

The Color Revolutions Betrayed

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The color revolutions of Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) promised these countries substantive democratization, which was supposed to end the immoral practices of post-Soviet imitation democracies, foster market-driven prosperity, and open the way into the prestigious club of European nations. High hopes, alas, quickly sank into renewed cynicism. Prevalent opinion put blame on the personal faults of leaders or even entire peoples said to lack democratic values and modern dispositions. A better explanation, however, might draw on the insights of macro-historical sociology, extending its reinterpretation of early modern revolutions and Western patterns of democratization into the early twenty-first century.

Given how vigorously Eastern European revolutionaries and Western “transitologists” rejected all vestiges of Marxism, it seems ironic that recent theoretical advances in historical macrosociology have returned states, class relations, and elites to the forefront of social scientific inquiry. This new materialism, however, differs significantly from erstwhile Marxist-Leninism with its rigid linearity and prophetic thrust. The focus is now on the historical processes that create key collective actors, together with their perceived interests and the institutional arenas in which they come to clash. This is why we ought to put the recent events in a longer-term and more comparative perspective, allowing a clearer view of what forces and constraints were actually involved in both the color revolutions and their non-occurrence in countries like Russia and Belarus.

The Paradox of Self-Democratizations in the USSR

Why did the ostensibly totalitarian Soviet Union twice attempt democratization, in 1956-1968 and again in 1985-1991? The answer lies in the costs, challenges, and evolving social composition of the socialist military-industrial state. The Bolshevik revolutionary dictatorship survived by emulating an ultra-Germanic war economy and, since 1929,

institutionalizing it on a permanent basis, which meant fusing all sources of social power: economic, administrative-political, military, and ideological. Weberian-minded political scientist Stephen Hanson has wryly defined the resulting monster as “charismatic bureaucracy.” The totalitarian trend peaked in 1938-1942. The war, however, forced Stalin to concede the practical impossibility of a perfect command structure backed solely by ideological cult and terror. The prerogative of decisionmaking had to be shared with the top military. This became the first historical factor undermining the Soviet dictatorship of development.

The second factor flowed from the first. Soon the nomenklatura became a self-conscious elite capable of pursuing collective interests. Khrushchev’s “collective leadership” was essentially the Magna Carta of the nomenklatura. Security of status and office were achieved during Brezhnev’s “stagnation.” Gorbachev’s *perestroika* already promised security of inheritable private wealth. In a linear progression, the end result would have been a capitalist oligarchy but not yet democratization. The USSR could then have been preserved by this capitalizing nomenklatura to serve as a powerful bargaining platform vis-à-vis the West and their own population. This realization now seems to drive the counter-reformation of Vladimir Putin.

What critically complicated things was, in a sense, proletarian class struggle, albeit of varieties hardly envisioned by Marxists. The Soviet industrial dictatorship reduced to wage labor even its functional equivalents of entrepreneurs and liberal professionals such as doctors, lawyers, scientists, and educators. Their emancipatory project was de-proletarianization, while contemporary Western societies served the desirable example of “normal life.” The new class of educated specialists pursued a double-pronged strategy of acquiring autonomous cultural and economic capital, i.e. becoming middle class, and curbing bureaucratic authoritarianism through the institutionalization of genuine political rights within enterprises, professional associations, neighborhoods, and the polity at large. The class of educated specialists was essentially reformist. Their goal was to update the power structures, cultural practices, and consumption in accordance with their growing collective weight in new industrial society. Such a strategy presupposed the existence of an effective and responsive state capable of enforcing collective rights and legal guarantees, hence democratization.

The Scramble for Spoils

Neither Nikita Khrushchev nor Mikhail Gorbachev found a solution to the contradictions between the nomenklatura and the nascent middle class. Instead, the USSR ended in sudden chaotic collapse. It would be wrong, however, to assume that any specific social class had an interest in this outcome. Depending on local structural opportunities and fleeting contingencies, Soviet collapse produced all over the social pyramid many losers but also some winners, from former nomenklatura and the intelligentsia down to déclassé sub-proletarians who emerged as criminal entrepreneurs or ethnic warlords.

