

Interpreting the Color Revolutions and Prospects for Post-Soviet Democratization

Breaking the Cycles

PONARS Policy Memo No. 373

Henry E. Hale
George Washington University
December 2005

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan have been widely interpreted as democratic breakthroughs. This largely misses the most important point. In fact, these revolutions reflect the continuity of the old system more than they reflect change. This old system, one of patronal presidentialism, is marked by regular and reasonably predictable oscillations between what appears to be autocracy and what appears to be democracy. By implication, the waves of political contestation seen in the color revolution countries are likely to peter out as the democratic space constricts anew. The main exception is Ukraine, which may indeed have made a democratic breakthrough in 2004, but ironically this is at least partly because the victory of democracy advocate Viktor Yushchenko was stripped of some of its meaning. Ukraine still risks moving back to a new autocratic phase, however, especially if constitutional reforms weakening the presidency are thwarted.

Patronal Presidentialism and Autocracy

Most of the former Soviet states are governed by institutions that might be called patronal presidentialism. Power resides overwhelmingly in a directly elected presidency and, crucially, this power involves not only formal authority, but immense informal authority based on pervasive patron-client relationships and machine politics. While the general importance of informal networks and authority is a holdover from the Soviet period, the particular nature of the political machines and patronage politics are largely products of the postcommunist transition itself, especially privatization policies and transformations in center-periphery relations.

While this vast patronal presidential power can be used for the betterment of society, it can also be a tremendously effective weapon with which to beat down or co-opt a (potential) opposition. Since this weapon penetrates deep into society, almost anyone with something to lose in society can lose it to the president. Big businesses (led by oligarchs) can have their licenses revoked or their leaders prosecuted for tax evasion. Elected officials can be disqualified from races by corrupt courts or find their opponents exceptionally well-funded. Regional political machines can be starved of government largesse. Many of these power-holders, however, can simply be bought with the massive resource flows that course through off-budget state-linked accounts or blackmailed with material collected by government security agencies.

In theory, regional bosses or business leaders could gang up and dislodge a president. But the president has a tremendous advantage in any such struggle, as he or she can play on the immensely diverse interests of such stakeholders, and thus divide and conquer them. Patronal presidents like Russia's Boris Yeltsin and Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma, for example, were famous for balancing key groups of supporters against each other, and current Russian President Vladimir Putin has long done the same with the *siloviki*, the St. Petersburg lawyers, and even the liberal group in the government and economy.

When a patronal president is firmly entrenched in his or her office, therefore, those who have a significant financial or political stake in society are likely to avoid anything resembling a challenge to the regime. This means that the president's ideological opponents will have a very hard time attracting any kind of material support, be it in the form of financing or television airtime. At such times, a country with patronal presidential institutions will very much resemble a classic autocratic regime. This is the Ukraine of 1999, the Russia of 2004, and the Uzbekistan of the last 15 years.

Patronal Presidentialism and Democratic Breakthroughs

Whenever a patronal president is widely perceived to be on his or her way out, however, the situation changes dramatically. Not all former Soviet countries have encountered such situations: since the mid-1990s, the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have all subverted constitutional term limits and remained healthy enough so that few expect them to willingly depart the political scene anytime soon. Yet in other post-Soviet countries, there have come points in time when society's stakeholders came to expect that a patronal president would not run for reelection. In Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, the incumbents Boris Yeltsin, Askar Akayev, and Eduard Shevardnadze made clear prior to presidential and parliamentary elections that they would bow to constitutional term limits and not run again for office. Patronal presidents can also become incapacitated by illness, as did Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliyev. Others can face peculiar sets of circumstances that make clear to others that they would not run for reelection. This was the case with Kuchma, who, while facing a constitutional term limit, also was beset by evidence linking him to the murder of a journalist.

When expectations of a president's departure become widespread for any of these reasons, the incumbent suddenly becomes a lame duck, someone who will not be around after the election to punish those who defect from his or her team. As Yeltsin was on his way out in 1998-99, for example, many of the same governors that had ensured his reelection in 1996 boldly backed a popular former prime minister (Yevgeny Primakov), whom Yeltsin himself had sacked in 1999 and who was calling for the prosecution of key Yeltsin allies. As Kuchma was exiting the presidency in 2004, western Ukrainian stakeholders and other businesses that had backed him in 1999 opted to support Yushchenko, the most popular opponent of his regime.

