

# Russia – NIS Relations Beyond the Color Revolutions

## Are the Shifts Durable?

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During a short period of nine months, the joyful euphoria of many observers about the Orange Revolution in Ukraine gave way to shock and mixed emotion about the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. Satisfaction with Moldova's fair elections was followed by anger at the tragic May events in Uzbekistan. By late 2005, we came full circle, with deep concern arising regarding a new political crisis in Ukraine. All this stands before the background of strengthening autocratic tendencies in Russia. The chain of revolutions and political crises in Eurasian states, starting in Georgia in 2003, was not accidental. A new phase of socioeconomic and political development has begun in the post-Soviet space.

To comprehend this phenomenon, the following questions need to be answered, or at least put on the agenda:

- What is a color revolution? Is it even a revolution at all?
- What is the place of Russia in the chain of color revolutions?
- What is the scale and depth of the changes in ostensibly revolutionary post-Soviet states?

- Are the changes durable and irreversible?
- How long will they take to be implemented?
- Where are the revolutionary post-Soviet states going? Must the notion of a color revolution be anti-Russian?
- What do the color revolutions mean for Russia's relations with its neighbors and for the future of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) more generally?
- What do all these changes mean for the West?

## Are They Revolutions?

Some have argued that the changes in Ukraine were evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. Even ardent supporters of the Orange Revolution in neighboring Poland question whether the term is appropriate.

Fifteen years ago, one of the most subtle intellectual observers of central and eastern Europe's velvet revolutions, Timothy Garton Ash, argued that the tectonic shifts in that region from 1989 to 1991 were, given their peaceful nature and the smooth changeover of elites, really "refolutions," a combination of reform and evolution. If the events of that time could be characterized in this way, then the political crises in the post-Soviet space fifteen years later merit use of the term even more.

Still, events did reveal the utter dissatisfaction of politically significant layers and groups toward the existing regimes. Particularly in Ukraine with its high economic growth, a classic Marxist revolutionary situation developed, as the political superstructure did not correspond to the socioeconomic base. Many analysts refer to Ukraine's small and medium businesses as a leading force of protest against the oligarchy. Referring to a rebellion of "millionaires against billionaires," Anders Åslund has compared the Orange Revolution to the French bourgeois revolution.

At the same time, all the color revolutions were caused by or connected with elections, and their final results are the results of voting, meaning that the new leaders are legitimate. This connection makes revolution more akin to a simple change of leadership, keeping much the same political and business elite. Some analysts thus conclude that what has transpired is a series of coups d'état, all the more because all the new leaders were in power earlier in the 1990s or at the start of this decade.

Nonetheless, the scale of events and participation of hundreds of thousands of people, suggest a revolutionary aspect, along with a very strong democratic component, to these political changes.

## What is Russia's Place in the Chain of Color Revolutions?

The difference between political developments in Russia and the revolutions in post-Soviet states is democratic elections. In 2000-2001, Vladimir Putin declared his governing aims: to establish a state of law, fight corruption, de-bureaucratize the system, modernize the economy, reduce control by the oligarchs, create favorable conditions for small and medium business, and integrate Russia into the global economy. These are all aims similar to those declared by Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine.

Democratization was given lower priority in practice and in rhetoric under Putin, however, giving way to centralization and the building of a power vertical. In the public's perception, democracy was associated with chaos and lawlessness, while centralization was justified as a way to establish order. In spite of obvious violations of democratic norms and a strengthening of authoritarianism, Putin and his program for establishing order are solidly popular in Russia and even in some other post-Soviet states.

Initially, Putin's Kremlin implemented several liberal reforms (including tax and land reform) and intensified trade and security cooperation with Russia's main Western partners. Putin also managed to establish friendly personal relations with Western leaders (although not with post-Soviet presidents). Moscow adopted a more pragmatic approach to its relations with its post-Soviet neighbors in 2001-2003.

