

# The Coming Revolutions in the North Caucasus

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A specter is haunting Eurasia: the specter of revolution. Ironically, this time Washington stands accused of promoting subversion while Moscow emerges as the headquarters of counterrevolution and conservative order. Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, overlooked Abkhazia, and the terrible outbreak in Uzbekistan. On all sides experts are guessing: where next?

Rather than advancing informed guesses, let us consider the social processes driving this wave of rebellions and try to answer the question: how immune is Putin's Russia? Specifically, what stands behind the extremely contradictory signals emerging from the ever troublesome North Caucasus? Is it international terrorism (a nefarious foreign import), the resurgence of Islamic identity (a deeply internal factor), the second attempt (after 1989) at national liberation and democratization, or, perhaps, the dangerous erosion of governance which can produce black holes, as in Somalia or Congo?

## **Neopatrimonial Machines**

For the purposes of this analysis we can do with just one arcane jargonism: neopatrimonialism. Its lineage goes back to the Latin legal term *patrimonium* (from *pater*=father; same as the medieval Russian *votchina*), which means the familial inheritable possession of public office as it was in feudal monarchies. The classical sociologist Max Weber famously used the notion of patrimonialism to describe the historical stage of barons before the arrival of modern rational bureaucracy bound by formal rules

and consisting of hired and duly promoted officials. In the late 1960s, Israeli sociologist Shmuel N. Eisenstadt modified the term into *neopatrimonialism*, which he applied to explain the grotesquely self-serving behavior of many rulers in the newly independent states of the third world.

On the surface, these states looked quite modern. They featured ministries, provincial governors, courts, parliaments, and universal suffrage, even if only to allow the choice of a single party and president for life. Scholars of Africa and Asia adopted the concept of neopatrimonialism to show that inside formal state institutions ran networks of personalistic ties where clients provide loyal services to their political patrons. On a daily basis the clients control political and economic resources (the knowledge of how to maintain local stability, control votes, or collect kickbacks), channeling benefits up to their patrons in exchange for being *de facto* exempt from sanctions for their corrupt indulgencies and insider profits. This scheme operates across cultures and civilizations. To various degrees, it has been registered in Nigeria, Brazil, China, and, for that matter, the Chicago city government. The old American notion of machine politics, in fact, can illuminate a great deal in the affairs of postcommunist countries.

During 1989-1991, the USSR fragmented primarily into an assortment of political machines. This became the key survival strategy of the former communist bureaucracy in the face of revolutionary chaos. Cliques in the sectoral bureaucracies which controlled economic assets (especially such easily exported commodities like aluminum or oil) saw their opportunity in becoming private corporations. Likewise, the cliques which at the moment of collapse presided over territorial units sought to turn these units into sovereign republics or provincial bailiwicks. In both economic sectors and territorial administrations, former communist officials had to fight and selectively incorporate the pushy young interlopers rising from the Komsomol and junior intelligentsia under the banners of market reform, political democratization, and various nationalisms. The main processes of the 1990s were these convoluted and unseemly fights over Soviet spoils occurring within economic sectors and territories.

As the dust settled toward the mid-1990s and victors began to emerge, machine-style politics became institutionalized in sets of ever-shifting personal alliances and dependencies greased with profits from various bottlenecks on the market and budgetary cash flows. Creation, control, and maintenance of these bottlenecks (what the neoclassical economists abstractly label rent-seeking behavior) were of utmost importance to all machines: how could patronage function without the ongoing redistribution of tribute?

## Becoming Top-heavy

If today's corrupt neopatrimonial patterns resemble the feudal patrimonial patterns of old, then their problems should be similar too. Perry Anderson argued that the most famous patrimonial collapse in history, the fall of the Roman Empire, resulted from a combination of the empire reaching the limits of its resource base (due to past successes there was nothing left to conquer and enslave profitably) and, at the same time, of the state edifice becoming unbearably top-heavy. With time passing, too many successful warriors, provincial aristocrats, palace careerists, and, belatedly, Christian bishops made it into the Roman elites, rendering the imperial edifice prone to capsizing. It is instructive to remember that the onslaught of Germanic barbarians came after a long sequence of internal strife.

The first general insight which follows is that all political regimes based on personal patronage accumulate problems as the number of clients grows and squabbles become difficult to contain. Secondly, as America's most influential historical sociologist Charles Tilly observed in the case of the medieval European monarchies, ruler succession provides a major opportunity for contention, and the surest way to start a civil war is to introduce an illegitimate scion into the scene.

In our days, such moments are provided by elections which the incumbents cannot avoid, mainly because emulation of democratic rituals has become one of the criteria for strong international credit ratings. In Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, the rebel leaders were the incumbents' estranged sons, daughters, and brothers. Following an old tradition, their calls for justice were directed simultaneously to the West, which played the role of moral arbiter not unlike the medieval papacy, and to the commoners, whose multiple grievances and millenarian zeal give force to rebellions once the rulers become regarded as intolerably crooked.

These are not mere playful parallels. The purported triumphs of democracy in Georgia or Ukraine have been so far just that: successful rebellions emerging from within the top-heavy and increasingly unstable machines of patronage. Past parallels were glorious and historical moments which proved that masses could gain voice and smash palace intrigues. But they were only a precondition for future democracy.

## Is the North Caucasus Next?

The sheer brutality demonstrated by Uzbekistan's authorities in Andijon in May 2005 reflected the extreme panic which must have gripped President Islam Karimov and his circle of clients. What frightened them in Andijon on May 13 was not an incursion by foreign-sponsored terrorists, but a rebellion causing the flight of local authorities. The massacre happened against the backdrop of successful rebellion in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and shortly after the impressive protests of market vendors,

traditionally a potent social force in the Islamic countries who rioted in several towns of Uzbekistan against newly-imposed extortionate regulations.

