Is the Age of Post-Soviet Electoral Revolutions over?

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In 1989, citizens across Central Europe took to the streets, bringing down communist dictatorships and asserting their right to live in societies free from fear and oppression. More than a decade later, people across post-communist Eurasia are filling the streets once again: this time, to prevent "elected" authoritarian leaders from stealing elections. People are demanding that leaders 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 Western CIS (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. Nowadays, both inspirational images of people power as well as knowledge and political know-how spread at the speed the newest technology can accommodate. Moreover, once "home" revolutions are completed, their organizers move on to new territories, share experience and train more aspiring democrats. Stories of democratic breakthroughs in situations that just recently had seemed so unchangeable raise hopes and make democratic leaders, civil society activists and the general public reconsider the possibility of change in their own countries.

Talk of "democratic contagion" is spreading to debates among scholars, journalists and politicians worldwide. With hope, fear and, at times, hysteria, people are asking: who is next? The answer may be "no one." While the wave of electoral revolutions has already transformed the politics of post-communist 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 agitated and hopeful, the authoritarian incumbents got a wake-up call to prepare for possible challenges. For instance, the Belarusian president has strengthened his security forces and introduced a new law that allows the police to shoot

street protesters when the president deems necessary. In Kazakhstan, a major opposition party has been outlawed. Moldova, something of a post-Soviet oddity but still a semi-authoritarian country, blocked the entrance of Russian and Belarusian observers (mobilized by the Moldovan opposition) to its parliamentary elections last March. In Tajikistan, the government issued new regulations restricting contact between foreign diplomats and local civil society groups. And in Russia, President Putin recently announced an upcoming ban on democracy assistance from abroad. Almost all surviving Eurasian autocrats have issued public statements vowing not to admit another "colored" revolution on their home territories, referring to what had happened elsewhere mostly as terrorism and banditry.

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 what made the successful revolutions happen. By and large, people power succeeded where (1) the demand for political change was overwhelming; (2) the incumbent leaders had antagonized their societies through repression, mismanagement and corruption; (3) the opposition worked together; and (4) civil society had matured enough to mobilize both voters and peaceful protesters.

Furthermore, these revolutions happened in places where incumbents did not possess total control (either vertically or horizontally) over the institutions of the state. Reasonably liberal political life had allowed an opposition to develop in parliament and between elections. When local governments sided with the opposition and encouraged the protests, the opposition was able to assemble bulldozers and motorcades of cars and buses and force their way into capital cities. Parliament and the courts were sufficiently independent to act according to the law, not out of fear or loyalty. As the result of this significant devolution of authority, the central government was unable to control nationwide unrest, even with the real threat of force.

Decentralization of informal power and influence had also been achieved through economic means. In all the successful revolutionary episodes (though to varying degrees), oligarchic capitalism had emerged alongside the unconsolidated competitive autocracies (with their uncompetitive electoral systems). Once former government officials defected to the opposition (taking their offshore bank accounts with them), it became much easier to sustain the opposition and free it from dependence on foreign assistance (which, in any case, can never provide enough to outspend the regime in power).

Last but not least, an important reason for the success of all three electoral revolutions (Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine) was the complacency of the incumbents (as explained below, Kyrgyzstan presented a different case). When the revolutions began, authoritarian leaders across the region discounted the threat to their own regimes due to the geographic and/or cultural remoteness of the country in question. They perceived their regimes

as more stable and consolidated, and they dangerously underestimated the potential of people power.

For example, Milosevic sincerely believed he could win 70 percent of the vote in the election that eventually landed him in the Hague. He had not learned from earlier manifestations of people power in Slovakia and Croatia (where all it took to bring down semi-autocratic rule was to win the elections, not to take to the streets). Leaders of the former Soviet republics did not pay much attention to the downfall of Milosevic. (One exception was Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who shared with Milosevic the reputation as Europe's "last dictators" and had developed strong personal ties to him. With his own re-election campaign approaching in 2001, Lukashenka specifically instructed his political apparatus to take care that the "Yugoslav scenario" not be replicated in Belarus.)

Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze—who by the time of his ouster had lost touch with reality—clearly learned nothing from Milosevic's fall, and even Shevardnadze's fate did not cause much anxiety among the rest: the Georgian leader was resented as overly liberal and democratic, and they had little reason to object to his ouster. As a result, while Ukraine's Kuchma and Yanukovych were somewhat alert to the risks they took in 2004, their big-time vote-stealing in the few provinces most tightly controlled by the outgoing regime was too visible for the domestic audience and international observers to miss, and the obvious fraud itself became a factor in the mass mobilization.

Meanwhile, the democratic oppositions—connected by myriads of informal bonds and friendships (often mediated by democracy promotion organizations)—found the initial revolutions a source of learning and inspiration.

It was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine that was the true watershed in the political development of the region, due to that country's size and geopolitical importance. Once an electoral revolution had occurred so deep in Soviet territory and in the country thought secure for post-Soviet authoritarians, the possibility of contagion and diffusion could no longer be discounted. This realization gives the authoritarian incumbents an advantage.