While an outgoing president may attempt to anoint a political heir and to engineer his or her victory in the next presidential election, as Yeltsin did in 1999 by ushering Putin into office, this does not always solve the problem. For one thing, regional and business leaders generally have very diverse interests and are typically divided into rival groups. While all rally around the president when the president is firmly in control, they compete with each other for presidential favor and the resource distribution this entails. The problem for an outgoing president is that only one person (and hence only one group's representative) can be selected as the heir. The heir's rivals then have reason to fear that they will be shut out of the heir's future administration or, perhaps even worse, be stripped of their assets, forced into exile, or jailed. When Kuchma tapped former Donetsk regional governor Viktor Yanukovich as his successor,

therefore, representatives of western Ukrainian regions and business rivals to the mighty oligarchic Donetsk clan were alarmed that his victory could mean the crushing of their interests, whether or not they supported him in the election. At the same time, pro-presidential rivals in such situations are certainly prone to speculate about the riches they could obtain should they defect from the outgoing president's chosen team and win, claiming presidential spoils for themselves.

Thus, whenever a patronal president makes clear that he or she will leave office, a Pandora's box of political struggle is opened up. Since the stakes are extremely high (the patronal presidency itself), these battles can be extraordinarily fierce, involving all manner of tactics reminiscent of the most inspired and nefarious manipulations of a Boss Tweed. In Russia in 1999, oligarch-run television (notably the pro-Putin ORT and RTR and the pro-Primakov NTV) squared off in a battle of innuendo and potential slander, while regional political machines took sides to quash their opponents and promote their chosen allies. In Ukraine in 2004, the contest is widely regarded to have involved starkly obvious fraud and even an assassination attempt.

These struggles are not entirely elite affairs. Since public opinion is one resource in battle, these elite contests frequently open up political space for mass involvement, including massive street protests when passions run high. In Ukraine, the *maidan* (Kyiv's public square) saw unprecedented mass turnout, and street protests also played major roles in Georgia, as opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili stormed the parliament building, and in Kyrgyzstan, as anti-Akayev forces drove the incumbent out of the country. While the crowds can sometimes be unruly, such periods of political competition can make a country that once looked highly authoritarian resemble a democracy much more closely than it did before, especially once the opposition wins. Many have thus hailed the Orange, Rose, and Tulip Revolutions as democratic breakthroughs.

Cycles of What Appears to be Autocracy and Democracy

But the logic of patronal presidentialism strongly suggests another outcome in most instances. Once business leaders, regional bosses, and other stakeholders agree on who is likely to win the struggle, they have great incentive once again to rally around the president, so as to avoid falling out of favor with the new president's team. This is because of the great power a patronal president has to influence the fates of these stakeholders, be it actively (through repression or rewards for loyalty) or passively (through overlooking corruption charges or ignoring pleas for resource transfers).

Even well-intentioned presidents can find themselves resorting to machine tactics in an effort to overcome stubborn, obsolete, corrupt, or

illegitimate opposition to what they may actually see as necessary democratic or market reforms. The temptation often facing patronal presidents, then, is to impose reforms from above through the existing concentration of power, rather than to build the broad-based coalitions that other kinds of institutions often necessitate. The result, ironically, can be a return to the authoritarian-style politics that had been the target of a new leader's campaign prior to assuming office.

Indeed, we should not forget that the decrepit autocrats who were displaced in the Rose and Orange Revolutions were once seen as enlightened heroes of liberalism endeavoring to rid their countries of corruption and autocratic methods: Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's erstwhile champion of a pro-Western foreign policy, and Askar Akayev, formerly regarded as Central Asia's lone democratically-inclined leader, standing out as a scientist, rather than a career Communist Party official.

Already, there are signs that Georgia and Kyrgyzstan might be repeating this history, entering new autocratic phases in their politics. Indeed, it is striking that both Mikheil Saakashvili and Kurmanbek Bakiyev consolidated their revolutions with stunning near-90-percent victories in their first presidential contests.

