

# The Latent Resonance of the Arab Revolutions in the North Caucasus

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 177  
September 2011

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The spectacular explosion of revolutionary energy across the greater Middle East in the first weeks of 2011 reconfigured many international endeavors, including the Israeli-Palestinian pseudo-peace process and NATO's wishful quasi-consolidation. The revolutionary drive may have slackened in the second half of the *anno arabicus miraculum*, but it is definitely not a spent force and there are heavy impacts to brace for. It is far too early to say whether these revolutions will promote democracy across the region, of which there has been too little, but it is certainly a good time to speculate about probable repercussions. Popular uprisings in post-Soviet states (still defined as such twenty years after independence) have features and dynamics significantly dissimilar from those in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, but it may be useful to look for interplays between the so-called color revolutions and the Arab Spring. A particularly complex interplay appears in the North Caucasus, where new drivers are reshaping the banditry-insurgency-terrorism threat and providing it with new momentum.

## **Russia Stands Firm Against Revolutions**

It has become strikingly clear that Russia's position on the breakdown of the political status quo in the arc of revolutions from Morocco to Syria is the opposite of that taken by the West (disunited as the West has been), and very close to the attitudes expressed by China. Where U.S. President Barack Obama finds a "historic opportunity" for advancing democratic values, Moscow sees the threat of violent destabilization, the risk of Islamist extremism, and even a conspiracy set in motion by Western agents, including Google's top managers. The Kremlin's counter-revolutionary stance is not pragmatic, but neither is it opportunistic or mercantilistic – the three most prominent traits in Russian foreign policy. Instead, it can be characterized as ideological, determined by the very nature of the political regime labeled *Putinism*. This authoritarianism has grown too corrupt to be effective, and its only ideology is survival

by means of “over-managed democracy,” which has become repugnant to the active electorate. The specter of revolution haunts this regime, as it has closed all channels for any opposition to develop. It is also demonstratively incapable of modernization as feebly advocated by President Dmitry Medvedev. Since the mid-2000s, the main incarnation of this specter has been the phenomena of color revolutions, which are closely linked to elections, as demonstrated by Georgia (November 2003), Ukraine (November 2004), Moldova (April 2009), and Belarus (December 2010). The Kremlin has therefore concentrated on tightly controlling the election process, which includes building the Soviet-style “Popular Front” for December 2011 parliamentary elections. However, the Arab revolutions, foremost in Egypt, have shown that perfectly managed elections can be a major part of the problem and that an explosion of discontent among the urban middle classes does not require a charismatic leader or an underground party – revolt can be triggered by an absurdly insignificant spark.

Demonstrating that the new wave of revolutions is bringing nothing but violent chaos is a crucial element of the *Putinist* counter-revolutionary strategy, which thus comes into conflict with Western strategies supporting democratic transformations. Granting NATO an opportunity to intervene in the Libyan civil war is now seen in Moscow as a mistake that has brought unexpected benefits because the Alliance seems stuck in a hopeless enterprise, which has further damaged its cohesion and Russia can now refer to the “abuse” of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 for justifying its rejection of further Western interference, first of all in Syria. This increased emphasis on the sacred principle of the primacy of sovereignty is more than just a tactical maneuver because the Putin clan, with growing certainty, expects that at some moment it will have to reassert its control over Russia, maybe with violent force, despite any sanctions the West might dare impose.

### **Re-Assessing the Risks in the Southern Neighborhood**

No expert analysis supplies a convincing argument as to whether the wave of Arab revolutions will stop at the borders of Turkey and Iran or perhaps spread even further into the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russian policymakers, however, do not see any connection between the collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and, say, the crisis of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. What the Kremlin is concerned about is the probable shift in attitude of the Obama administration, which has toned down the United States’ rhetoric in support of regime change by mass uprising as it was too closely associated with George W. Bush’s ideological course. It may now have to embrace even non-peaceful revolutions as vehicles for the democratic cause. Nonetheless, Moscow expects that Washington will place its strategic interests – centered on Afghanistan – above wishful idealistic thinking.

This is particularly relevant in the case of Central Asia, through which an increasing part of military transit to Afghanistan passes as the crisis in the U.S.-Pakistan strategic semi-partnership deepens. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin knows the rulers of the Central Asian “sultano-stans” too well to believe their claims that Arab revolutions have had no impact on regional stability, but he is not particularly keen to

spread the illusion that Russia would come to their aid. Moscow was caught unprepared by the violent unrest in Kyrgyzstan's Osh province in late spring 2010, and has apparently concluded that the scope and intensity of potential crises go beyond Russia's military capacity to project peacemaking power. Every stagnant autocracy, with the possible exception of Kazakhstan, has accumulated a crucial mass of discontent, but any attempt to depose an ailing despot, particularly in Uzbekistan, could degenerate into violent state failure with heavy cross-border resonance. Russian leadership does not fancy an intervention modeled after the remarkably successful one in Tajikistan in the mid-1990s. This reluctance to play the role of security provider is rational since Russia no longer sees Central Asia as an area of geopolitical competition with the United States or, for that matter, with China.

