

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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The Orange Revolution: Five Years Since Panels 2 and 3

Panel 2: The Near Abroad

Lincoln Mitchell, Arnold A. Saltzman Assistant Professor in the Practice of International Politics at Columbia University, is writing a book with the working title *Whatever Happened to the Colored Revolutions?* “I’m sure that the publishers won’t let me keep that, but it reminds me of listening to the radio in the old days and hearing, ‘whatever happened to that one hit wonder?’” Mitchell remarked with a laugh. He argued that with the exception of Ukraine—which is still up for debate—the colored revolutions have failed to establish democracy.

Mitchell discussed the revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). “It is tempting to lump them all together, but these revolutions have some important differences.” The situations in the three countries diverged from the beginning. Ukraine erupted in massive public demonstrations, while the demonstrations in Georgia were modest, “perhaps more accurately described as vigils.” In both Georgia and Ukraine the revolutions were nonviolent in nature, while in Kyrgyzstan there was some low-level violence and looting.

All three revolutions took place during the aftermath of controversial elections, and involved an overthrow of authoritarian leadership in the name of democracy. None of them started with “much of a model for democratic development.” Mitchell joked that “these were neither colors nor revolutions—tulips and roses are both flowers, while an orange is a fruit and the extent to which any of these “revolutions” led to democracy, or perhaps less generously whether any of them even contributed to democracy is dubious.” Despite the lack of democratic credentials within these three countries, the colored revolutions tend to be associated with the word democracy.

“Perhaps the jury is still out on Ukraine, which would make it the most successful of the three.” Mitchell has frequently visited Ukraine since the Orange Revolution, “always in advance of an election, and always when the election goes more or less the same way as the one that precipitated

the Orange Revolution went. That may change in 2010, but it may not.”

Mitchell remarked that Georgia went from “one kind of free-wheeling kleptocracy to another. It switched to a more dominant party system where the state is stronger and things function better, but there is also less freedom.” He lamented that Georgia traded in “democracy for state-building, and ended up with neither after the conflict in 2008.” Kyrgyzstan also failed to democratize—the leadership merely shifted to another type of technocratic gang.

The extent of the United States’ involvement is another differentiating factor between the three revolutions. “There is a sense in Moscow that the wave of revolutions was part of a US conspiracy—that these were all US-backed events, but this really varies.” Mitchell deemed that the US had the heaviest hand in Ukraine. He was in both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan during the revolutions, and did not feel that the US played a significant part in either revolution. The Tulip Revolution especially, “caught everybody by surprise.”

Mitchell reflected that the US tendency to frame the three revolutions in terms of democracy has “allowed for democracy to become an easy target.” He noted that “more people in Washington think of Georgia as a democracy than they do in Tbilisi.” This inclination to approach the revolutions through “a paradigm of democracy” has led the US to be closely identified with unpopular leaders.

“What strikes me is that the colored revolutions weren’t really about democracy, they were about Russia.” The real impact of these revolutions was on the relationships of these three countries with Russia and the relationship between Russia and the United States. “We seemed to miss this at first because we were stuck in the groove of democracy.” This “democracy” rhetoric has exacerbated Russian perceptions that the US orchestrated the colored revolutions.

Mitchell concluded that although the colored revolutions in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan were initially perceived as democratic breakthroughs,

these revolutions will probably be remembered as mere “speed bumps” in the post-communist political development of these countries. He added that there is still potential for the Orange Revolution to have been an event that “really changed things” in Ukraine.

Alexander Cooley, Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, discussed Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution, which he believes “exhibited more differences than similarities to the other colored revolutions.” He argued that while the revolution had little effect on changing the domestic politics of Kyrgyzstan, it had a “seismic regional effect,” because “it conflated the western support of democratic consolidation with regime change, sending shock waves across the region.”

The Tulip Revolution (February-March 2005) began in the southern city Jalal-Abad in response to a contentious parliamentary election—both the Rose and the Orange revolutions followed presidential elections and began in the capitals. NGOs and external actors played a minute role in the Tulip Revolution, while they played a significant role in both Georgia and Ukraine. Cooley reflected that “it probably muddled the waters a little bit that a lot of external actors took credit for the Tulip Revolution post-fact.”

The Tulip Revolution was not revolutionary—Kyrgyzstan’s “questionably elected parliament” remained mostly intact as a part of Bakiev’s bargain. “The cabinet members just switched their loyalties from Akayev to Bakiev, and the ones who didn’t were harassed.”

Kyrgyzstan has experienced a tangible regression since 2005. The constitutional reforms have strengthened executive power and the presidential family has become significantly more embedded in the government. Corruption is rampant, and the parliament “has become a way for members to inoculate themselves from criticism and investigation from criminal and business doings.” Also, the media, previously “something that Kyrgyzstan could feel proud of relative to the rest of the region,” has been under assault.

