

A Year After the Color Revolutions

Preemptive Authoritarianism and Challenges for Democratization in the Former Soviet Union

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Contagion Means Reaction

In 1989, citizens across central Europe went to the streets to bring down communist dictatorships and assert their right to live in free societies. More than a decade later, people across postcommunist Eurasia went to the streets once again to prevent elected authoritarian leaders from stealing elections, force them to accept the verdict of the electorate, and transfer power to victorious candidates from the democratic opposition.

Unlike the 1989 revolutions that brought Western-style liberal democracy only to the western rim of the former communist world (central Europe and the Baltics), this new wave has spread to far more culturally and geographically diverse polities: from Serbia in the Balkans (2000) to Georgia in the Caucasus (2003) to Ukraine in eastern Europe (2004) and finally to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia (2005). These transitions occurred in the era of the Internet, mobile communications, global media, and versatile international civil societies. Inspirational images of people power, as well as knowledge and political know-how, spread at the speed

the newest technology can accommodate. Once revolutions are completed at home, their organizers move on to new territories, share experience, and train additional aspiring democrats. The new cultural setting for democratization and the speed of diffusion of information and knowledge have induced democratic leaders and civil society activists in the remaining authoritarian states of Eurasia, as well as the Western democracy promotion community, to reconsider the possibility of regime change in countries where democratization seemed highly implausible. Indeed, initial expectations of contagion immediately after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine were remarkably high.

One year later, the wave of electoral revolutions has indeed transformed the politics of postcommunist Eurasia: ironically, it may have made democratic change less possible in many places where the power of surviving autocrats is still relatively safe. As democrats in other countries became activated and hopeful, the authoritarian incumbents got a wake-up call to prepare for possible challenges. Nearly all Eurasian leaders have issued public statements vowing not to allow another color revolution on their home territories, referring to what had happened elsewhere as terrorism and banditry. President Aleksander Lukashenko of Belarus has strengthened his security forces and introduced a new law that allows the police to shoot street protesters when the president deems necessary. Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev emasculated the opposition and purged his inner circle in the run-up to parliamentary elections in November 2005. In Kazakhstan, a major opposition party has been outlawed. In Tajikistan, the government issued new regulations restricting contact between foreign diplomats and local civil society groups. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin announced in July 2005 an upcoming ban on democracy assistance from abroad. And in Uzbekistan, the May 2005 massacre in Andijon confirmed that at least some authoritarian leaders in Eurasia are ready to defend their power by all means possible.

Exhaustion of the Electoral Scenario

To understand why a democratic future for the remaining autocratic states in the post-Soviet region may now be even more implausible than before, one needs to examine the causes of successful revolutions. By and large, people power succeeded where there was: 1) an overwhelming demand for political change; 2) an unconsolidated old regime that left a sizeable legitimate space for political opposition, civil society, and independent media and in which incumbents did not possess total control (either vertically or horizontally) over the institutions of the state; 3) meaningful, if unfair, elections which the opposition could win and, in case of rigging, present credible evidence of fraud and thus its genuine victory to society; 4) decentralization of economic power and influence that creates a domestic financial base for the opposition and independent electronic media; and 5) complacency of incumbents who discounted the threat to

their own regimes due to the geographic and/or cultural remoteness of their country.

The remaining post-Soviet states simply do not possess the social and political features seen in competitive authoritarian systems. Authority is firmly concentrated in the hands of the president, and representative institutions serve largely as window-dressing. Control over economic resources is much more concentrated, partly owing to the availability of easily controlled natural resources. Elites have been thoroughly purged and rotated to prevent the rise of internal opposition, and dissenters are quickly punished. Civil society and political opposition are generally weak, and wherever they have managed to develop into a sizable community, the regimes increasingly work to destroy and discredit it. The most effective and charismatic opposition leaders may face imprisonment on false charges, character assassination by the regime-controlled media, or sometimes worse. As a result, the rest of the opposition is either too scared or too ineffective to fight.

