

Book Review

Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, eds (2010)

The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures

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A wide range of scholars have contributed differently to make this book colourful. The paperback begins with an excellent foreword by Stephen White and James Bryce arguing that the transformations that happened in the former Soviet republics during and after the independence period (1991) were no more than cosmetic changes. The edited volume vividly takes a course of seeking the causes and effects of the revolutions, why they happened in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, but not in other countries (most likely in Azerbaijan and Belarus) despite the existing favorable conditions. It provides insightful analysis by explaining the dynamics behind the disruptions with domestic and external factors prevailing. The authors systematically discuss the factors that have contributed to the success and failure of the colour revolutions.

A chapter on Georgia tells us how a revolution that started initially successfully brought uncertainty into the country afterwards by providing a multifaceted study. With unnecessary military conflict in August 2008, as the author puts it correctly, President Saakashvili rather became a victim of Russian provocations, which indicated his inexperience in political affairs. However, one possible explanation for this might be the fact that he was the youngest national president in Europe when elected in 2004, so inaccuracies were inevitable. Although it was a political flaw of Saakashvili, it should not keep the positive changes that he brought to Georgia in the shadow. With all its drawbacks, the chapter productively discusses how he managed to tackle corruption, succeeded in the withdrawal of Russian military bases, made a set of fundamental reforms (government, police force, education), which are still considerably painful in neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, what the author failed to provide is a possible outlook on what Georgia might experience after 2013 when Saakashvili's subsequent presidential term comes to an end, which is also critically important to assess his democratic/autocratic image. Moreover, the chapter concludes with some speculative and provocative remarks, which could have been avoided or developed with some firm arguments in the middle of the chapter. Accordingly, it might have been useful to examine the origins of those beliefs more thoroughly. This neglect is therefore somewhat surprising. To describe briefly, history recorded it as an example of a successful colour revolution and the change that Saakashvili brought to Georgia after the Rose Revolution was not cosmetic, but rather colourful with ups and downs.

Apart from the external conditions, which obviously were crucial, every single country had its own path with its own story towards a revolution, but the outcomes were relatively and surprisingly identical - in terms of disappointment and disillusion. Not less important is the fact that a real challenge begins after the revolution. A post-revolutionary period is a testing period for each revolution-tasted country. A revolution itself needs to be evolutionary. A revolution must be in the brains, the people must change in order to overcome the typical Soviet-style obstacles. As President Saakashvili in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly mentioned, "[m]odernization without freedom is not sustainable. Computers are not enough, if you don't have free minds to use them. So let us free our minds from our common Soviet past in order to build a common future". Ukraine in this regard was not an exception. The Orange Revolution, according to the author's stimulating observations, was a non-violent transfer of power from an unpopular government to an opposition through elections. The chapter addresses critical issues before and during the post-revolutionary period with some interesting findings. The Russian rivalry with the West and the loss of much of its face resulting in political embarrassment for Russia was particularly attention-grabbing. The chapter further examines how the Orange Revolution essentially replaced one part of the Ukrainian post-Soviet elite with another. Perhaps the recent Arab uprising in Egypt deserves to be mentioned when one demonstrator made it clear that "it would be a good lesson for the new government, before they do wrong things they will remember this mass protests here in Tahrir square". This is very much valid for Ukraine as well, as the author aptly provides that what has been achieved was the will of the Ukrainian people to cast their vote in a free and transparent election and their desire to live in a better-governed society. Even though the pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich won the presidential race, the elections, keeping Russia in mind, were largely fair and reflected the will of most Ukrainians by keeping a democratic trace behind. From this perspective, the author partly succeeds in his mission. Yet, what is largely missing is the absence of the influence of the Georgian Rose Revolution on Ukraine. No single word has been said regarding this, although it has at least a timeframe influence over the mass protests in Kiev's Maidan square in 2004.

Next, the volume provides the reader with an insight into the internal complexities of Moldova. This was the first country in the former Communist bloc to democratically elect an unreformed Communist party to power. Although it has many characteristics similar to the countries that underwent revolutions, it has experienced a different outcome. The same can be said of Belarus, which, despite having the highest level of political repression among the countries that have experienced the colour revolutions, has stayed out of the revolutionary wave. In this regard, a mostly divided or weak opposition was a common feature of the failed revolutions. Political repression, media obstruction and a popular government were also key elements for the failure. Another strong argument in the volume is a thesis that many of the colour revolutions were about cyclical, rather than transformational, change, referring to the typical example of Kyrgyzstan.

The book continues with the case of Azerbaijan, regarding which a comprehensive analysis has been made. Two major arguments deserve to be mentioned. According to the author, the strategy and the timing of the revolution were badly chosen with a two year-delay. It effectively provides pragmatic solutions and superior alternatives. It further explains that the Azeri opposition prepared for a colour revolution based on enthusiasm under the influence of the Georgian and Ukrainian successes, rather than as a result of their internal political life, so that it could not but fail. This is a novel approach to the problem and therefore is a welcome addition. However, embarrassingly, the author refers to the chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party Ali Kerimli, whose name is misspelled.

A chapter on Tajikistan highlights that the absence of revolution-like protests can be mostly understood by the unwillingness to face the prospect of another civil war. The fear

of a civil war made the people choose autocratic stability over uncertain change. For that reason, Tajikistan was a case where domestic conditions and historical experience matter. The book further benefits from the unique case of Turkmenistan, where a president for life, as described by the author, ultimately was brought down not by a strong civil society, but by a weak heart, calling it a very Turkmen coup.

Overall, through analysis, it can be concluded that Russia remains and will for a longer period remain a promoter of an authoritarian trend in the troubled post-Soviet space. It is revealed how Russia was using hot conflict points as a weapon of control and its continuous export of "Made in Russia" authoritarian products in order to prevent the possible revolution-like scenarios. After all, the Russian interventionist factor has always been dominant in the region by making it ubiquitous. Consequently, the book showed us that there is an apparent clash between authoritarianism aroused by the post-Soviet legacy and the liberal values nourished in the West. On the other hand, it is also shown how the EU attitudes towards human rights were determined by the size of a country's energy reserves, as it discovered its double-standard policies towards energy-rich authoritarian states.

As the research unveiled, the strategies and technologies of the colour revolutions disoriented many post-Soviet dictatorships. It is also revealed that the learning process is multi-dimensional, referring to the fact that not only have opposition activists learnt from each other, but autocrats have also observed the colour revolution and learnt from its successes and failures for how to deal with non-violent protests. The cases of Russia and Azerbaijan clearly demonstrate how the ruling regime can emulate tactics previously employed by colour revolutionaries and use them to bolster the regime (the establishment of the pro-government youth movements, "Наши" and "İr•li", in the respective countries). Literally, it shows that those governments certainly know that they are wrong-doers - a clear reflection of the fear that is pushing them to take anti-revolutionary measures. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the cosmetic changes are distinctive for the most, if not for all authoritarian states in the post-Soviet space. Another consistent factor in the post-Soviet 'colour revolutions' has been an outgoing president seeking to develop a succession strategy (Russia, Azerbaijan).

By and large, the book contains a good source of information with thrilling analysis. However, the quality of the book is blemished by poor editing. A major drawback in the volume is where an interesting in-depth analysis of Uzbekistan is obscured by an unfinished chapter, which is embarrassing. Apart from the above-mentioned reservations, this insightful paperback can be highly recommended to researchers in the field of post-Soviet politics.