The Tulip Revolution produced paranoia within surrounding regimes—it was a shock that “even in Central Asia, a region with archaic patrimonial systems” a regime could fall. Governments began to take preemptive measures against possible upheavals in their own countries. In May 2005, Uzbekistan’s interior ministry fired into a crowd of protestors in Andijan, killing hundreds of people, because of fears that the protest would lead to another colored revolution.

After the Andijan Massacre, Russia and China united in support of Tashkent’s Andijan

crackdown, claiming that the West used democracy as a front for geopolitical interests. Countries across Central Asia began to adopt similar kinds of laws concerning censorship, media and the curbing of NGO activity.

Cooley stressed that while Russia and China united in opposition to the colored revolutions, they had different reasons for doing so—China never viewed the colored revolutions as a direct security threat, it opposed the idea of western intervention in the business of sovereign countries, while Russia actually saw the revolutions as “a foray into its space” by the West. According to Cooley, “China’s security agenda in Central Asia is stabilizing western China—Russia’s security agenda is pushing back the West.”

Cooley concluded that “the conflation of democratization with regime change was really damaging.” Democracy requires numerous factors—civil society, transparency, governance, a fight on corruption—these factors were not present during the Tulip Revolution.

Gordon Bardos, Assistant Director of the Harriman Institute, discussed the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia. He argued that although Serbia began with the most difficult conditions—having faced a decade of wars, severe economic sanctions, and 78 days of NATO bombing—the Bulldozer Revolution has been the most successful out of the colored revolutions discussed on this panel.

Bardos hypothesizes that Serbia’s relative success stems from four factors: political strategy; divided political leadership; a relatively undisputed, homogenous national identity; and the role of Russia. In contrast to the other cases, Moscow played a relatively “benign and unobtrusive role in Serbian politics.” Without Russia to influence its domestic and foreign policy decisions, Serbia was able to function with more political freedom. “Moscow has not tended to favor any one political party or individual over another in the post-Milosevic period.”

Unlike the other three countries, where ethnic divisions interfered with governance, Serbia has a relatively homogenous population—both ethnically and in terms of religion. Moreover, since Slobodan Milosevic’s leadership, no party or leader has dominated the Serbian political scene. “No one individual has been able to accumulate enough power to begin derailing the democratic process in the country.”

Finally, Bardos argued that Vojislav Kostunica’s decision to retain Milosevic-era laws until they could be changed by the new parliament and the new courts “was the appropriate one.” Belgrade’s population criticized this decision

because they wanted tangible results. “Much of this disappointment can be explained by the understandable frustration from people who wanted to see more immediate improvements in their daily lives.” However, by not overhauling the old system and allowing the changes to evolve gradually the Serbian government was able to establish more democratic institutions.

Mark Beissinger, Professor of Politics at Princeton University, discussed Russia’s role in the wake of the colored revolutions. “While there were echoes of the Orange Revolution inside of Russia, nothing materialized and precisely the opposite occurred,” stated Beissinger. Putin grew increasingly authoritarian and justified the tightening of his reign with the “threat” posed by the Orange Revolution. “In my opinion, the threat of a revolution was greatly exaggerated.”

Beissinger sees two possible reasons for the Russian government’s disproportional response to the colored revolutions. First, there is “what we might call authoritarian over-insurance,” which is the tendency of authoritarian governments to over-insure themselves against potential upheavals, even if they know that a revolution is unlikely. Second, Beissinger referred to the “cynical manipulation of a political opening,” which means taking advantage of a situation—in this case the Orange Revolution—as an opportunity to consolidate power. Beissinger favors the latter hypothesis.

At the time of the Orange Revolution, electoral practices in Russia had been more or less fair. Unlike President Kuchma in Ukraine, Putin was “an overwhelmingly popular leader” with a 60% approval rating. There was no need to “stuff ballot boxes” the way the government was doing in Ukraine, and the way the Russian government is doing today. Russia’s oil boom had stabilized the economy and created capital for the expansion of social programs. A real middle class materialized in Russia, and according to the polls it preferred stability over democratic freedoms and “preferred Putin in particular because he represented that.”

Putin’s opposition in Russia was small. In the wake of the Orange Revolution, opposition parties formed a coalition but the result was fragmented, and protests, even according to the most generous estimates, never reached beyond 15,000 demonstrators. “There was not much of a threat coming from the street.”

