

# Post-Soviet Realpolitik

## Russian Policy After the Color Revolutions

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 4

*Andrey S. Makarychev*

*Nizhny Novgorod Linguistic University*

*March 2008*

Russian policy toward Georgia and Ukraine after the color revolutions presents an example of a *realpolitik* answer to a normative policy challenge. Here we see one of the widest discursive gaps between Russia and the West: the former is convinced that the reason for the latter's external interference, regardless of its normative rhetoric, always boils down to *realpolitik*, while the West prefers to frame its policy toward the color revolutions within the normative terms of promoting democracy and civil liberties. Russia entirely denies the normative appeal of the "color revolution" phenomenon, reducing it to a set of pragmatic and power-related issues.

In responding to the color revolutions, therefore, Russia pursues two goals: to prevent the rise of anti-Russian regimes in neighboring states, and to block any possibility of projecting a color revolution into Russia. For Russia, the post-color revolution countries are perceived as troublemakers: relations with Ukraine are complicated by its increasingly decisive orientation towards the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, while Georgia is faulted for its commitment to NATO and for allegedly being loyal to separatists in Chechnya. Russian policymakers perceive these states' initiatives with irritation and as an indication of their malevolent ambitions in Russia's "backyard."

As a result, post-revolution developments in Georgia or Ukraine are not seen as being radically different from Russia's own political developments. Their political systems are frequently even presented as being inferior to Russia's. According to the prevailing interpretation, Ukraine is undergoing a period of instability and faces fragmentation and disintegration, while Georgia is a state ruled by a hypercentralized authoritarian and repressive government. Though this might suggest that the two states are moving in divergent directions, both trajectories are taken as confirmation of Russia's negative attitude toward the color revolutions, and their political and social consequences.

What are the means which Russia employs in its relations with Ukraine and

Georgia? In the case of Ukraine, Russia uses political pressure to force Kyiv to make concessions in at least two important areas. The first is regarding the recognition of Russian as an official language of Ukraine. Here Russia appears to have a strong argument, since the majority of Ukrainians are Russian-speakers. Russia's second major demand is the halting of Ukraine's further integration into NATO. If for no other reason, this issue is important in terms of Russia's strategic plans to maintain its military presence in Sebastopol, which might otherwise be jeopardized in the case of Ukrainian NATO membership.

Russian instruments against Ukraine have included: manipulation of energy prices; interference in the electoral campaign of 2004 through the participation of Russian experts in "electoral engineering;" and disputation of border demarcations (in 2003, the small island of Tuzla became a source of serious tension between the two states as a result of Russia's attempt to build a dike).

Russia has employed an even greater variety of instruments against Georgia:

- The introduction of a visa regime that has targeted tens of thousands of temporary (and sometimes) illegal Georgian workers. The Russian government is fully aware of its economic advantages, including its substantial energy resources and the attractiveness of its labor market.
- Military pressure, including the violation of Georgian airspace and multiple bombings from unspecified military jets. Unsurprisingly, high-ranking Georgian officials accuse Russia of planning "terrorist acts" against Georgia.
- A ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, under the pretext of health and safety standards.
- The granting of Russian citizenship to residents of the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This policy may lead towards their step-by-step incorporation into the Russian Federation. In August 2007, for instance, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dubbed the residents of North and South Ossetia "a single people."
- An anti-Georgian media campaign within Russia, which provoked – perhaps unintentionally – repressive actions against Georgian restaurant, nightclub, and casino owners in Moscow and other major cities.

What results have these policies achieved? Russia's *realpolitik* goal to keep neighboring states firmly within its geopolitical orbit has provoked a *normative* reaction from the West and the post-color revolution states themselves. An example of this trend is the closer inclusion of the post-color revolution governments into EU and NATO institutions, as well as the establishment of the Community of Democratic Choice. The revival of the Orange coalition in the aftermath of the Ukrainian parliamentary election of September 2007 can also be seen as a further normative development.

In the meantime, Russia appears to have accepted this challenge and has even counter-attacked on the normative plane. Such a reaction can be discerned, for example, in an October 2007 State Duma statement, accusing the Saakashvili regime of violating principles of democracy and for committing human rights abuses, including tightening control over opposition and repressing dissidents. It is hard to imagine that this normative appeal could be driven by purely practical considerations, such as the need

to support non-existent “pro-Russian” forces in Georgia. Instead, it seems that Russia is attempting to make a point in the debate over democracy standards and to take advantage of the instability of Saakashvili’s regime. Russia’s normative counter-attack gained further strength with the Georgian crackdown on protestors in November 2007, after which a number of major Western states admitted that there was a significant degree of popular discontent within Georgia. This admission appeared to match the dominant Russian discourse. By the same token, Russia accused the West of supporting the “illusionary democracy” of the Saakashvili regime, which from the Russian point of view is oligarchic, voluntaristic, and despotic.

Another normative issue that has appeared to strengthen Russia’s position is the outcome of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. Georgia has effectively been forced to share Russia’s normative position on the matter, grounded in the universal applicability of international law. Georgia’s cautious position is explained by its unwillingness to support any measures that can be interpreted as strengthening the pro-independence aspirations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Conceivably, this situation could be used to bridge the gap in Russian-Georgian relations.

While Russia’s disdain of the color revolutions is strongly supported domestically by a nationalist and power-driven discourse, such an attitude still faces a number of challenges. On the one hand, Russia’s confrontational policy with Ukraine and Georgia faces significant cultural limitations since both states are widely perceived as being culturally close to Russia and as sharing similar historical and religious legacies. On the other hand, Russian policy toward Georgia, at least, is severely constrained by the lack of any pro-Russian political elite within the country. Even in Ukraine, former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, despite his political rhetoric, cannot be considered an explicitly pro-Russian politician.

There are signs, in fact, that Russia is increasingly recognizing its neighbors as independent states and separate political entities whose relations with Russia no longer fit into a “patron-client” type of relationship. Russia’s attitude toward Ukraine has shifted substantially between the Orange Revolution and the return of the Orange coalition to power in parliamentary elections of September 2007. That month, President Vladimir Putin remarked that “if the West wants to support ‘orange’ movements, let [it] pay for them. Or do you want to support them but have us pay the bill?” While framing relations in such pragmatic, and perhaps even cynical, terms, Putin’s statement was free of any geopolitical or ideological connotations.

The events in Ukraine (and, to a lesser extent, in Georgia) are exerting serious influence upon Russian identity. Russia is gradually losing its political leverage over states which were traditionally part of Russia’s “near abroad,” shedding itself of its imperial past and reframing its national identity in more pragmatic and business-like ways. Yet this is not a straightforward process. On the one hand, Russia aspires to be a depoliticized international actor that reacts primarily to economic arguments and frames its relations with adjacent states accordingly. This logic forces Russia to give up the naïve illusion that it can be the only pole of attraction within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). On the other hand, such de-politicization is far from complete. On certain occasions, Russia reacts fiercely to identity-related arguments, raising the emotional component of its foreign policy discourse. President Putin’s harsh reaction to the hypothetical deployment of NATO bases in Crimea is a good illustration

of the explosive conflation of identity- and security-based arguments. Learning how to share interests, power, and responsibilities with other major international actors who have a stake in Russia's neighborhood (including the EU, the United States, NATO, and even China) will be one of the main challenges facing the new Russian president.

*PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Program on Global Security and Sustainability of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, the Carnegie Corporation, or the MacArthur Foundation.*