Preemptive Authoritarianism

To add to these disadvantages, surviving authoritarian leaders in the region are not complacent about the stability of their own rule. As a result, they make preemptive strikes that diminish the democratic opposition's opportunities to learn and evolve. Preemption aims at political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting.

Beside attacks against political opponents (tactical preemption) and advance tightening of the electoral rules along with institutionalization of presidential power (institutional preemption), regimes are turning to cultural preemption. It is not surprising, for example, that the Kremlin's principal spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky hosts a propaganda program on one of Russia's nationwide TV networks, frightening the audience, for example, with claims of Georgia's plans to invade Russia.

An important element of preemptive authoritarianism that emerged following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine is the growing cooperation between the surviving Eurasian autocracies for the sake of preventing democratic contagion. Much of what we might call the emerging "authoritarian international" is centered in the Russian Federation. Russian security forces have been mobilized to combat democratic contagion across the former USSR. For example, director of the federal security service (FSB) Nikolai Patrushev announced in May that his

agency identified channels of Western support for the democratic opposition in Belarus. Russia heavily pressured the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2004-2005 to abandon its focus on election monitoring, and threatened to withdraw funding crucial for the functioning of this organization. CIS leaders also debated in August 2005 the use of Russian internet control capabilities to combat democratic movements in the entire area of the former USSR.

What Follows the Electoral Revolutions?

Preemptive authoritarianism makes a strictly electoral revolution scenario (in which the mobilization of people power is an intermediate stage between elections and the transfer of power to the legitimate winner) an unlikely one in the rest of Eurasia, except for one or two countries (Moldova and Armenia) still characterized by soft authoritarianism.

The unlikelihood of electoral revolutions, however, does not mean political change is foreclosed. The March 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan is an example of a non-electoral scenario. Former President Askar Akayev had learned from Ukraine. He called upon the country to unite against the threat of revolution and preemptively disqualified the strongest challengers (some had already been jailed), replacing them with surrogates to make certain of his victory. He made sure that the real election results were never made public. This did not save him, in part because Kyrgyzstan shared many features with societies that had mounted successful electoral revolutions. Public dissatisfaction with the regime was high, and the country had extensive experience of political liberalization. In addition, Akayev was a weak leader with past democratic pretensions; he hesitated to use force to crack down on the protests.

Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution also illustrated what can result from a collision between democratic contagion and official preemption. There is no doubt that the Kyrgyz opposition was invigorated by the Ukrainian revolution. While the government had learned enough from Ukraine (and Georgia) to prevent an electoral revolution, the opposition, once denied any chance through elections, went straight to the streets and won the contest of force. Kyrgyzstan carries an important lesson: if the desire for political change exists, expect it to materialize in totally unexpected forms and processes.

The dynamics and the consequences of the Kyrgyz revolution, however, hint that postelectoral scenarios of regime change may be more violent, less manageable, and create more dilemmas for supporters of democracy promotion. While it was fine to advise and even promote electoral revolutions (after all, they were grounded in legitimate electoral exercises) it was the incumbents' failure to observe established rules, not Western intervention, that motivated protests. But what should be done in

future political crises, which are likely to go beyond this fine frame of legitimacy?

Challenges for the Future

For the moment, the active promotion of democracy in Eurasia seems to be an uphill struggle. The recent wave of revolutions has left behind several autocratic regimes, all of which are stronger than those it washed away. Preemption will certainly also result in the closing of loopholes left over from the times when flirting with democracy (and the West) seemed to be harmless. Collective defense against democratization and Russia's readiness to back friendly autocrats will also help to fend off any further democratic challenges.

