

Yawning Through the Arab Spring

RESILIENT REGIMES IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

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In the weeks and months after the January 25 Revolution in Egypt, there was hope among commentators and opposition figures that some post-Soviet regimes might be equally susceptible to uprisings and collapse. Such hopes were not entirely fanciful. Like the events of the Arab Spring, the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s caught observers off guard. And making confident predictions about the durability of authoritarian regimes anywhere is a hazardous enterprise. Nonetheless, even while the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak led to further mass protests (and crackdowns) across the Arab world that are dramatically reshaping the region's politics, leaders in Central Asia and the Caucasus – the region physically and culturally closest to the Middle East – reacted with barely a yawn.

This memo identifies three reasons for the Arab Spring's failure to influence events in Central Asia and the Caucasus: (1) the social ties enabling diffusion across Middle Eastern states weaken when they cross the Russian-language barrier, (2) post-Soviet regimes became more resilient in the early 2000s in response to the color revolutions, and (3) the likely form of political opposition differs between the two regions, making a structurally similar uprising unlikely. This does not mean post-Soviet regimes are indestructible; rather, they are more likely to break down in other ways.

Presidential Primacy

Stability in Central Asia and the Caucasus is not a result of good governance or satisfied citizenries. As of 2011, the Central Asian regimes led by Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, and Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov in Turkmenistan have been in place for 21 years; in Azerbaijan, Heydar and son Ilham Aliev have governed for 18 years collectively; Tajikistan's

Imomali Rahmon (néé Rahmonov) has been president for 17.¹ Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan are considered “not free” by Freedom House, while Kyrgyzstan and Armenia barely squeak into the “partly free” category. The global financial crisis hit the region hard and caused falling commodity prices, declining foreign exchange reserves, unemployment, decreased remittances, and rising poverty levels. Recently, as a result of economic recovery, these states have suffered from inflation, particularly from rising food and energy prices. With the exception of Georgia, the region places in the bottom half of the 2010 Corruption Perceptions [Index](#), with most states concentrated in the bottom 10 percent.

Yet “objective” indicators of misery and authoritarianism do not make revolution inevitable, even after the inspiring examples from the Arab world. Significant acts of civil disobedience in post-Soviet Eurasia that could reasonably be tied to the Arab Spring are few and far between.² In February, former Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrossian, who mobilized tens of thousands against presidential victor Serzh Sargsyan in 2008, organized protests in Yerevan along with several opposition parties. In early April, one thousand protesters aligned with several opposition parties gathered in the center of Baku, Azerbaijan, before they were rounded up and arrested. Groups in both countries explicitly linked their grievances to those in the Arab world. However, their minimal impact to date has disappointed those who had hoped for regime change. Likewise, a fanciful attempt to hold a protest in Uzbekistan on July 1 was announced over the Internet; it failed to materialize.

It is equally hard to identify significant actions taken by post-Soviet regimes in response to events in the Middle East. Instead, the region has witnessed characteristic forms of simulated democracy and soft repression. Kazakh President Nazarbayev’s abrupt decision to hold a presidential election in April 2011, a year early, was attributed by some as a pre-emptive action, despite the fact that he faced little political or grassroots opposition. He cruised to re-election with nearly 95 percent of the vote. The same month, the Turkmen government [reportedly](#) called on hundreds of Turkmen students living abroad to return home or face punishment. These measures, though troubling, are hard to link directly to concerns about revolution. Nazarbayev had toyed with the timing of elections in the past, and a patently false result would be unlikely to increase his legitimacy. Berdimuhammedov had also previously tried to prevent Turkmen from studying abroad for various manufactured reasons, assumed to relate to fear of “ideas” they might acquire there.

In the Caucasus we can identify some regimeactions that may have stemmed from the Arab example, though they too are hardly out of the ordinary. In Azerbaijan, officials warned young people from joining demonstrations and arrested several youth activists, including organizers. Taking a different tack, the Armenian parliament passed laws allowing freedom of assembly and granting amnesty to 400 prisoners. In neither

¹ Where there was a seamless, dynastic transfer of power that was not the result of free and fair elections, I do not consider a transition to have taken place.

