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Democracy or autocracy on the march? The colored revolutions as normal dynamics of patronal presidentialism

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Abstract

What impact have Eurasia's 2003–2005 "colored revolutions" had on the state of democracy and autocracy in the region? The logic of patronal presidentialism, a set of institutions common to post-Soviet countries, suggests that the revolutions are at root succession struggles more than democratic breakthroughs generated by civic activists and foreign democratizing activity. This helps explain why Georgia is experiencing a new retreat from ideal-type democracy while only Ukraine, whose revolution weakened the patronal presidency, has sustained high political contestation after its revolution. This means that autocratic leaders clamping down on non-governmental organizations, free media, and their foreign supporters may have learned the wrong lessons, perhaps making their countries more susceptible to violent revolution than they were before.

Keywords: Hybrid regimes; Demonstration effects; Democratization; Eurasia; Ukraine; Central Asia

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What impact have the Eurasian "colored revolutions" of 2003–2005 had on the state of democracy in the post-communist region? Three views have become widespread. First, the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, the 2004 "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, and the 2005 "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan have been widely interpreted as breakthroughs of popular democracy in these countries, instances where citizens retook control of corrupt states from autocratizing leaders (Bunce, 2006; Karatnycky, 2005; McFaul, 2005; Silitski, 2005a). Second, many of these same thinkers have argued that the colored revolutions represent "democracy on the march" in the region, that each successful revolution has helped inspire or otherwise promote revolutionary behavior in other countries (Beissinger, in press; Bunce, 2006; Karatnycky, 2005; Silitski, 2005a; Weir, 2005; Wilson, 2005a; Kuzio, unpublished). Third, some authors have also noted an opposing effect. Autocratic rulers have also learned from seeing how their neighbors have been overthrown and have accordingly reduced democratic prospects there through harsh crackdowns (Carothers, 2006; Herde, 2005; Silitski, 2005b). In combination, the most common expectation seems to be one of regime-type polarization in the region: The revolutionary countries are on the fast-track to democracy while the non-revolutionary countries are going steadily in the opposite direction.

The present paper presents a different view that might at first seem paradoxical: (1) the colored revolutions represent more continuity than change in these countries' politics; (2) the prospects for revolution are not greatly enhanced by the learning of democracy advocates; and (3) the efforts by autocrats to prevent democracy may in fact be making revolution more likely in their countries. The key is to understand the dynamics of a set of political institutions that have been in place in most Eurasian countries in the 1990s and 2000s: *patronal presidentialism*. These institutions are marked by regular and reasonably predictable oscillations between periods of tight political closure and periods of (sometimes sudden) political opening, including the phenomena typically called the "colored revolutions." The opening is only likely to last, resulting in true democratization, if it involves a change in the fundamental institutions of patronal presidentialism. But this has not been the case in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, both of which now show few signs of true democratic progress. Only in Ukraine did a "colored revolution" result in a major institutional change, and only there have we seen a dramatic move toward democracy. As for the non-revolutionary states, both pro-democracy activists and incumbent autocrats have learned, but they have not generally learned the right lessons due to a widespread misinterpretation of the actual sources and meaning of the colored revolutions. Most interestingly, the mistaken learning of autocrats may actually be weakening them: by ruthlessly crushing non-governmental organizations smacking of independence and by attempting to cut their societies off from foreign contacts, they may inadvertently be undermining one of the critical sources of strength for a patronal president, making revolution *more* rather than less likely (and, unfortunately, also more likely to involve violence).

These findings have at least two major implications for comparative political science. First, they reveal the crucial importance of institutional design in hybrid regimes in determining whether these regimes remain in the limbo of hybridity or