Ukraine's Paradox: How One Failure of Democrats May Produce More Democracy

Ukraine is the one patronal presidential country that as of this writing appears to have taken a different path during its revolution, perhaps breaking out of the cyclical pattern of competitive and autocratic politics described above. Ironically, this is not because the strongest advocate of democracy, Yushchenko, won the presidency. Instead, the result of Ukraine's 2004 contest was a stalemate that was resolved only when Yushchenko agreed in December 2004 to weaken the presidency that he aspired to inherit.

The constitutional reform that was the linchpin to this deal is set to transfer some key presidential powers to the parliament, most importantly the right to name the prime minister as well as the ministers of defense and foreign affairs, as of January 2006. While it remains to be seen whether this transfer of power will be enough to significantly weaken the presidency with its arsenal of informal powers, it at least offers up the possibility that several things will happen in Ukraine. Initially, it could encourage the president to strike broader bargains with other political forces in order to accomplish important reforms. This, in turn, would lower the stakes in the struggle for the presidency, facilitating the willingness of an incumbent team to leave office and become a parliamentary opposition force, should they lose the battle for public opinion.

Accordingly, if the parliament itself gains significant authority over how the government is run, the president's ability to use coercive (and ultimately economically unproductive) levers to pressure or punish opponents will be reduced. This reduces the risks and increases the benefits to be experienced by stakeholders, should they decide to support opposition candidates or go into opposition themselves in parliamentary elections, even when the president is not expected to leave office soon. The result is thus more likely to be a significant increase in the sustainability of political opposition and, hence, a reduction in the degree to which the country swings toward autocracy, when the president is entrenched in office.

Very importantly, all of these democratizing results can be expected to occur regardless of whether one believes that Yushchenko will personally follow through on his pledges not to use machine politics or other presidential powers in ways subversive to democracy. While Ukraine will certainly be better off if Yushchenko does prove to be a true democratic trailblazer, and while one certainly hopes that he does in fact have this character, the sad fates of Shevardnadze and Akayev (and even Kuchma, whose initial victory in 1994 was not greeted as the dawn of an autocratic age) provide strong reason not to rely on personalities alone to push through democratic reforms.

Ukraine's constitutional reforms have not yet been implemented, however, and there is still a chance they might be overturned. As a judge on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, Bohdan Futey, has noted, there are still technical grounds on which a Ukrainian court could plausibly strike down the reforms. For example, Ukraine's constitution stipulates that an amendment rejected by the parliament cannot be reconsidered for a whole year, but key components of the December 2004 reform had in fact been rejected by the parliament just eight months earlier. If the transfer of power from president to parliament is thwarted in this way, Ukraine's hope for greater democracy will rest on much thinner ground: the political will and belief system of one man, Viktor Yushchenko. He will then have to prove he is truly different from those previously touted as democratic hopes, including Shevardnadze and Akayev, not to mention Yeltsin.

Conclusion

The color revolutions should not, in and of themselves, be mistaken for true democratic breakthroughs in the former USSR. While a change of leadership does bring at least some hope that the new leader will prove committed and strong enough to effect democratic change, the post-Soviet history of the region provides strong reason to be skeptical. Instead, the most prudent assessment to make of the color revolutions is to anticipate a return to more autocratic styles of politics, although we should also expect a new round of political competition, once the new leaders themselves leave the scene.

Better grounds for democratic optimism come when the revolutions actually produce a change in the underlying institutions of patronal presidentialism. Thus, if the Orange Revolution is, in fact, to democratize Ukraine, it is more likely to be due to the fact that Yushchenko did not completely win and was instead forced to accept the compromise that weakened patronal presidentialism. There is still hope for Kyrgyzstan as well: new president Kurmanbek Bakiyev also agreed to weaken the presidency as part of a deal to gain the support of his chief rival for the presidency, Feliks Kulov. So far, no major reform has been forthcoming, but the aforementioned logic suggests that Kyrgyzstan's chances of real democratization are far stronger should the reform be extensive and implemented responsibly. Naturally, not just any weakening of the presidency will do, but at least in principle the path to democratization in post-Soviet conditions is more promising when authority is more evenly distributed across branches of power than is currently the norm.