² The recent creative “clapping” and other protest acts in Belarus are self-consciously modeled after the Arab Spring. Yet their relatively small numbers and limited impact thus far serves to demonstrate how different the region’s dynamics are from the Arab Spring.

case did these measures backfire. The contrast is clear – whereas temporizing measures by the leaders of Egypt, Yemen, and Syria were perceived as insulting, which emboldened the opposition to carry on, in post-Soviet Eurasia there was no galvanizing effect, and autocrats calmly rode out the storm. To reiterate, this contrast can be attributed to limited cross-regional diffusion, skilled post-Soviet regimes, and differing qualities of the opposition.

The Weakness of Weak Ties

Dense cultural and economic ties between societies has been a critical feature of the spread of protest movements across the Arab world. Like the East European revolutions of 1989, the Arab Spring was driven by citizens who were separated by national boundaries and had never met, but who were linked through numerous channels of communication and recognized the similarity of their predicaments.

Despite heavy restrictions on media freedom in the Arab world, people in one country could rapidly learn of protests in other states through international travelers such as businessmen and labor migrants; by telephone and e-mail; and through blogs, social networking websites, and satellite networks like Al Jazeera. The effects of these dense networks of communication were visible in the rapid spread of protests and tactics from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and beyond.

A perception of analogy was also critical in the regional spread of uprisings. Middle Eastern regimes were led by presidents in power for decades, presiding over sclerotic economies dominated by a narrow ruling elite. Protesters in different countries referred to their similar political circumstances and framed their grievances using shared cultural references and life experiences. We thus saw recurring demands for justice and diatribes against the ruling elite, whom ordinary people, especially youth, blamed for hoarding economic resources and blocking opportunities for others.

But there are limits to social ties and the credibility of analogy. Just as network ties are dense within the Arab world, they are also strong within post-Soviet Eurasia, many residents of which still direct their attention toward the full territory of the former Soviet Union 20 years after the breakup. Despite sporadic efforts by the region's leaders to distance themselves from their former "imperial" core, ordinary people continue to interact through ties of trade and labor migration, and through digital media. Many still speak Russian as a first or second language and watch Russian television, including pro-government news broadcasts. By contrast, social and cultural manifestations from the Arab world weakly penetrate former Soviet space.

Even the societies of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, which are predominantly Muslim, tend to look north rather than south or west. These states' economic, cultural, and political ties with Russia remain strong, while their leaders treat Arab states with apprehension. Young people who intend to seek work abroad learn English, or sometimes Turkish – but rarely Arabic. Central Asians see Arabs as distant ancestors, not relatives, and consider themselves more culturally advanced than Arabs, a legacy of Soviet modernizing discourse. In official discourse, Arab Islam is portrayed as extreme,

and fundamentalism as retrograde and dangerous. This view is widely shared by Central Asians, even those who dislike their government.

When events happened in the Middle East, dissidents and opportunistic politicians in post-Soviet states sought to capitalize by organizing rallies, as in Armenia and Azerbaijan. But due to their lack of social ties with the Arab world and post-Soviet orientation, mass publics did not draw inspiration from the Arab Spring. Likewise, perceptions of political opportunities failed to travel across the divide; people had no reason to believe that the institutional constraints on protest and freedom of expression in their own countries had changed significantly just because they had in, say, Egypt.

What Doesn't Kill Them...

