, for example, the references to Belarus and the World Values Survey on pages 128 and 168). These are, however, very minor quibbles.

That Way's argument still has the power to act as a corrective – even after the wave of literature following what Thomas Carothers called the 'end of the transition paradigm' – speaks both to the quality of the book, as well as to the apparent perennial urge (which the book critiques) to interpret moments of political competition as intimations of democratisation. Along with other recent works from scholars such as Henry Hale, Way's book serves as a sober reminder that pluralism is not synonymous with democracy and that the challenge of the latter lies in regulating political competition without stifling it.