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978-0-521-18725-1 - Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries

Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik

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Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries

From 1998 to 2005, six elections took place in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia that had the surprising outcome of empowering the opposition and defeating authoritarian incumbents or their designated successors. Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik compare these unexpected electoral breakthroughs – to one another and to elections that had the more typical result of maintaining authoritarian rule. They draw three conclusions. First, the opposition was victorious because of the hard and creative work of a transnational network composed of local opposition and civil society groups, members of the international democracy assistance community, and graduates of successful electoral challenges to authoritarian rule in other countries. Second, the remarkable run of these upset elections reflected the ability of this network to diffuse an ensemble of innovative electoral strategies across state boundaries. Finally, elections can serve as a powerful mechanism for democratic change. This is especially the case when civil society is strong, the transfer of political power is through constitutional means, and opposition leaders win with small mandates.

Valerie J. Bunce is the Aaron Binenkorb professor of government and international studies at Cornell University, where she served as chair of the Department of Government from 2001 to 2007. Since receiving her Ph.D. in political science at the University of Michigan, Bunce has also taught at Lake Forest College, Northwestern University, Central European University (Budapest), and the University of Zagreb. She has served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies and as vice president of the American Political Science Association, and she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her articles have appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *World Politics*, *International Organization*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Slavic Review*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, and *East European Politics and Societies*. She is the author of *Do New Leaders Make a Difference? Executive Succession and Public Policy under Capitalism and Socialism* and *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* and a coeditor of *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*.

Sharon L. Wolchik is professor of political science and international affairs at The George Washington University. She has served as director of the Russian and East European Studies Program and the Masters in International Policy and Practice Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs and is a member of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies. She has served on the board of the American Association for Slavic Studies and the Cold War International History Project and as chair of the Board of the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research. She is the author of *Czechoslovakia in Transition: Politics, Societies, and Economics* and is a coeditor of *Domestic and Foreign Policies in Eastern Europe in the 1980s*; *Women, State, and Party in Eastern Europe*; *Women and Democracy: Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe*; *Women in Power in Post-communist Parliaments*; *The Social Legacies of Communism*; and *Central and East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy*. She has authored articles in *Slavic Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *World Politics*, *Studies in Comparative Communism*, the *Journal of Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, and *East European Politics and Societies*.

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*Advance Praise for Defeating Authoritarian
Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*

“*Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* is a major contribution to debates on regime transition. Bunce and Wolchik make the paradigmatic case that opposition creativity, innovation, and ambition are central to successful democratization. The book also offers a refreshing take on democratic diffusion. Contrary to the ‘high altitude’ approach taken by so many studies, this book, based on primary research in at least eleven countries, shows us exactly how diffusion takes place and the array of domestic and external actors who play a critical role in its success or failure. This book will be of enormous interest to scholars of democratization and essential reading for those concerned with strengthening democratic institutions in the world today.”

– Lucan A. Way, University of Toronto

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The idea for this book originated in a casual conversation between the two of us in early 2004. Val had been working on a project comparing variations in bargaining dynamics between central and regionally based political leaders in Georgia and Serbia. In the process of exploring why some regions were cooperative, others wanted more autonomy, and still others demanded independence, she noticed that both countries had experienced a surprising and similar event: elections that generated large-scale popular protests in response to fraud and that replaced long-serving authoritarian leaders with leaders of the opposition. When she mentioned this to Sharon, Sharon said that actually, the same thing (minus the protests) had happened earlier in Slovakia. Being “graduates” of 1989, we thought, “Here we go again.” We decided it would be a great idea to put our heads together and analyze this dynamic. Of course, several more cases were added to the study – Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. As our study progressed, we came to see the connection between our original cases and developments in Croatia in 2000 and, as a prelude to the Slovak breakthrough, Bulgaria in 1990 and 1997 and Romania in 1996. We also decided that we did not want to fall into the trap of confining our attention to successful cases of electoral turnover – that is, elections where oppositions succeeded in their quest to replace authoritarian leaders or their anointed successors. Looking only at such cases would have been a problem because they are the clear exception to the rule in mixed regimes that straddle democracy and dictatorship. Variation in electoral results would also help us tease out important causal influences. Thus, we added elections in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus to the group. These elections look a lot like the successful ones, save for their outcomes.

Our enthusiasm for this study was boundless. However, we confess that this has not been an easy book to research and write. Among other things, tracking down key local and international participants in so many elections taking place in so many different countries and then interviewing them was not easy, especially because many of them have moved or taken new positions since the events we analyzed took place. Thus, this book took a great deal longer to

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research and to write than we expected. The writing was also difficult because we had a great deal of data, and we analyzed these elections in three ways. We carried out case studies of each one; we compared them to one another; and we treated them as events that were interconnected through a diffusion dynamic. Of course, how many academic books would get written if authors were better at predicting how much work they would actually require?

This book has also been a labor of love. In part, this was because after more than thirty years of friendship (beginning as graduate students at the University of Michigan), we decided that it was finally time to work together. Miraculously, the friendship survived – even when we did fieldwork together in Armenia and Azerbaijan! Indeed, it deepened. This book was also a trip down memory lane in another respect. We returned to an issue that had long preoccupied us before the collapse of communism led us to take up the new topic of democracy – that is, struggles against authoritarian rule. This project returned us both to our intellectual roots and, in those countries where democratic breakthroughs did not occur, to our early experiences in conducting fieldwork in nondemocratic settings. It also raised issues about authoritarianism that we had not considered during the communist era. A final rewarding aspect of this study was the opportunity to interview so many fascinating people. In both those countries where efforts to use elections to unseat semi-authoritarian leaders succeeded and those where they did not, we met amazing people who, in their dedication, courage, and willingness to persist in struggling against difficult odds, reminded us of the dissidents and independent intellectuals we had come to know under communism. It did not hurt, moreover, that the participants in these elections were in many cases very willing to share what was the most exciting political experience of their lives. They were eager to share their experiences, and we were privileged to listen. We want to thank them again for their generosity in sharing their time and insights with us.

Our “struggle,” like that of the activists we interviewed, was not just long; it also owed its success to the contributions of a wide range of people. Thus, we have a long list of thank-yous. We can begin with our mentors at the University of Michigan, William Zimmerman and Zvi Gitelman. Our common intellectual grounding clearly made our collaboration easier, as our perspectives on the information we gathered and, more importantly, our standards for evaluating it were generally very similar. More recently, we are thankful to the Smith-Richardson Foundation, the International Center for Non-Violent Conflict, the Einaudi Center for International Studies and the Institute for the Social Sciences at Cornell University, and the Institute for European, Eurasian, and Russian Studies at the George Washington University for providing financial support and to the U.S. Department of State for inviting us to give lectures in Armenia. Residential fellowships at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center and at the National Endowment for Democracy gave us much-needed time to carry out collaborative writing and also introduced us, particularly in the latter case, to numerous actors involved in our cases. In addition, we are

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Our warmest thanks go to our families who supported us in this as in all of our endeavors. Ronald Herring, Nicholas Bunce-Herring, Leon and Olga Wolchik, Sharlene Wolchik, and John, Michael, Andrew, and Annie Varnum all played their roles in encouraging us and keeping us grounded, and it is to them that we dedicate this book.