Unlike in Georgia and Ukraine, the political institutions in Russia were not highly divided and stood under the consolidated control of Putin and his staff. “Also unlike Georgia and Ukraine the liberal opposition had no political base.” Opposition parties performed poorly in the

legislative elections of 2003, with only seven seats in the parliament controlled by either Yabloko or the Union of Right Forces. “If splits and defections from the police and the military were important to the carrying out of the colored revolutions, under Putin the very close relationship between the police and the presidential power made that a lot less likely,” Beissinger said. Finally, the strong sense of nationalism and anti-Americanism within Russia created the wrong kind of audience for a colored revolution.

Beissinger noted that although it posed no tangible threat to the power structure of the Russian Federation, the Russian government viewed the Orange Revolution as its biggest foreign policy disaster. “Russia became more assertive and vocal about its right to exclusive hegemony over the region in a way that it hadn’t done before the colored revolutions.” Beissinger mentioned the war with Georgia, Russia’s threats to Ukraine, and the registration of people as citizens in minority areas. He argues that the colored revolutions provided a political opening that justified these actions. “The threat of the colored revolutions has long receded from the region and yet Russia’s actions persist.” The colored revolutions provided opportunities not only for would-be democrat leaders, but for authoritarian leaders as well. “The Putin Administration was never really fearful, they just took advantage,” Beissinger concluded.

Panel 3: Have the Colored Revolutions Come to an End?

Sharon Wolchik, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs, has spent the past five years collaborating on a book with political scientist Valerie Bunce about electoral revolutions, or “democratizing elections,” as Wolchik and Bunce have decided to call them. Wolchik disagrees with the notion that the colored revolutions have nothing to do with democracy, “they have an enormous amount to do with democracy,” she said. “A democratic opening does not always lead towards democracy in a linear way.”

Wolchik views these revolutions as “illustrations of a third mode of democratization,” a term she and Bunce coined. Wolchik explained that the first two modes were elite pacting (prevalent in Latin America and Southern Europe) and mass protests not related to elections. “What distinguishes this universe of cases is the attempt to use elections and electoral campaigns in order to democratize.” This type of effort began in Slovakia and Croatia. These cases were different

from the colored revolutions because the leaders left peacefully, and there was no need for mass protests.

“After comparing the successes and failures within ‘the third mode,’ we have ruled out the usual suspects,” Wolchik said, referring to the factors that determine the level of revolutionary success within these countries. “The degree of development, economic performance, repression, and even the degree of US assistance don’t seem to matter.” Wolchik added that one “usual suspect” that does matter is the vulnerability of the existing regime.

“Within this universe of vulnerable regimes, it is clear that what leads to success is something that we, for lack of a better term, have labeled the electoral model.” Wolchik described this “model” as a “set of strategies and tactics designed to increase voter turnout, ensure greater transparency in electoral procedure, unify the opposition, energize citizens who are passive, apathetic and cynical, and challenge the regime at the ballot box.” She noted that some of these techniques “were quite clearly drawn from earlier episodes in 1989 and the dissidents in the region, even under communism.”

In order for there to be another colored revolution in the region, there needs to be an appropriate electoral model. In addition, the participation of outside actors matters. Wolchik indicated that without the influence of a “transnational coalition of internal and external actors,” revolutionary attempts tend to fail.

Another factor that will influence whether we see a resurgence of colored revolutions is the “fear of contagion that spread throughout the region.” If regimes continue to guard themselves against the possibility of future revolutions—the Azeri regime, for instance, “went to great lengths by controlling the media, eliminating dissent, also going so far as to ban the sale of orange material in local shops”—then Wolchik doubts that another revolution can occur.

She emphasized that the building of civil society is another essential factor that can promote democracy and urged the United States to incorporate civil society building into its democratizing campaign. She concluded her presentation by stressing that “electoral revolutions have been the region’s only cases of movement in a more democratic direction.”

Rajan Menon, Monroe J. Rathbone Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University, noted that a revolution, as it is generally defined by the academic community, involves “the capture of a state by outside forces,” and then the use of the state to “carry out a thoroughgoing political,

economic, and social transformation.” A revolution should “alter the societal trajectory” of a nation.

Menon contends that the colored revolutions did not alter much in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. “If I had to mark the continuities I would put Georgia on one end and Kyrgyzstan on the other—with Ukraine towards Georgia.” In each of these countries corruption, cronyism and social polarization persist.

Ukraine has seen four governments since 2004, “at the very least leading to a great deal of incoherence over what domestic and foreign policy should be like.” It has suffered tremendously from the economic crisis—it would not have suffered to this extent had there been preventative mechanisms and reforms that could have minimized the effects. “Sovereign debt is something like 20% GDP. According to public opinion polls, key institutions do not have public confidence. The annual Freedom House report shows that four indexes have stayed the same since 2005 and three have gotten worse.”

