

These Colors May Run

The Backlash Against the U.S.-Backed “Democratic Revolutions” in Eurasia

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The victory of Viktor Yanukovich in the second round of Ukraine’s 2010 presidential election has been widely portrayed as a rebuke of the 2004 Orange Revolution and the pro-Western alignment it ushered in. Even before the election, however, the effects of the Eurasian color revolutions, celebrated with such euphoria in some Western foreign policy circles in the mid-2000s, had far-reaching and unintended consequences which have proven to be detrimental to U.S. influence and credibility in the region.

Although most Western commentators and policymakers understood the electorally-induced regime changes in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as victories for democratic forces, in Eurasia these same events were largely viewed as U.S.-sponsored efforts to topple regimes and replace them with pro-Western clients. Accordingly, soon after the Orange and Tulip Revolutions, a variety of Eurasian regimes, with strong backing from Moscow, adopted a series of measures to counter the activities of external democracy actors so as to avoid a replay of the sequence of events which led to the overthrow of these governments. This backlash has not only eroded basic civil liberties and media freedoms in many Eurasian countries, especially in Central Asia, but also challenged the authority of many international organizations and nongovernmental organizations in the region. At the same time, in the case of Georgia, U.S. officials reinforced the theme that the color revolutions were primarily motivated by geopolitics by uncritically treating the pro-Western government of Mikheil Saakashvili as a consolidated democracy. As Georgia’s nascent democracy began to deteriorate, U.S. officials remained silent, signaling that the “common values” that it publicly proclaimed to share with Tbilisi were more indicative of strategic alignment than a

mutual interest in democracy.

The Color Revolutions and the Dynamics of Diffusion

Recent scholarship on the origins and dynamics of the color revolutions suggests that external environments and transnational actors played critical roles in diffusing the electoral revolution model across Eurasian states. Political scientists Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik have explored how international donors like the U.S. Agency for International Development, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe played pivotal roles in strengthening civil society and opposition movements throughout the region. Bunce and Wolchik reveal, moreover, how domestic nongovernmental organizations and youth groups in countries like Georgia and Ukraine learned from the experiences and activities of other groups that had succeeded in pressing for regime change. Thus, graduates of the 2000 “Bulldozer Revolution” in Serbia assisted Georgian groups in 2003, while Georgian and Serbian groups contributed to Viktor Yushchenko’s victory in Ukraine in 2004. Political scientist Mark Beissinger has characterized the diffusion dynamic in the color revolutions as “modular,” in the sense that actors in each successive case emulated the features of previous successful revolutionary models. That said, according to Beissinger, after coming to power these governments faced serious challenges in trying to consolidate state institutions and enact democratic change.

Dimensions of the Backlash

The Orange and Tulip Revolutions sent alarm bells ringing across Eurasia. Eurasian elites viewed the color revolutions not as legitimate democratic responses to corrupt authoritarian rule, but as Western-sponsored threats targeting their very survival. These perceptions were supported when various Western NGOs and donors began to publicly take credit for their role in ushering in regime changes, even though their importance, especially in Kyrgyzstan’s case, tended to be exaggerated. Not surprisingly, a number of Eurasian governments soon began treating external NGOs and democracy-promoting actors as actual security threats. The backlash was especially intense in Central Asia where, with support from Russia and China (which saw the color revolutions as potentially encouraging separatism in Xinjiang), all states took steps to curtail the activities of Western NGOs and placed new legal and bureaucratic restrictions on their activities. Around the same time, Eurasian governments introduced a number of repressive new media and internet laws and redoubled their efforts to crackdown on opposition groups and consolidate single-party political rule.

Governments that conducted elections soon after the color revolutions, such as in Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, took great care to block the transnational networking of domestic NGOs in pre-electoral periods and to prevent opposition groups from gaining access to media outlets. Thus, just as pro-democracy NGOs diffused their strategies and techniques across cases, so too did Eurasia’s governments learn how to effectively counter the “electoral revolution” playbook.