To start with, most of the remaining ex-Soviet states simply do not possess the social and political features seen in competitive authoritarian systems. In contrast, 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. Independent oligarchies (who might put their own interests before those of the regime) are either unheard of, have been thoroughly eradicated, or are in the process of being eradicated. In many cases, government control of national wealth helps to maintain a fair degree of social cohesion by enabling the president to

redistribute money for political gain. Any elites have been thoroughly purged and rotated to prevent the rise of internal opposition, and dissenters are quickly punished.

Civil society and political opposition is weak (if it exists at all), and, wherever it has managed to develop into a sizable community, there is a growing tendency to destroy and discredit it. The most effective and charismatic opposition leaders may face imprisonment on cooked-up 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.

To add to these disadvantages, authoritarian leaders' complacency has now given way to anxiety and even fear. As a result, they make pre-emptive strikes that diminish the democratic opposition's opportunities to learn and evolve. The incumbents now know the routine and are prepared to rebuff standard attacks on their authority. They know that elections need to be rigged more thoroughly in a way that denies the opposition any chance to prove fraud (and claim victory). They know the democratic "evil" needs to be fought in embryo—long before the election is announced. And they have learned how masses are mobilized, which means they are ready to place riot police and security forces on high alert. All this will make elections meaningless, yet the opposition—still agitated by vivid memories of successful democratic breakthroughs—may continue to follow the familiar, but now largely outdated, paradigm of "electoral revolution," preparing in vain for a now impossible scenario of regime change.

Does this mean the age of revolutions in post-Soviet countries is over? Perhaps. A strictly electoral scenario—in which the mobilization of people power is an intermediate stage between elections and the transfer of power to the legitimate winner—is indeed unlikely to happen anywhere else, except for one or two countries (such as Moldova, or maybe Armenia) still characterized by "soft" authoritarianism.

But does the unlikelihood of electoral revolutions mean the foreclosure of any political change? No. What if the opposition challengers—aware of the meaninglessness of electoral exercises—simply move on to mass mobilization and attempt to carry out revolutions in a more traditional meaning of the word? Take the recent example of Kyrgyzstan, where revolution occurred in a more classical, non-electoral scenario. For his part, former president Askar Akaev had learned from Ukraine. He called upon the country to unite against the threat of revolution and pre-emptively disqualified the strongest challengers (some had already been jailed), replacing them with surrogates to make certain his victory. He made sure that the real election results were never made public. All in all, he very effectively denied the opposition's claim to legitimacy. And yet, this did not save him, 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, Akaev was a weak leader with past democratic pretensions; he hesitated to use force to crack down on the protests.

But Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution also illustrated what can result from a collision between democratic contagion and official pre-emption. There is no doubt that the Kyrgyz opposition was invigorated by the Ukrainian revolution: it had happened too recently for excitement and expectations to subside, and the example was striking and encouraging. While the government had learned enough from Ukraine (and Georgia) to prevent an electoral revolution, to the horror of the Akaev regime, the opposition, once denied any chance through elections, went straight to the streets. Once the opposition had won the contest of force, they needed no electoral legitimacy.

Of course, this classical, non-electoral revolutionary scenario is not something to cheer about. The absence of political legitimacy and a recognized leader made transition in Kyrgyzstan chaotic and violent. Unlike the previous revolutions, the next day Kyrgyzstan's new leader was ousted, the crowds did not know whom to obey, and anarchy, street fighting and looting resulted. This non-electoral scenario also presents the democracy promotion community with a dilemma. While it was fine to advise and even promote electoral revolutions—after all, they were grounded in legitimate electoral exercises (even in the views of the incumbent leaders)—it was the incumbents' failure to observe established rules, not Western intervention, that motivated protests. But what should be done in future political upsets, which are likely to go beyond this fine frame of legitimacy?

While not offering an answer to these questions, the first non-electoral revolution in the region, Kyrgyzstan, carries an important lesson: there is no way to stop people once they are committed to changing their government. If the urge for political change exists, expect it to materialize in totally unexpected forms and processes. It may be that aspiring democrats trying to force change will have to do something different to outscore the incumbent autocrats. Sometimes they may be successful, even if only accidentally and unwittingly. That "sometimes" means incumbent autocrats face an unpleasant truth: they may successfully rebuff challenges for years, but in reality they are like underground miners—one mistake can mean their end. And humans are fallible, even those who consider themselves gods.

The electoral revolutions in the region also offer an important lesson for the democracy promotion community. As we saw with the resurgence of demands for democracy in unexpected places, the greatest mistake is to view repressive leaders and still-frightened societies and believe that these people have no authentic demands for democratic change. Though the forthcoming transitions—however long they may be in coming—are likely to be more violent and chaotic than recent ones, democracy promoters must continue to cultivate and nurture responsible democratic actors capable of

streamlining future transitions, and they must help ensure these transitions are carried out in a relatively peaceful and orderly manner.