
“From Velvet Revolutions of 1989 to ‘Velvet Occupations’ of 2014: Europe’s Soft Power and the Geopolitics of Putin’s Russia”

There is no better time than the present to consider the changing power dynamics between Europe and Russia. Dr. Stefan Auer’s lecture, which dealt with a variety of issues from the changing dynamics of protests and revolutions to the political theory underlying European and Russian policy, was intended not as a prediction for the futures of Russia, Ukraine, and the EU, but rather as a reflection on what caused Europe’s weakness, and the implications of that weakness with respect to Putin’s Russia.

Dr. Auer opened his controversial lecture with a photo of the Maidan in Kiev; everything was in flames and the buildings in a shambles, but the EU flag was still flying in the center of the square, acting as a symbol for the characteristically “EUropean” values of democracy and human rights to which the protesters in Kiev aspired. This symbolic and largely conceptual vision of Europe provided a framework for much of the lecture, establishing a basis for understanding EUrope’s response to Russia’s recent assertion of military power. Dr. Auer looked back towards the Velvet Revolutions of 1989, which, for the first time since the advent of the radical, violent modes of protest employed during the French Revolution, espoused nonviolent strategies to bring about political and social change. These same strategies continued throughout the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe in the early 2000s, and also characterized the beginning of the protests in Ukraine. Dr. Auer suggested that this shift in the revolutionary script arose from the oft-cited concept of the “return to Europe,” largely as a result of the soft power of EUrope.

Before a further discussion of the current state of EU-Russian affairs, Auer took a moment to wittily define soft power: “I make you want what I want you to want without you even noticing.” He then examined the success of soft power in EUrope with regard to its foreign policy. Auer suggested that soft power played a large role in the 2004 expansion of the EU, but suggested that it could not work in countries that are unable or do not wish to become a part of the European project. Auer blamed what he considered to be the failure of the European neighborhood policy on this limitation. However, for those countries who are a part of contemporary EUrope, the vision is clear; Dr. Auer considered the phenomenon of a post-modern, post-national, borderless EUrope to be the new face of much of the continent, eschewing geopolitical motivations in favor of an integrative model focusing on the pooled sovereignty of EUropean nations.

Drawing a sharp contrast to EUrope, Auer considered the current political and ideological position of Russia. He saw a Russia rediscovering nationalism with gusto. Russia has not abandoned its concern for its borders: Putin has often said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” Russia has frequently expressed its interest in what it calls the “near abroad,” and has, as recent events would indicate, taken the opportunity to exert its power in these areas. Dr. Auer highlighted the peculiarity of Russia’s recent intervention in Ukraine and especially in Crimea, in that it used very post-modern techniques to perpetuate a condemnable

move informed by border politics. Although Russia certainly made displays of brute force in Crimea, relatively little violence was perpetrated; despite its utter untruth, Russia started a media campaign to frame the new government in Kiev as Fascist. Government initiatives within Russia, such as Nashi, a “democratic” youth nationalist group (which has drawn comparisons to the Hitler Youth from its critics), have been created to raise conscription rates, increase patriotic sentiment, and promote healthy lifestyles. Russia’s use of such non-violent, ideologically based strategies, similar to those used by protesters in the Velvet and Color revolutions, has led Dr. Auer to consider the recent annexation of Crimea to be a “Velvet Occupation,” a troubling development that is sure to have consequences regarding Russia’s place in the European and global political picture.

Considering the ideas of political theorists including Carl Schmitt, Jürgen Habermas, and Alexander Dugin, Auer discussed the divides he saw forming between Europe and Russia, making no secret of his disagreement with some of the ideas he presented. Auer presented Dugin as a sort of model for Putin’s nationalist, border-focused politics; Dugin himself believes that Europe is divided by the powers of Russia and Germany, and that the Westernizing influence of the United States is to be avoided and prevented. Schmitt and Habermas, in providing contrasts to each other provided theoretical lenses through which to interpret Russia and Europe, respectively. While Schmitt’s strict conservatism emphasizes the indivisibility of sovereignty, the sharp contrasts between friend and enemy, and the unavoidability of conflict, Habermas focuses on pooled sovereignty, communicative reason, and peace through conversation. It is easy to understand which theoretical model best suits Putin’s Russia.

Upon consideration of Russia’s new, more powerful position, Auer called for a “more robust response” on the part of the West to allay what he qualified as almost “Imperialist” behaviors on the part of Russia; he also shared the recently voiced concerns regarding the safety of Estonia in Russia’s expansionist project. Auer suggested that even soft power could be a source of greater strength if Europe were to increase sanctions of Russia for its actions in Russia and Ukraine. This lecture was in no means a call to immediately allow Ukraine to become an EU member state; Dr. Auer even observed that in times of conflict, the pooled sovereignty model of the EU rarely works, citing Greece’s loss of sovereignty in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis as an example. The aim of the lecture was only to present a series of observations, opinions, and warnings for the future of relations between the West and Russia.

The lecture spurred articulate and probing questions from students. Topics ranged from Sino-Russian relations to conservatism in Central Europe (especially Hungary and Slovakia) to the merits and challenges of a liberal democracy.

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