A second reason why contagion from the Middle East is unlikely to infect post-Soviet Eurasia is that the latter has already faced a wave of regime-toppling protests in 2003-2005. As some autocrats tumbled, others took measures to shore up their power lest they also succumb, becoming more resilient in the process. Many of their actions have been well-documented: the closure of Western non-governmental organizations; the expulsion of the Peace Corps from Russia; the arrest and harassment of journalists and human rights activists; the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators in Azerbaijan and Belarus; the Kremlin's creation of the pro-government youth movement *Nashi* and copycat groups in other states; and investments in building up ruling parties in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Less visible measures have involved the use of surveillance technology to monitor public gatherings and Internet activity; the weeding out of potentially disloyal regime officials; and the stealth nationalization of private businesses, making it more difficult for economic elites to mount a challenge.

The surviving autocrats, having endured potentially destabilizing elections – in particular, in Azerbaijan in 2003 and 2005, Kazakhstan in 2005, and Tajikistan in 2006 – were by 2011 well positioned to withstand threats from below. Middle Eastern autocrats, isolated from events in post-Soviet Eurasia by the same barriers that prevent contagion in the other direction, took little notice and grew complacent from their many decades of successfully managing power. They were thus caught off guard when a hapless street vendor set himself on fire in Tunisia and sparked the first of many challenges to incumbents.

Today's post-Soviet autocrats are adept at staving off opposition challenges without using overt repression, allowing them to preserve stability and even to claim popular and international legitimacy. This is most apparent in Kazakhstan, where Nazarbayev won the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, an organization charged with safeguarding human rights and strengthening democratization in the region. Even Karimov and Berdimuhammedov, while scarcely easing up on repression, have used their geopolitical leverage to decrease the volume of criticism.

Revolutionary Dreams Deferred

A third reason we have not witnessed a Central Asian-Caucasian spring has to do with the sources of opposition in the two regions in question. The Arab Spring appears to be a genuinely grassroots affair, in which ordinary people representing different social groups coalesced into a united movement – at least temporarily. They in part succeeded by acting through existing civic organizations such as trade unions, student groups, Islamic movements, and political parties with grassroots appeal. These organizations survived under authoritarian regimes, albeit with many restrictions, and aided in attracting ordinary people once protests began. Mobilization against authoritarian regimes is a high-risk activity, so the trust that held these groups together was critical for the opposition.

In contrast, civil society in Central Asia and the Caucasus is very weak, with the exception of Georgia. In large part due to the Soviet legacy, there are few independent organizations with popular support through which people can be recruited to join protests. Central Asia has no pre-existing Islamic movement enjoying widespread support and organizational resources, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, where there was mobilization against Soviet power in the late 1980s, dissident groups failed to institutionalize their influence in civil society over the ensuing years of regime stabilization.

Even the color revolutions, despite enjoying mass support, were led by elites, particularly leaders of political parties, some of whom had previously worked for the incumbent; and were supported by business elites, who opened their wallets to finance the preparation, coordination, and sustenance of demonstrations following fraudulent elections. The fragmentation of the elite years before the revolutions was a critical contributor to their success. If this is indicative of the dynamics of post-Soviet regimes, then it should point our attention to a different mode of regime breakdown than the Arab Spring.

Threats to regimes can be latent, undeclared, and informal, and can come from above – rival political elites within the regime or businessmen who have pledged their loyalty but also have their own power base. A president's coalition can hold together for a long time, but it can also unravel abruptly, for example, as a result of imminent succession and the failure of officials to rally around a successor who can assure their privileges. Struggles over power can also occur over a shrinking economic pie, or from personal disagreements between influential figures. Such an unraveling could be especially destabilizing – for 20 years, the rules for managing power in countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan have worked well within the limited domain of satisfying elite interests. But these elites have no experience dealing with rapid change, and they may not be able to resolve their differences peacefully when the old rules cease to function.

In short, Central Asian and Caucasian incumbents may breathe a sigh of relief that they were able to avoid the challenges faced by their Arab counterparts, but they would be wise not to become too complacent. Political change *will* eventually come to the region, however stable its governments appear on the surface. But change will not

necessarily come from below. It may instead come from within regimes. If this happens, we will see new opportunities for democratization, but also, as after the Arab Spring, a new set of challenges.