Additional factors need to be mentioned as well. One is the ongoing rise in oil prices. This inadvertently bolsters the strength of authoritarian regimes in some of the most important states in Eurasia, as much as elsewhere in the world (for example, Venezuela). Another factor is the continuing battle with terrorism, which gives some of the authoritarian regimes in Eurasia an opportunity to render services to the West and to thereby offset concerns about lack of democracy. Though the expulsion of the U.S. military base from Uzbekistan showed that this marriage of convenience may not last long, nonetheless it is obvious that geostrategic considerations make the U.S. administration hesitant to pressure the Kremlin on democracy and its role in encouraging and supporting preemptive authoritarianism elsewhere in the former USSR. And for all the commitment to spreading freedom declared by the current administration, there is reasonable doubt as to whether this commitment will be sustainable even in the next electoral round.

Likewise, it seems that a difficult time lies ahead for the democracy promotion community. Its presence and financial resources are increasingly unwelcome in the region. Moreover, the knowledge and expertise accumulated as a result of the recent sequence of successful democratic breakthroughs will be difficult to apply to new repressive environments. The scenario of the electoral revolution, a revolutionary development itself just a few years ago, is now well studied not only by democratic activists, but also by the incumbent autocrats and their security apparatuses. Projects aimed at building the domestic bases for future democratic breakthroughs will be the first to be targeted by surviving autocratic regimes. And the prospects for neutral projects, such as the funding of election monitoring or nonpartisan voter mobilization, shall also be affected for the worse. Consolidated authoritarianism bolstered by preemption almost entirely excludes the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power. And democracy promotion institutions are neither able nor meant to promote actors and develop strategies that employ violence. In addition, given the reality of who the opposition is,

particularly in Central Asia, democracy efforts may face ethical and other dilemmas about engaging with political Islam.

That said, new democratic breakthroughs in the former USSR remain a prospect, if a distant one. Effective democracy promotion will require not only the continuation of the involvement of international nongovernmental organizations in the region, but also the firm political support of Western democracies. First, democratic change badly needs to develop a more positive image in the region, especially as it is routinely presented as banditry or as utterly chaotic by surviving autocracies. Those countries that have recently achieved breakthroughs should not be left to languish by the democratic West. Revolutionary change needs to be consolidated, and a positive experience in these countries might inspire others. Ukrainians particularly deserve to share in the benefits of their proximity to the European Union through a higher level of trade, a better visa regime, and the prospect of political integration, even if that does not mean membership in the EU in the foreseeable future.

Secondly, wherever possible, the West must apply systematic political leverage to ensure at least a basic respect for free and fair electoral processes and the autonomy of civil society and independent media in the region concerned. The consequences of further ignoring Russia's slide into authoritarianism will be catastrophic, given its central role in organizing collective defense actions against democratic development in Eurasia. Democracy needs to be put back on the agenda of the West's relationship with Russia. It needs to be made clear to the Kremlin that the benefits of engagement with the West are contingent upon a greater degree of political freedom inside the country and more restraint in the provision of support for the survival of authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space.

Regarding the democracy promotion community, it is in urgent need of significantly updating the focus of its fieldwork. The expertise accumulated from pre-1989 work may be increasingly relevant in relation to the current repressive environments. This is particularly true in relation to approaches to breaking information blockades in repressed societies, including the use of electronic media broadcasting. At the same time, while elections may be increasingly meaningless in the post-Soviet area as vehicles for regime change, members of the democratic opposition will still have to run for office, as one of the few ways possible to connect with the public. Activists, therefore, need to learn how to continue their work and spread their message when there are fewer and fewer legitimate and legal means to do so. Likewise, they need to develop new ideas about how to unmask vote fraud when the basic conditions for election monitoring are absent. Democracy assistance should be smart and offer intellectual input and practical support in an effort to put democrats just that little bit ahead of the learning curve of autocratic rulers. Above all, however, democracy assistance has to be continued. The promotion of responsible and civilized democracy is an indispensable investment in the future of

the Eurasian states, especially given the fact that escape from the current authoritarian condition is otherwise likely to be accompanied by violence.

