# What's in Store for Color Revolutions?

## Managing a New Rise of Discontent in a Time of Crisis

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The angry and hopeless demonstrations in the streets of Tehran last June did not resemble the enthusiastic "happenings" on Kyiv's *maidan* (main square) in November 2004. However, successive eruptions of public protest after elections perceived to be "stolen" occur too often to avoid attempts at generalization. It is clear that these events, which have acquired the common name of color revolutions, should not be treated as fresh cases for classical theories of revolution. The so-called "transitology" school, for its part, interprets them as assaults on the barriers regimes erect to contain the global march toward democracy, but this characterization contains much wishful thinking.

As the sudden eruption of violence in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010 demonstrated, investigation into the causes of the color revolutions presents not only an academic challenge but also a practical political task. The development of any revolutionary situation is certainly driven primarily by internal conflicts, but rises and falls of the revolutionary trend depend strongly on the course taken by external actors, including the United States and the European Union. There is obviously more pragmatism and less ideological zeal in present-day U.S. policy than there was in the previous decade. The American commitment to supporting democracy remains unquestionable and every revolutionary situation sets a test for it. There is no simple key for passing these tests, and this analysis does not aim to invent one, but it might be useful to examine the evolution of this exciting but elusive phenomenon.

## Revolution No. 15?

We cannot proceed by conceptualizing the color revolutions simply as explosions of creative energy similar to the romanticized "happenings" of 1968. A more neutral working definition could be an organized and unarmed public uprising in a post-Soviet state, aiming to replace by democratic means a discredited semi-authoritarian regime with a government formed by an alternative and usually more pro-Western elite coalition.

One issue with this definition concerns geography. Revolutionary energy is brewing in Iran and bursting through political dams in Thailand, but this analysis assumes that post-Soviet political developments possess a unique quality originating in the USSR's spectacular collapse, which brought into existence a group of inherently fragile proto-states with weak identities. Stabilization of these state-projects was achieved in the latter part of the 1990s through the consolidation of political power by "enlightened" authoritarian regimes. The breakdown of Yugoslavia was in many ways similar to the collapse of the Soviet Union, even if it was aggravated by a series of wars. The uprising in Belgrade in October 2000 that cast out Slobodan Milosevic can therefore be classified as the first in the chain of color revolutions.

Starting with the year 2000 may appear artificial, but the fact is that the civil wars and coups of the 1990s constitute an entirely different set of analytical puzzles. This analysis considers 14 events that fit the above definition, more than is usually associated with the notion of color revolutions since the unsuccessful attempts are included (my more elaborate analysis of this data set can be found in a forthcoming article in *Comparative Social Research*). At the same time, it is essential to mention several outliers that this definition does not capture**:** the uprising in Andijan, Uzbekistan (May 2005) and the armed clash in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria (October 2005), the angry demonstrations in Cherkessk, Karachaevo-Cherkessia (November 2004) and in Maikop, Adygeya (April 2006), the armed attack on the Armenian parliament in October 1999, and the unrest caused by massive electoral irregularities in Derbent, Dagestan (October 2009).

## Common Features – and Lack Thereof

Every color revolution is certainly *sui generis*, with its own particular trajectory and special emotional catharsis. Nonetheless, from this collection of cases several characteristic features are apparent. Two that stand out most prominently are a strong link between uprisings and elections and low levels of violence. Unarmed and often unruly crowds did not always remain peaceful (looting and capture of official buildings happened in half the cases), but the regimes under threat never resorted to machine guns or tanks. Indeed, what is absent in the picture is tough authoritarianism; the revolutions emerge not as protests against brutal repression but as responses to the weakness of corrupt quasi-democratic regimes.

As far as elections are concerned, there appears to be no difference between presidential and parliamentary elections, and the scale of falsification cannot really be connected to the intensity of public outcry. The key point, as political scientist Joshua Tucker has pointed out, is that elections open a shortcut to overcoming a problem of collective action. Individual choices are made on the assumption that expressing disapproval of an elite that has every intention to retain its grasp on

power is, in this context, essentially risk-free. The direct connection between mishandled elections and an explosion of protests shapes several other noteworthy features: the presence of international observers, for instance, and the heavy concentration of protest activity in capital cities (where election results are finalized), even in such large and internally diverse states as Ukraine.