One of the biggest organizational casualties of the democracy backlash has been the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Since the mid-

1990s, the ODIHR has been the primary external monitor of national elections in Eurasia. During the color revolutions, ODIHR's labeling of elections as "neither free nor fair" served to cast doubt upon the legitimacy of national elections and played a pivotal role in mobilizing opposition groups to press for change. Not surprisingly, Russia, supported by Belarus, Armenia, and the Central Asian states, introduced at the 2007 OSCE summit a draft proposal to curtail ODIHR's election monitoring activities. The proposal included limiting the size of monitoring missions to fifty, allowing the host state to veto proposed mission heads, and obliging ODIHR to submit its preliminary findings to the host for initial collaborative review prior to public release. Such measures would effectively gut future ODIHR missions of any independence.

Today, Eurasian governments view ODIHR as a pro-Western entity that must be countered. Some countries, such as Russia and Uzbekistan, have simply refused to host any meaningful ODIHR mission during their most recent elections whereas others, such as Kyrgyzstan, have imposed more subtle yet important restrictions on the scope of ODIHR mission activities. At the same time, as governments scrutinize and inhibit ODIHR's activities, other more government-friendly teams of observers, from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are now routinely sending election monitoring missions to member states. Not surprisingly, the conclusions of these "alternative monitors" regarding the quality of elections have been at odds with ODIHR assessments in every case.

Finally, the rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a political and security organization in Central Asia is virtually a direct consequence of the color revolutions. Although the organization's potential to become an anti-NATO military bloc has been much exaggerated, its more underappreciated role has been to target the activities of regional political dissidents and democracy groups under its stated goal of combating the three "evils" of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Human rights organizations have accused the security services of SCO states of routinely violating domestic asylum laws and bypassing national procedures. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Center (RATS) coordinates "cybersecurity" efforts and maintains a common list of extremist groups that also contains the names of pro-democracy organizations. Although the rivalry between Russia and China continues to inhibit the institutionalization of many of the organization's activities, the governments of the Central Asian states themselves see the SCO as a useful counterweight to the demands for political change and external conditionality being promoted by Western actors.

"Common Values," Loss of U.S. Credibility, and the Escalation of the Georgia Crisis

The pushback against actors promoting Western-style democratization has been one major regional consequence of the color revolutions. That said, the United States has also contributed to the erosion of its own credibility as a promoter of democratic values through the manner in which it dealt with the government of Georgia and its democratic failings in the post-Rose Revolution period. Indeed, for outside states and observers, the United States' vigorous support of Georgia contributed to the notion that Washington's efforts to promote democracy in the post-Soviet space were simply

justification for supporting anti-Russian regimes.

The Georgian case is especially important not only because it was the original “color” revolution, but also because the administration of George W. Bush and the government of the charismatic self-styled reformer Mikheil Saakashvili publicly championed the theme that the two countries shared “common values” and a commitment to democratic ideals. In the post-Rose Revolution period, however, U.S. officials rarely criticized Tbilisi’s backsliding and continued to act, for political reasons, as if Georgia was a mature and consolidated Western-style democracy rather than a country still undergoing political transition. Early in Saakashvili’s first term, USAID curtailed its assistance programs designed to support civil society development and media independence. In turn, U.S. policy became focused on directly backing the Georgian regime. The new government in Tbilisi also proved highly skilled in crafting an image of Georgia as an embattled democracy and using this image to its political advantage. Georgian officials, many of whom were educated or otherwise spent time in the United States, understood how Washington operated; they effectively navigated the city’s thicket of influential think tanks and policy institutes and regularly traveled to Washington to brief Congressional staffers and U.S. government officials. Georgia’s numerous points of contact with the U.S. government ensured that Tbilisi exerted an influence in Washington that was probably beyond what its small size and geopolitical position warranted. In the end, Georgia succeeded in curtailing U.S. criticisms of its democratic shortcomings, documented with increasing alarm by international democracy watchdogs and NGOs.