The priority of strengthening national statehood and the preservation of a mentality of *derzhavnichestvo* (great-powerness), although natural in this situation, contradicted the aims of modernization, integration into a post-modern global economy, and pragmatism in CIS policy. Russian expert Lilia Shevtsova argues that the mentality of *derzhavnichestvo* does not allow for the sovereignty of states in the former Soviet space. Nonetheless, the priority of strengthening statehood and the often undemocratic levers used to implement this goal are supported by society and can be regarded in this sense as legitimate.

The logic of Putin's policy of centralization has created a Russian state with a centralized and semi-autocratic presidential regime, weakened federalism, a sham parliament, a subordinate judiciary, corruption even greater than in the 1990s, a weak and purposefully deformed party system, and limitations on democratic freedoms including the electronic mass media. Isolating the Kremlin from previous oligarchic influence resulted in the partial re-distribution of property (notably the Yukos case), the formation of new and even more direct oligarchic ties, and deeper business mistrust of the state.

However, the scale of state interference in the economy does not justify reference to Russia's economic structure as state capitalism. Key economic ministers in the government (Minister of Economics and Trade German Gref and Minister of Finance Aleksei Kudrin) are liberals. The weakness of the power vertical, revealed in the state's total irresponsibility, prompts a continuous search for new administrative solutions on all levels.

The transition of Russian statehood is not complete. The weakness of democratic norms, procedures, and institutions (including the degradation of the parliamentary and party system) and the weakness of civil society and institutions contribute to the state's instability. The Russian political system lacks a stable feedback connection, and the authorities have no partners with which to conclude a social contract.

The Kremlin does seem to be aware of this problem. When asked in September 2005 by foreign experts at a Kremlin-sponsored meeting outside Moscow whether a color revolution was a possibility for Russia, Putin said that:

There are no real grounds for destabilization. In the last few years the real incomes of Russia's mass population have increased by 10 percent. We have to strengthen the middle class, party system, and independent mass media. We have a powerful economic basis to do that. The main causes of the Ukrainian revolution were unemployment and poverty as well as widespread corruption. We are not against changes in the former Soviet space. We want to be sure they will not lead to chaos.

This explains the attempts of the Kremlin, on the one hand, to build a civil society from above and, on the other, to conduct social reforms. The authorities are failing in this, however, and instead have caused the rise of paternalist and leftist sentiments in society. The authorities are suspicious of social self-organization or unregulated democracy, that is, nongovernmental initiatives or institutions not coordinated or approved by the authorities.

This has led to the fear of sociopolitical projects by individuals like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and George Soros, and by foreign foundations. Color revolutions, which succeeded in large part because of their wide social protest component, are feared for the same reason.

In a way, the controversial results of post-post-Soviet developments in Russia serve as a baseline useful for estimating the progress of color revolutions in the post-Soviet space.

## **What is the Scale and Depth of Changes in the Revolutionary Post-Soviet States?**

In all revolutionary post-Soviet states, the initial post-revolutionary stage has been followed by regression in socioeconomic and, sometimes, political spheres. What are the reasons for this?

The first reason is populism. In Ukraine, the new leadership, prior to the dismissal of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, pursued a populist economic policy. So did Georgia's leaders before Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania lost his life under unusual circumstances.

Second, in the initial post-revolutionary stage personal political ambitions and a settling of accounts among the leaders of the mass protests play a destructive role. The differences between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko in Ukraine are well-known. In Kyrgyzstan, too, the relationship between Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Feliks Kulov may yet follow the pattern of the Yushchenko-Tymoshenko split.

Very high social expenditures, a budget deficit, and increasing inflation require professional macroeconomic and fiscal policy. Populism and intra-elite competition work against such policies. Tymoshenko's term as prime minister provided a most vivid textbook example of the mistakes which can be made by a revolutionary government.

Third, though minor, is the comparatively low professionalism of some new members of the revolutionary team and the ideological eclecticism and low compatibility inherent among members of a team formed on the basis of revolutionary political debts.