The situation in the Caucasus is perceived rather differently. But here again, Moscow presumes that the West is downsizing its interests and even slackening support for Georgia, a pioneer of the color revolutions. The main pressure point of the revolutionary wave is Azerbaijan, where the corrupt and dynastic ruling regime distinctly resembles Arab oil monarchies. Not that Moscow sees a revolution coming to Baku, but it anticipates an anti-Western turn from President Ilham Aliyev, who used to be welcomed like a guest of honor in Brussels and Washington but is now treated like another corrupt autocrat whose term could expire any day. Aliyev, however, resents the prospect of accepting Putin's patronage, opting for a riskier game of escalating tensions around Nagorno Karabakh and assuming that a nervous EU will try to secure its energy corridor with reassurances and incentives.

### **Mutating Civil War in the North Caucasus**

Libya, Yemen, and Syria have shown how easily revolution can unleash civil war; regarding the North Caucasus, the question is whether an evolving civil war can culminate in revolution? This is by no means a hypothetical question since various violent conflicts that were diminishing in intensity from 2005 to 2007 have strongly escalated since late 2008 and have shaped a theater of non-stop combat operations stretching from Dagestan to Kabardino-Balkaria. Up until the terrorist attack at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in January 2011, Russian authorities remained in denial of this trend, insisting that Putin's strategy for stabilizing the region was a success. Admitting the undeniable rise and spread of violence, they also ordered a counter-offensive, so several successful operations targeting leaders of rebel networks were executed in the spring and summer of 2011. That secured a break in the escalation trend, which might suffice for reducing the terrorist agenda to a third-priority issue in the election campaign and re-arranging the Russian political arena as Putin sees fit without major disturbances.

The pause in the growth of the civil war, however, might not last long. Indeed, already in late summer a series of minor attacks hit Dagestan without any mark on the political radar screens in Moscow. The main drivers that propel the destabilization are still at work, and their diversity creates the complex interplay of conflicts, making it next to impossible to distinguish between terrorism, insurgency, and banditry. Many

analysts identify the growth of Islamist radicalism as the main cause of conflict; from that perspective, the question about a Tahrir-style revolution is irrelevant. There are, however, good reasons to believe that it is the profound distortion of structures of governance caused by corruption that is driving the escalation of violence. Corruption might seem to be a pedestrian explanation, but in the North Caucasus, it has acquired not only grotesque forms but also a particularly malignant quality. Sustained inflows of “free money” from the Russian federal budget have corrupted local elites, who engage in clan warfare; it has also alienated the have-nots who are excluded from patronage networks. This discontent feeds the growth of Islamist extremism, while also shaping a revolutionary situation.

The proposition about a revolution in one of the seven pseudo-republics in Russia’s Caucasus region might appear far-fetched, but it builds on several important precedents. Abkhazia had a “color revolution” of sorts in September 2004, when a Putin-backed candidate was defeated after a confrontation that followed inconclusive elections. Karachaevo-Cherkessia was in turmoil in November 2004, when protestors stormed the government building in Cherkessk and demanded the president’s resignation. In the republic of Adyghea, citizens and the provincial president, Hazret Sovmen, staged mass protests in the spring of 2006 against a plan for merging the republic with the Krasnodar region – a plan that was abandoned. In contrast, the growth of social tensions in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria in 2005 culminated in an armed uprising in October that was crushed in a few hours.

Major urban centers of the region concentrate the discontent among the downwardly-mobile middle class and student bulge; for many such malcontents, an Egypt-inspired idea of mass protest against local political-mafia appointed from Moscow might become an appealing alternative to armed violence. One place where such an idea cannot be entertained is Grozny, which is rebuilt but remains badly traumatized by two wars and is brutally controlled by Ramzan Kadyrov’s paramilitaries. In fact, a more probable prospect for Chechnya is a new bid for independence made not by the rebels but by the maverick Kadyrov, whose loyalty to Putin should never be overestimated.

## **Conclusions**

Russia has managed to steer a safe course through the Middle Eastern turmoil. It has expressed its disapproval of revolutions but benefitted from anxiety in the oil markets. Russia gave NATO the opportunity to commit a serious blunder in Libya while asserting that Syria is off limits for interventions and sanctions. Its opposition to U.S. efforts at encouraging democratic reforms in the region has been essentially cost-free, while the counter-revolutionary proto-alliance with China has impressed Saudi Arabia, built influence in Turkey, and gained ground in Central Asia. Successful as this maneuvering may be, it cannot erase the question of whether Putinism is becoming ripe for a revolutionary breakdown.

Looking at the world from Moscow, Russia might appear safe from populist threats – unless a major external shock, such as a colossal fall in oil prices, upsets the

stagnating system. Such a shock, however, might come from inside the country. The escalation of instability in the North Caucasus points in the direction of a series of terrorist attacks, perhaps aimed at upsetting preparations for the Sochi Winter Olympics. A different and more benign kind of shock could come by way of a regional revolution against corrupt clans that were installed by the federal center and resented by the middle classes and the youth. These social groups are much better informed about and connected with the Arab world than politicians in Moscow tend to believe. The Tahrir demonstration effect could yet come into play in the post-election frustration with Russia's unmodernizable and dysfunctional kakistocracy.