These shortcomings became increasingly acute over time. Since the Rose Revolution, President Saakashvili had made the strengthening of the Georgian state and eliminating corruption top priorities. However, these gains have come at the expense of undermining democratic institutions. In 2005 and 2006, the Georgian president was criticized by international observers for reasserting executive control over the judiciary and unduly interfering in the affairs of opposition media outlets. On November 7, 2007 tensions peaked when government security forces violently cracked down on thousands of anti-government demonstrators in Tbilisi, beating them with wands and spraying rubber bullets at protestors. International observers such as Human Rights Watch estimated that over five hundred Georgians were injured in actions that were widely condemned as excessive. As the events of November 2007 were noted with alarm in Brussels and other Western political capitals, U.S. officials downplayed the heavy-handed crackdown.

Part of the deal that was brokered between Saakashvili and opposition leaders in the aftermath of the November events was the holding of early presidential elections in January 2008. The poll in which the Georgian president cleared 50 percent to triumph in the first round of balloting had some flaws, but the Georgian president most likely would have won comfortably in a run-off against any of his opponents. Much more problematic was the conduct of the May 2008 parliamentary elections under which the president’s political party, the United National Movement (UNM), gained 119 out of 150 seats with a certified 59 percent of the vote. The final ODIHR election mission monitoring report identified “a number of problems” with the election, noting irregularities in the vote count, the intimidation of opposition candidates, the UNM’s

improper control of the Central Election Commission and other state agencies and resources, and a general lack of balance in media coverage. Yet Washington again remained notably silent about the quality of the flawed election.

Georgia's privileged position as a "democratic client" state also prevented Washington from soberly assessing the deteriorating situation in the South Caucasus in the spring 2008 run-up to the August war. Ultimately, the Saakashvili government lacked either the capabilities or common sense to restrain itself from launching a kamikaze-style attack against South Ossetia in early August that initiated the disastrous Russian response and occupation of its breakaway territories. Whether increased U.S. criticism of Tbilisi's democratic shortcomings would have made any difference in Saakashvili's calculations to initiate military action is subject to debate. That said, Washington's failure to restrain the Georgian leadership in August 2008 is indicative of the United States' inability to translate its close "values-based" relationship with Tbilisi into actual influence at the most critical of times.

The Obama Administration's Response and the Democratic Challenge

The irony of Ukraine's latest elections is that, from a comparative perspective, it is in the best shape, democratically speaking, of all three of the Eurasian states which experienced a color revolution. The very process of an orderly government turnover, facilitated by national elections, should be widely acknowledged and appreciated, even if the results are not to Washington's liking. By contrast, in early 2010 Freedom House downgraded Kyrgyzstan to "Not Free" from its previous level of "Partly Free." At the same time, the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia war has raised concerns about the quality and fragility of Georgia's democratic institutions. Thus, although the election of a Ukrainian candidate advocating a more conciliatory orientation towards Moscow may not be good news for Ukraine's Atlanticists, the quality of Ukraine's national election in 2010 was clearly superior to the last national election in either of its Eurasian counterparts.

More broadly, it is now clear that the color revolutions have seriously damaged U.S. influence and credibility throughout Eurasia. The regime changes which took place in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan sparked a substantial backlash among Eurasian elites who viewed U.S.-sponsored democratization as a security threat. As a consequence, the OSCE and its democratic monitoring efforts are now operating on life support, while Eurasian regimes have become increasingly emboldened to flout democratic norms. Moreover, the United States' strong support for the Georgian government, despite its democratic backsliding and inability to restrain its military response to Russia's creeping annexation of the breakaway territories, crystallized the view that Georgia was the United States' privileged client in the region.

Does the damage that was inflicted by the color revolutions offer the Obama administration any lessons for the future? To be sure, the current climate does not favor democratic advocacy and U.S. officials are now constrained in their ability to push for democratic reform in the region. That said, U.S. officials should take care to explicitly reject the now widely-accepted conflation of supporting democratization and pressing for regime change. Indeed, U.S. officials should make clear that the type of democratic progress they wish to see is gradual, long-term, and pluralistic in nature.

However, ignoring the grave erosion of democratic rights currently underway across the region would actually further undermine U.S. standing and influence in Eurasia. Even as governments in the region actively promote multivectorism and play the West off of Russia and China, U.S. administration officials should realize that the West continues to be a critical vector for Eurasian states in these balancing efforts. That alone is reason enough for U.S. officials to demand an open and honest dialogue with Eurasian governments about the deteriorating state of democratic governance.

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