

THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN PROTECTING DEMOCRACY

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*Review of 'Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy'.**New York: Public Affairs, 2009, by Natan Sharansky*

Natan Sharansky, the famous Soviet dissident, *otkaznik* (translators' note: a person denied permission to leave the country) and later on, a Minister in the Israeli Government instantaneously became a star in the political science realm in one glorious moment in 2004. This occurred when George W. Bush, in preparing his second inauguration speech, told Condoleezza Rice that his source of inspiration was Sharansky's book 'The case for democracy'. In his second work, the ex-dissident promoted a new approach to international politics. According to this approach, democratic powers should not be permitted to maintain friendly relations with authoritarian regimes or 'societies of fear', as the author called them. According to this logic, Israel should have refused recognition to Yasser Arafat as an obviously undemocratic leader. The conception put forward by Sharansky fit well into the new 'democracy proliferation' line that was towed by the Washington Administration. 'The case for democracy' itself looked like a kind of a manifesto of the 'global democratic revolution' that was much-touted by Bush.

Later on, the 'global democratic revolution' faced a number of problems. Almost all of the political regimes that emerged from the so-called 'coloured revolutions' seemed to be weak and unstable. On the back of the rise in anti-authoritarian wave, Ahmadinejad came to power in Iran, and the radical Palestinian group Hamas asserted itself in the Gaza Strip, which has acquired autonomy. The stake of 'democratisation' as a universal cure for all misfortunes has not ended up proving itself well.

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It is difficult to say to what extent this situation might have



actually contributed to the defeat of Sharansky as an Israeli politician. However, it did not do any evident harm to his fame as a public intellectual at the global level. His new book was a real event in the political life of the year 2009 and was partly taken as a sign of a shift made by some Soviet and East European ex-dissidents to the conservative right wing.

In his previous book, Sharansky presented the 'case for democracy'. His most recent work 'Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy' (it was published in Russia at the very beginning of 2010), he defined the term 'identity' as the set of national and cultural features typical for a person. As in the case with his previous book, **this book is not a treatise of a learned scholar at all but a passionate pamphlet of a politician.** This politician has a complex biography of a dissident, in addition to clear understanding of the priorities of his country.

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While in his previous book, Sharansky identified cold realism,

indifferent to the 'case for democracy', as the main object for his criticism, in 'Defending Identity', his criticism is instead aimed at European human rights activists.

This is captured by three trends that are equally alien for the author, which are post-nationalism, post-modernism, and multiculturalism. The average Europeans' readiness to defend the 'case for democracy' is weakened by criticism of 'identity', and of religious and national peculiarities. According to Sharansky, they cannot completely discard their fear of religious fanaticism and ethnic nationalism. The post-modern Europe supports the claims of the Palestinians and refuses to support democratic Israel due to its fear of a stronger and obviously non-tolerant identity. This is done in the same way that the liberal 1950s Soviet intelligentsia could not overcome their fear of the KGB, while Ukrainian nationalists and Zionists continued to express their opinions freely and were not afraid of jails.

In his opposition to liberal post-nationalism, Sharansky goes as far as taking a stance against the French government's ban of the Muslim hijab worn in public places, since this measure is based on the same abstract liberal approach. The problem here is not as much in the author's inconsistency (we have to admit that he sincerely seeks a strict consistency in his views) as in the complexity of the 'identity' problem itself. This is revealed in the fact that the identity of a state and the identities of its respective ethnic and religious minorities within its population can indeed be non-complementary. In order to resolve the conflict of these very hostile identities in a democratic manner, they should use the same post-nationalism that has been so easily denied by Sharansky. ■