Overall, the end result was a sudden and spectacular, if unstable, concentration of private power and wealth. Entire national republics were privatized, in effect, by new

presidents. In the process, similar looking opportunistic alliances of fractured elites, entrepreneurial intelligentsia, and able interlopers sought control over territorially localized bases of power and legitimacy. In the industrial sectors, conflicts among coalitions of claimants assumed the form of insider intrigues, business “raiding,” and assassinations. A lack of stable property rights, personal security, and institutions of safe political bargaining throughout the broken post-Soviet landscape made personal patronage networks paramount.

In the meantime, the vast majority of the population suddenly found themselves economically as well as socially marginalized. They no longer seemed to matter, neither as producers of value and military recruits nor even as an audience for propaganda. Their bargaining position was drastically reduced and their very survival called into question. Populations withdrew into micro-adaptations, such as moving together into larger neo-traditional families, expanded subsistence, petty “shuttle” trade, informal employment, labor migration, and “brain drain” abroad.

Two key conditions for democratization were lost in the post-Soviet nineties: a broad distribution of power and resources across society, enabling its various groups to advance collective claims, and an effective state which could be used to institutionally transform such claims into policies and rights.

The “Young Turks”

The situation seemed intolerable to almost everyone, including many members of the elite who found themselves inhabiting almost Third World countries. The emergence of new leadership was eagerly anticipated, and it did arrive. But who were they? Putin is regarded as the polar opposite of a Mikheil Saakashvili, Viktor Yushchenko, or Yulia Tymoshenko. But is he really? Some interesting similarities lie right on the surface. First, they all stormed into power by forcefully outflanking more senior rivals with strong regional bases such as Viktor Yanukovich (eastern Ukraine), Aslan Abashidze (Ajara), and Yuri Luzhkov (Moscow). The new arrivals, however, were not total outsiders. At some point they used to occupy high positions in the regimes they overthrew. Contrary to traditional nomenklatura, they projected the image of “Young Turk” modernizers, blending nationalism with technocratic competence and knowledge of the West. They all pledged to take their countries out of the shame and disorder of the previous decade, punish the thieves, reign in sub-national potentates and separatists, achieve economic dynamism and modernization, restore popular faith in their nations, and bolster their international position.

Domestic configurations of forces were also rather similar on the eve of takeovers, whether revolutions or palace coups. Toward the late 1990s, Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine (and also Kyrgyzstan) all had what could be called “unconsolidated authoritarian” regimes. The evolution of these post-Soviet regimes subverts the common notion that democracies are built by democrats. In all these instances it was the democrats from the *perestroika* era who ended up building personal authoritarian regimes: Gorbachev’s erstwhile ally Eduard Shevardnadze, the maverick populist Boris Yeltsin, the cosmopolitan scholar Askar Akayev, and Leonid Kuchma, once a progressive technocrat from the rocket industry. Generally speaking, it was not power

as such that corrupted them but rather a historically specific logic of power that imposed a constrained range of options in a situation nearing state collapse. At the beginning of their tenure as leaders of newly independent states, they might have genuinely believed in progressive reform. But the exigencies of daily survival instead prescribed a muddling through, suppression of opponents, the seizure of resources before they could be snatched by rivals, and securing the compliance of clients by awarding them former state assets and personal exemptions from law. Western recognition mattered greatly for these leaders of feeble and indebted states. For this reason, as well as the lack of any ideological alternatives after the end of communism, these post-Soviet regimes maintained a façade of procedural democracy in untidy contradiction to their actual “sultanistic” practices.

However, these imitational democracies could not become consolidated authoritarian regimes either. This was not so much due to ideological resistance as to drastic state weakness, when more or less autonomous potentates and oligarchs emerged within regions and key economic sectors. These lesser but often locally strong patronage “machines” continuously bargained and occasionally clashed with the central potentate and amongst themselves. Since virtually all such political “machines” and oligarchs soon developed their own public relations campaigns, the overall result was a series of political battles reflected in a boisterous if increasingly dirty and venal media environment, which contributed to an impression of democratization.

In Belarus, by way of contrast, a once obscure but very capable populist seized a relatively advanced and better-managed chunk of the former Soviet industrial state. Using a relatively well-preserved state apparatus and its assets, Lukashenka did not allow the emergence of sub-national potentates through privatization or regionalism. Here, no color revolution could materialize despite the continued presence of an oppositional intelligentsia that enjoyed significant outside support.