Fourth, the business interests of groups previously deprived of power can become an economically and politically destructive factor. Millionaires struggle against billionaires, or weaker billionaires struggle against stronger ones. Redivision of property destabilizes the economy, undermines constructive state-business relations, causes a serious deterioration of the investment climate, and, perhaps most importantly, discredits the new authorities. In the second post-revolutionary phase, when less political technocratic teams (such as that headed by the new Ukrainian prime minister Yuri Yekhanurov) come to power, these problems may diminish.

In a very short time, the new authorities in Kyiv have awakened, as in Russia, paternalist and leftist moods in society, and this will become a long-term problem for President Yushchenko. The peculiarities of the upcoming election period, specifically the building of electoral blocs and coalitions with the aim of forming a majority in the parliament, will blur the political and ideological identity of the parties. The building of political parties, which is a necessary component of a stable institutional democracy, has become a product of political manipulation in Ukraine. Although the situation is not as bad as in Russia, the similarity is clear.

At present, neither the scale nor depth of reforms in the post-Soviet revolutionary states guarantees their irreversibility. Reforms cannot be implemented quickly, especially in light of the fact that the European Union has sent a clear message that none of these states have a high chance of achieving EU membership in the foreseeable future. Additionally, the longer the period of reforms, the higher the risks of regression. In this situation, the only (but crucial) guarantee for the post-Soviet course will be a strong democratic component in future revolutionary developments. With this in mind, the new powers in the revolutionary post-Soviet states are looking for the West's support of their reforms, paying key attention to maintaining democratic momentum.

On the other hand, the longer reforms take and the more problems that arise in the EU and in its policy towards the post-Soviet states, the stronger the reasons for post-Soviet states to maintain close economic cooperation with Russia. Russia seems to have already taken this into account, recently revitalizing its policy toward the Eurasian Economic Community and the Single Economic Space.

### **Does Color Revolution Mean Anti-Russian?**

No, and yes. On the one hand, given the extent of economic, social, human, and cultural interdependence, and the heavy dependence of hundreds of thousands of households on incomes earned in Russia, it cannot be anti-Russian. On the other hand, most of the new revolutionary leaders have created their identity on the basis of a contrast with Russia's modern polity. By definition, they position themselves as democrats, value-oriented, and advanced: in short, as pro-Western (even if, other than the democratic element, Putin is doing the same). None of these leaders (unlike those in the Baltic states) can afford, however, to hew to a straightforwardly anti-Russian position.

The less democracy there is in post-Soviet political culture, the more acute the problems of internal stability will be, and the higher the threats of terrorism, ethnic and religious hostility, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and poverty. This also means, ultimately, greater reliance of anti-democratic leaders on Russia. The U.S. military presence in Central Asia, which undoubtedly has served as a stabilizing factor, has become a source of concern for local regimes after unrest in some of the countries. In addition to a feeling of personal threat, Central Asian leaders regard U.S. support for the opposition as a factor destabilizing regional security, not without reason.

## **What Does It All Mean for the West?**

The events in Central Asia in 2005 have posed a difficult dilemma for the United States: how to choose between stability and democracy. They also are putting Russia through a serious ordeal. Russia faces a no less dramatic dilemma of its own. On the one hand, it might yield to imperial temptation, jeopardize relations with Washington, and upset the whole strategic balance in the Asian-Pacific region (which involves China). On the other, it might hew to a pragmatic course, invest in Central Asian strategic-economic sectors (for example, hydroelectricity), cooperate with regimes without obligations of personal support, provide security through regional multilateral structures (like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and cooperate with the United States and the West in the region.

The challenges of the color revolutions caught the United States and the EU unawares. Western support for democratic reforms is extremely important, but subsequent developments have demonstrated that a new round of reforms in the post-Soviet states will take time and will depend mostly on the countries themselves. Cooperation with Russia need not jeopardize the progress of these newly revolutionary states, if the new leaders manage to implement reforms and keep their democratic momentum. The West, of course, should provide incentives for these policies and make it easier to implement them where possible. Although disappointing for new Ukrainian leaders, the current approach of the EU (friendly and cooperative pragmatism and conditionality) has proven effective. It is not time for romanticism or illusions, but for hard work.