**Color Revolutions Accomplished and Attempted**

| State | Success | Period | Elections | Crowd | Victims | Civil war |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yugoslavia/ Serbia | Yes | 27 Sept-5 Oct 2000 | 24 Sept 2000 | 250,000 | 2 | 1990/94 1999 |
| Azerbaijan | No | 16 Sept-20 Oct 2003 | 15 Oct 2003 | 25,000 | Few | 1991/94 |
| Georgia | Yes | 15-23 Nov 2003 | 2 Nov 2003 | 100,000 | None | 1990/93 |
| Ajara/ Georgia | Yes | 14 Mar-5 May 2004 | 28 Mar 2004 | 50,000 | Few | No |
| Abkhazia | Yes | 12 Oct-5 Dec 2004 | 3 Oct 2004 | 15,000 | None | 1992/93 |
| Ukraine | Yes | 22 Nov-04 Dec 2004 | 21 Nov 2004 | 500,000 | None | No |
| Kyrgyzstan | Yes | 18-24 Mar 2005 | 13 Mar 2005 | 25,000 Bishkek | Few | No |
| Azerbaijan | No | 8 Aug-26 Nov 2005 | 6 Nov 2005 | 20,000 | Few | 1991/94 |
| Belarus | No | 19-23 Mar 2006 | 19 Mar 2006 | 35,000 | 1 | No |
| Georgia | No | 28 Sept-8 Nov 2007 | 5 Jan 2008 | 75,000 | Few | 1990/93 |
| Armenia | No | 20 Feb-2 Mar 2008 | 19 Feb 2008 | 100,000 | Few | 1991/94 |
| Mongolia | No | 1 Jul 2008 | 29 June 2008 | 10,000 | 5 | No |
| Georgia | No | 9 Apr-24 Jul 2009 | 21 May 2008 | 50,000 | None | 2008 |
| Moldova | No | 6-7 Apr 2009 | 5 Apr 2009 | 15,000 | 3 | 1991/92 |

A student of the 1917 Russian revolution would expect to find a correlation between the phenomenon under examination and war. Indeed, in nine cases, countries had experienced civil war, but in only two (Serbia in 1999 and Georgia in 2009) was this trauma fresh enough to be perceived as a real driver. The impact of the "war factor" might conceivably be found in the readiness of seasoned militaries to use deadly force and in the availability of weapons for "revolutionary" crowds – but neither feature is observed in our collection of cases. What is clearly observable is the high concentration of cases in the Caucasus (8 out of 14) and especially Georgia (with its breakaway provinces), which comes out as the champion with five revolutionary events (not to mention four wars).

## External Sponsorship and Export of Counterrevolution

One trend that is clear through all these diverse features is the spectacular success of color revolutions in the first half of the decade – and the chain of failures in the second. The 15-month period from late 2003 to early 2005 saw an impressive concentration of successful uprisings, and the sharp break from this trajectory remains largely unexplained. It was definitely not for lack of trying. Economic factors also have little explanatory value; all post-Soviet states enjoyed strong economic growth for most of the decade, and color revolutions themselves were not really triggered by economic setbacks.

One key factor that keen observers like Vitali Silitski and Alexander Cooley have noted is that "demonstration effects" work both ways. Like aspiring revolutionaries, resistant regimes learn lessons from color revolutions and figure out what it takes to diffuse the potential for protest and isolate the most radical groups. There is also a particular Russian feature in this learning process. Russia's then-president Vladimir Putin suffered a humiliating personal defeat in Kyiv in late 2004 and came to perceive the risk of regime implosion under the pressure of street protests to be an existential threat to Russia that had to be resolutely countered in every case, and at any cost. In hindsight, the turning point appears to be the Andijan massacre in May 2005, after which Putin – and after him Dmitry Medvedev – extended unconditional support to leaders seeking to face down potential "color revolutionaries": Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Serzh Sargsyan in Armenia, Aleksandr Lukashenko (despite far from ideal chemistry) in Belarus, and even Vladimir Voronin in Moldova, making an exception only for Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili. Denial of support to Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan (more on which later) marked a clear deviation from this counter-revolutionary stance.

This Moscow-centered "solidarity" network of quasi-democratic and neo-patrimonial rulers constitutes a serious deterrent in revolutionary situations. This influence points to the need to consider the role of Western sponsorship in successful color revolutions. Various pro-Western networks were in many cases the main transmitter of the demonstration effect for protestors, amplified by media campaigns, organizational resources, and money. This does not mean that Putinesque conspiracy theories about subversive strategies executed by joint operations of the CIA and Amnesty International are credible, but it is sufficiently clear that successful revolutionaries were typically inspired not only by democratic ideals but also relied upon multiple sources of Western support.