In a fundamental sense, the color revolutions, like more traditional “bourgeois” revolutions before, did not mean a total negation of the old. Rather, they grew out of the escalation of ordinary politics within the previous regimes. Political scientist Henry Hale was among the first Western scholars to identify the weak point in patronage regimes: the moment of political succession. This suggests what may be the key empirical test for determining how consolidated a given patronage-based authoritarian regime is: whether aggrieved or ambitious oligarchs and regional potentates are present. The next indicator of revolutionary possibility would be the presence of alternative (not to be confused with free) media and various nuclei of intelligentsia supported by oligarchic resources. Alternative press and intelligentsia organizations could, of course, be more genuinely “grassroots,” but in the impoverished and unstructured landscapes of post-Soviet states this is not as likely. Foreign sponsorship (overt or covert) can certainly play a role, but the commitment of foreign actors is often subject to the complexity of ideological and budgetary politics among national governments, international organizations, and private foundations. George Soros and George W. Bush could at some point find similar stakes in a peripheral country, but one should not expect such associations to last.

Last but not least, the color revolutions — as well as Putin’s ascendancy — suggest

yet another critically important indicator: the emergence of younger alienated cadres or entrepreneurs socially located near the summit of state power yet for some reason excluded from the circuits of wealth distribution. At the time of succession, these actors can serve as “fuses” igniting popular anger already concentrated by oppositional media outlets and nongovernmental organizations. Alternatively, this could lead to swift preemptive action, as in Russia around the year 2000, when certain elites basically stage a palace coup and target all possible contenders: rival media empires and political parties, NGOs, oligarchic wealth, and regional “machines.”

Revolutions of Intermediate Importance

The state remains at the center of revolutions. So do property rights. Here we arrive at the root cause of both the apparent failures of the color revolutions as well as the Russian counterreformation. In all these cases, new leaders certainly shook up existing elite structures, but they did not change in any consequential way class relations, defined as the balance of enforceable property and political claims between the often factional elites and the multiple groups located further down the social hierarchy. It is a robust and well-established finding of historical sociologists that in the modern history of the West, democratization has been driven mostly by alliances of intelligentsia, urban workers, and the petty bourgeoisie. Put simply, democracy is a political cooperative of a majority who lack the weight to individually secure access to state power. In the pithy expression of sociologist Terence Hopkins, it means making states and power elites issue guarantees against themselves.

This is exactly what did not happen. The color revolutions and Putin’s coup wrought consequences on the relative distribution of power and wealth only among the elites. Some factions lost, other gained, but states did not become substantively more effective in providing public goods or enforcing rational policies (with a slight exception possibly for Georgia, since its starting point was so dismally low). Insufficient provision of public goods, particularly woeful in these once highly industrialized and urbanized societies, means that the level from which economic or political entrepreneurship can emerge is very high, within the elites themselves. However, this kind of entrepreneurship is directed at wielding political influence and force in order to repossess rents from existing assets and transborder flows rather than inventing anything new. That is why the recently fashionable talk of modernization in Russia, for instance, remains a charade: the margin of profit is simply incommensurate.

Is there any hope for the future? The color revolutions marked an intermediate political upheaval perhaps comparable to the July 1830 revolution in France. Many such events got buried in history books because they never rose to the epic proportions of “true” social revolutions. Nevertheless, as sociologist Charles Tilly demonstrated throughout his life’s work, in the West intermediate revolutions, protests, and coups helped to maintain a dynamic which eventually strengthened civil societies and forced states to become less patrimonially venal and more bureaucratically disciplined. The current ruling elites in post-Soviet Eurasia, whether those that experienced color revolutions or avoided them, keenly understand the precariousness of their own position. Their space of action in the face of possible protest or economic crisis is severely limited by the oligarchic pattern of resource distribution, which bars resources

from being effectively tapped for policies of industrial, social, or even military reform. All this points to the likelihood of another wave of elite collisions in the near future, perhaps this time associated with the consequences of economic crisis, the resulting reduction of rent flows, and increased factionalism within oligarchic elites. There can be no certainty whatsoever that further socioeconomic upheavals will revive class-conscious political action toward reform and democratization. The immediate result could be spontaneous and quasi-spontaneous rioting by the young male sub-proletarians — as we have just witnessed in Kyrgyzstan. The same recent example also indicates that police repression might not be enough to save the “unconsolidated authoritarianisms” of Eurasia. However provocative this might sound, the class forces to watch and probably to support now are the workers and petty bourgeoisie emerging from the former Soviet intelligentsia.

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