Kyrgyzstan has fared worse on six Freedom House indexes, while one has stayed the same. “The degree of nepotism, corruption, harassment of journalists, violence against opposition parties, and the theft of state property,” has increased significantly. Georgia has fared better, with three indexes staying the same, two getting better and one changing for the worse. “Georgia is a little different because in the areas of corruption, judicial independence and civil society, the degree of transformation has been quite commendable,” stated Menon. However, the degree of political polarization has increased considerably, and the executive branch has consolidated too much power.

“If you used the word revolution in a different way—contested elections that give rise to instability,” Menon continued, “then I think the conditions for this occurring are ever-present in the region.” Menon stressed that Russia, which continues to think of itself as an empire, “has the capacity to exploit all sorts of weaknesses—the instability surrounding Russia is going to be a constant feature.” He noted that Russia is itself vulnerable towards collapse because of its extremely centralized nature.

Menon compared Russia to India—a country that has appeared to be on the brink of collapse, but continues to survive. “India is a ramshackled mess of a place. My theory is that it hasn’t collapsed, because it’s so disordered and decentralized that a disturbance in one area will have no effect on another.” In Russia the regions are much more interconnected, “a disturbance in

the center can radiate quickly.” Warning of the danger emanating from the North Caucasus, Menon lamented that the region has been wrongly declared a success in the Kremlin. “The violence is no longer confined to Chechnya—just this year about 200 people have been killed in Ingushetia.”

Russia’s neighborhood is highly unstable. “If the conditions that we point to for colored revolution-like events are present in Russia’s neighborhood, to what extent are they present in Russia as well?” Menon concluded by pointing out the unpredictability of the situation—after all, everyone had been caught off guard when the Soviet Union started to unravel.

Jack Snyder, Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, also questioned the meaning of the term “colored revolution.” “If you mean a political upheaval involving mass collective action, the fall of an undemocratic region and an election leading to a successor government, then yes, maybe there will be more colored revolutions in that sense,” he said. “If, however, you mean new democratic consolidations in currently authoritarian post-communist countries that will lead to the establishment of a rule of law state with regular democratic accountability, then the answer is not many, if any.”

In order for a country to experience the first kind of upheaval, it will need to “have lost or stolen elections, various domestic circumstances to create political opportunities for the opposition, aggressive activity by international NGOs, and a non-oil-based economy.” Snyder deemed that meeting these conditions would not be “a high hurdle” to overcome in “weakened, post-communist, authoritarian regimes,” and suggested that Armenia is a likely candidate for this kind of upheaval.

In order for a country to successfully consolidate democracy, however, there is a much more rigorous set of conditions. “A checklist of the conditions that facilitate democratic consolidation will be a much higher hurdle to

surpass,” stated Snyder. In order to create democracy-facilitating conditions, countries need to have a “relatively high level of income per capita, some sort of legacy of useable political, administrative, or legal institutions, and also a non-oil-based economy.” Snyder pointed out that democratic neighbors (like the EU) that can provide incentives towards democratization, are also important. If most of these factors are not present when a country attempts to transition, democratic consolidation will be unsuccessful.

Snyder lamented that countries that try to consolidate and fail, often end up swinging in the opposite direction. “Transition can be very turbulent and results in a high demand for mass participation in places with weak institutions—these turbulent moments often give rise to ethnic nationalism and sectarianism.” Attempting to democratize without the necessary facilitating conditions can mobilize illiberal groups and societies, “which then develop illiberal ideologies, create illiberal social networks and political institutions.” This can make it more difficult to democratize “the next time around.”

Scholars and policy makers often propose gradualism as a solution for failed consolidation attempts. Gradualism can take two different forms—sometimes autocratic governments adopt certain liberal reforms in order to co-opt their opposition. “Tunisian leaders brought labor into the ruling coalition to make them support the autocracy. In Morocco the government increased women’s rights in order to divide the liberal oppositions from the Islamic oppositions.” In these cases gradualism only strengthened the autocracy. Gradualism can facilitate consolidation if governments begin to strengthen both the economy and bureaucratic and legal institutions. “This creates facilitating conditions for democratic consolidation within the womb of the authoritarian regime.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner

The Harriman Institute postdoctoral fellowships allow junior scholars to spend a 2-year term in residence at Columbia University in New York. All fellows are assigned a faculty mentor. Postdoctoral fellows are expected to concentrate on their own research and writing; to give a brownbag seminar on their research; and to be active participants in the Institute's scholarly community and events. The Harriman Institute has two types of postdoctoral fellowships: general (three positions, two-year appointments) and Ukrainian Studies (one position, two-year appointment). The next call for applications to the Ukrainian Studies Postdoctoral Fellowship will be Fall 2019.