A significant reduction of this support, not least due to disappointment in the results of the Orange Revolution, coupled with the EU's flat refusal to grant Ukraine

any prospect of membership, has seriously weakened the revolutionary drive in post-Soviet Eurasia. While discontent with corrupt despotic regimes has not diminished since 2005, many opposition groups are too discouraged by the lack of U.S. and European involvement to pursue the "try-again-fail-again-fail-better" strategy. The EU flag raised over the sacked Moldovan parliament in April 2009 was a desperate attempt to reconnect with an indifferent "ever closer" Union.

## Does the Crisis Make Much Difference?

A working draft of this memo was presented soon after it had become clear that Yulia Tymoshenko had failed to snatch an electoral victory from the jaws of the unrelenting Viktor Yanukovych – and had also failed in staging protests against alleged election rigging and in defense of the tired "Orange Revolution." That anti-climax provided a perfect illustration of the easily observable fact that the devastatingly deep economic crisis has not so far brought a major spike in revolutionary activity. This observation fits the larger trend: the global recession has not generated a corresponding increase in anti-government (or anti-globalization) protest; neither, for that matter, have we seen a proliferation of civil wars, which generally correlate strongly with economic performance, particularly within the group of poorest countries.

The easiest available explanation for this muted impact is the time gap: the shock of the crisis was absorbed during a period when the sum of individual choices shifted toward adaptation rather than protest. Angry rallies in Latvia – one of the worst victims of the crisis – caused a fall of government but nothing resembling a revolution. At the same time, that political spasm demonstrated that it was rather improbable that a change of government would help revive economic dynamism in any of the states potentially susceptible to color revolutions.

Arriving at the two-year mark since the strike of the disaster, when the recession has technically ended in most economies, we see some revival of political protest, first of all in Greece, but also stabilization, as in Latvia. Such recovery, while uncertain, has led to another counter-intuitive finding: while the depth of the unexpected fall made it possible to predict profound economic and political transformation, recovery has generally led toward the restoration of "business-as-usual." The lessons of the crisis have been lost not only on the economists who expect that consumption will return to pre-meltdown (and definitely unsustainable) levels, but also on the politicians who refuse to see the scope of growing public demand for change.

An event that stands sharply in contrast to this picture of political pause in the face of economic disaster is the sudden explosion of violence in Kyrgyzstan that resulted in a swift collapse of governance in April 2010. The "tulip revolution" of March 2005 bequeathed the lesson that toppling a corrupt regime was easy, but the anti-Bakiyev revolt can hardly be qualified as a color revolution. It was not caused by fraudulent elections but triggered by an increase in communal tariffs, and, most significantly, it saw considerable violence with about 100 casualties. Moscow immediately recognized the new government. This readiness to embrace a regime change and reluctance to intervene invites a closer look at developments within Russia itself.

The slogan of "modernization" touted by President Medvedev contains an acknowledgement that Russia cannot return to the status quo ante but must find a new model of economic growth. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Medvedev aims only for a minor upgrade of Putin's "vertical" of executive power, which, even if accomplished, would be entirely insufficient for stimulating economic innovation. The petro-prosperity of the 2000s is irreproducible but its political superstructure is irreplaceable, and this contradiction translates into conflicts between different elite groups and clans, a typical setting for color revolutions.

The proposition that Putin's Russia might become the epicenter of a new wave of revolutions might seem preposterous, but it is worth noting that Dagestan is currently the most violent hot spot in the "zone of instability" running from Central Asia to the Balkans. Whatever trajectory the political crisis in Russia follows, Moscow will hardly be able to perform the role of counter-revolutionary leader, and the chaos in Kyrgyzstan proved this incapacitation. This could open up a certain opportunity for radical opposition in Belarus or Azerbaijan, even if they cannot count on any involvement from the United States (preoccupied with Afghanistan) and the EU (overloaded with centrifugal problems).

Russia's preoccupation with domestic crisis and the EU's neglect of the fledgling Eastern Partnership reduce the probability of a "neo-Orange Revolution" in the course of the next parliamentary elections in Ukraine (which could be centered in marginalized and depressed Lviv), but increases the risk of breakdown in such Russian-dependent quasi-states as Transnistria. In Georgia, a new spate of discontent against the Saakashvili regime might trigger a provincial revolution with a secessionist twist in Ajara, which Russia would recognize with few doubts. While Sapurmurat Niyazov's demise did not – against many predictions – shatter Turkmenistan, Islam Karimov's sudden end might unleash an explosion of smoldering discontent in Uzbekistan. Overall, the weakening of corrupt regimes caused by the protracted recession increases the chances for success in one of the next revolutions, but it appears probable that accumulated anger could turn peaceful protests ugly, while desperate despots could resort to military means for suppressing the opposition.

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