The Andijon rebellion became the first really grim instance of failure in what until then had been a miraculous succession of triumphs over impotent despots. In retrospect, it might prove to be a turning point. The incumbents in other post-Soviet states saw the writing on the wall, but now they also saw the uses of the ultimate argument of kings: military violence. Moreover, they obtained proof that, in the new threatening situation, Moscow and (at least as significantly) Beijing were willing to become closer and more lenient patrons than Washington or Europe.

Prevalent opinion in Moscow today is that there are several weighty reasons to ponder the fate of Central Asian rulers. The troubling situation in the Russian North Caucasus is perhaps the main among them. However serious, what is really causing the subterranean roar which threatens to engulf in rebellious tremors the whole region from the fractious and inherently violent Dagestan to the hitherto placid Adyghea?

Back in the desperate year of 1992, Boris Yeltsin's emerging regime overcame its liberal prejudices and struck a deal with the regional communist-era prefects. The immediate goal was to keep isolated the example of Chechnya, the first ethnic republic in Russia to overthrow the old regime in a true revolution in 1991. Yeltsin thus obtained a set of very loyal clients among the presidents of the North Caucasus republics, while these former communist officials obtained a new lease on a fairly comfortable life. Today, however, this lease is expiring, as the patronage machines of the North Caucasus are looking increasingly top-heavy and unstable.

The process that threatens to overthrow the North Caucasus regimes is a species of the revolutionary sequences that occurred in Georgia and Ukraine. Aging patrons have been purging and constraining the younger and ambitious members of the elite. But neopatrimonial machines can no longer restrain all those contenders who would like to expedite the generation succession and direct it to their own benefit. This sentiment among the junior upwardly-mobile members of the elite can tap into the analogous frustrations of young small entrepreneurs, junior intellectuals, and the young unemployed. Together, they might form a classical revolutionary bloc.

But here parallels with Georgia and Ukraine end. This is not, however, because of Islam. Azerbaijan, a historically Muslim country, seems nonetheless to be following in Georgia's wake (if only the Azerbaijani opposition ever manages to coordinate their campaign). Moreover, the Republic of North Ossetia is predominantly Orthodox Christian, which makes little difference to the emergence of revolutionary potential.

The republics of the North Caucasus also differ from Georgia and Ukraine in that they are shielded by Russia's sovereignty. Therefore, the potential rebel elites prefer to seek non-political venues for their aspirations. They would not dare appeal to the West or openly defy the incumbents who enjoy Moscow's support. The resulting lack of leadership is a substantial obstacle to revolution. However, this condition applies to Russia as a whole and is what makes Russian society look so apathetic. What, then, sets the North Caucasus apart in its revolutionary potential?

The major structural factor is the expansive demography of the region, which stands in stark contrast to the population decline in the rest of Russia. Proportionately, there are many more young men in the Caucasus (and in Central Asia) whose frustrations at the closure of economic opportunities can be directed against corrupt neopatrimonial figures who embody this closure. Put simply, Russia looks apathetic because the majority of its population does not consist of people likely to build barricades, while in the North Caucasus potential revolutionaries are numerous. In addition, the local culture provides them access to guns, as well as to models for action, in which Islam does indeed play a role.

### **Season's Color: Green?**

Revolutionary contention in the North Caucasus might not look like revolution, let alone such cheerful and bloodless revolutions as those witnessed in Tbilisi and Kyiv. The turmoil which is spreading across this region consists of desperate and bewildering protests (like the mothers' movement in North Ossetia's traumatized town of Beslan), bizarre outbreaks of elite family feuds (which engulfed Karachai-Cherkessia after the president's son-in-law murdered several business partners in what appeared to be an ownership dispute), the clashes that are reported as terrorist bombing attacks on police and police, and counterstrikes on terrorists, as in Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan. Yet, the process of these disparate events is really the same erosion of neopatrimonial power that elsewhere resulted in the color revolutions.

Moscow is trying to hold back the threatening wave by all means at its disposal: military, propagandistic, and diplomatic. The most recent tactical move was to repatriate as newly appointed presidents of their native republics a set of relatively young and successful business managers who would be vigorous and independent of local corrupt networks. After Adyghea's millionaire President Hazret Sovmen, the new president of Kabardino-Balkaria Arsen Kanokov was sent to rule. We might yet see proven the rumor that Moscow is seriously considering the former head of St. Petersburg's Baltika brewery Teimuraz Bolloyev as president of North Ossetia. The strategy of such preemptive appointments, intended to invigorate, if not replace, entrenched networks of political control and stave off rebellions in the North Caucasus republics, is the brainchild of the Russian proconsul in the North

Caucasus, Dmitri Kozak. Kozak is a rare bureaucrat who is widely considered competent; for once, the quality of Russian decisionmaking seems beyond reproach. Yet there is a stringent limit to what he can do. Neither Kozak nor Vladimir Putin himself seem capable of reigning in or even just cosmetically civilizing the most outrageous example of neopatrimonial rulership: the inherited sultanism of thuggish Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya.

If the past record of counterrevolutionary plans is any guidance, one should not place large bets on Kozak and his reformers-designate. Neopatrimonial machines are bound to produce their own undoing, sooner or later. But any revolution is a collapse of the existing power structure. Whether anything more stable can emerge depends on the nature of social coalitions in support of successor regimes. In the North Caucasus, the outlook does not seem encouraging.