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*A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.*

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## REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS: POLITICAL DISCOURSES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS<sup>1</sup>

*By Alexander Iskandaryan<sup>2</sup>*

In the South Caucasus and beyond, in a significant part of the post-Soviet space, 2004 was a year of Colour Revolutions. Discussions around any recent policy developments inevitably spark a heated debate on revolutions. Political narratives, newspaper reports, TV debates and even small talk in former Soviet countries are now brimming with sharp and often polarized comments on the topic.

Against this background, the discourse about revolutions becomes as valid an object of study as the revolutions themselves. In fact, Colour Revolution discourse that exist in the post-Soviet space in general, and in the South Caucasus in particular are, in themselves, so significant and so characteristic of the last few years' trends in these countries that research on the Colour Revolutions must include, as an integral part, analysis of the accompanying discourse.

A fact that immediately catches the eye once one looks at the discourse is that they are selective: even among the Colour Revolutions that took place in recent years in former socialist countries, the current discourse focuses on some and ignore others. Neither the media nor the para-academic circles thus pay any attention to the failed revolution in Moldova or the successful revolution in unrecognized Abkhazia. The Serbian Revolution is also seldom mentioned; at any rate, it is not referred to in the context of developments in 2004. Of course, awareness of historically and geographically distant precedents, such as the classical "People Power" or EDSA Revolution in the Philippines,<sup>3</sup> is limited to scholars, as is the realization that the phenomenon which has now been nicknamed "Colour Revolution" has long been known to scientists and analyzed in detail in academic publications.

The selectivity of this discourse reflects its motivation: it appears that the revolutions per se are of little interest to the speakers, as are their causes and consequences.

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1 This paper was published by the Caucasus Institute in Russian as: Iskandaryan, Alexander "Fenomen tsvetnykh revolutsiy kak yadro politicheskogo diskursa v stranakh Yuzhnogo Kavkaza." *Kavkaz – 2004. Yezhegodnik Kavkazskogo Instituta SMI* ("The Phenomenon of Colour Revolutions as the Nucleus of the Political Discourse in the Countries of the South Caucasus." *Caucasus 2004. CMI Yearbook*). Ed. Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: CI, 2006 (in Russian). – P. 6-15.

2 The author has been the director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute since 2005.

3 See, for example, *Dictatorship and Revolution. Roots of People's Power*. – Manila: 1988; *People Power. An Eye-Witness History: the Philippines Revolution of 1986*. – Manila: 1986.

What the discussants are really trying to achieve is to test and fit the revolutions to their own country, based on the preexisting perception that a revolution is a valid method of solving a country's problems. Since the discourse is focused on proving – or disproving – the need for a revolution in the country where they circulate, they ignore the examples which one cannot easily copy-paste because they are too distant (the Philippines), failed (Moldova) or unfolding under very different conditions (unrecognized Abkhazia).

Should the discourse have such little relevance to the essence and the reality of revolutions, does it still deserve to be analyzed? It certainly does because this highly politicized discourse reflects some characteristic phenomena in the political life of former Soviet countries; moreover, its cause-and-effect relationship with the revolutions themselves may be more complicated than meets the eye. There are reasons to believe that the Colour Revolutions were to a large extent the result of this discourse.

In the recent past, even before the onset of the revolutionary wave, the possibility of *regime change otherwise than through periodic elections* was widely discussed in many former Soviet countries. Utterly and inherently non-scientific, this discourse is extensive and varied in form: it can be a media discourse, a quasi-scholarly debate or social talk. It instantaneously puts the speaker on one side of a political or even generational barricade. And, of course, these barricades are drawn across the domestic political realities of the country where the debate takes place and not the one where a revolution happened.

If the speaker is in favour of a change of government in a given country, then the argument is based mainly on the personalities of potential revolutionary leaders: they are characterized as democratic, progressive, and pro-Western. Since the West has a “plus” sign in this discourse, fluency in English is often additionally underlined.

Opposite arguments are mostly reduced to statements in the vein that the country at issue needs stability; Colour Revolutions are condemned as phenomena *imported from the outside* (the West) and bought with money from transnational forces. Proof or disproof of the fact of the import is one of the main topics of “revolutionary” debates. The fact known to every freshman student of political science - that revolutions can only be catalyzed but not introduced from the outside - does not matter here.

Another important feature is that discourse participants and authors of articles on the revolutions hardly ever have any idea about the countries where these revolutions took place. Often, the only thing known about Kyrgyzstan to politicized ob-

servers is the fact that recently there has been a revolution there. One can assume that the automatic imposition of foreign experience on realities of one's own country, done in search of simple solutions, leads to the mythologization of discourse. In other words, in this context, real Kyrgyzstan is not discussed; rather, the topic of discussions is the image of Kyrgyzstan, the main component of which is the potential *non-electoral regime change*. In a mythological context, it does not really matter which formal criteria of a democratic leader Bakiyev, Saakashvili and Tymoshenko meet. The only thing that matters is the possibility to cut the Gordian knot of problems of one's own country.

As for the actual phenomenon of post-Soviet Colour Revolutions, they have already displayed some common, typical features.

The first revolution of this kind in the former Soviet Union happened – and failed – in Armenia in September 1996. All the ingredients of this phenomenon were on hand there, except for the support of and interest from the West.

Three successful revolutions ensued, including the Georgian Rose Revolution in late 2003, the nameless revolution in Abkhazia in the autumn of 2004, and Ukraine's Orange Revolution at the very end of 2004. The Abkhaz revolution was among these the least discussed, but also the most impressive: it was a success, despite the strong opposition of the only, albeit very powerful, external force, Russia. The revolution in Moldova in February-March 2005 failed, but in March of the same year, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan succeeded, though it was somewhat different from the others because of its regional and clan-related characteristics.

The first striking thing is the region where these revolutions happen. The territory of the former USSR may, for the purposes of our discussion, be divided into **three zones** on the basis of rotation of government.<sup>4</sup>

*The first zone* comprises those states that have more or less managed to develop a system of rotation of government based on the recognition of election results. In this case, it does not matter to what extent elections held in these countries are honest and fair, and to what extent they go without fraud and manipulation. First of all, the amount and type of election fraud varies across countries, and, secondly, in this case, the legitimacy of election results in the eyes of the society is more important than the integrity or fairness of the elections. The states in this zone have managed to build their political culture in a way that elections are held regularly, and

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4 See the comparative classification by Dmitry Furman, in, for example, Furman, Dmitri. "Demokratia v Azerbajjane: problema rotatsii vlasti." *Kavkaz – 2003. Yezhegodnik Instituta Kavkaza* (Democracy in Azerbaijan: the problem of rotation of government." *Caucasus 2003. CMI Yearbook*). Ed. Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: CMI, 2005. – Pp.19-25.

the political opposition recognizes the results of these elections, though not always eagerly. The society, too, recognizes election results and, thus, power is transferred from one leader to another. The three Baltic countries and Moldova are part of this zone. In two of the first three states, there is a system of apartheid: about a quarter of the population in Estonia and about one-third of the population in Latvia do not participate in elections. However, for one reason or another, even those residents of Latvia and Estonia that are deprived of their right to vote recognize election results. In any event, they do not man the barricades after the elections. As a rule, these states have experienced the transfer of power at least twice (e.g., from Snegur to Luchinsky and from Luchinsky to Voronin), and society sees these transfers as legitimate and uses elections as a mechanism for the rotation of elites.

Interestingly, though, all four of the mentioned states accurately coincide with those territories of the former Soviet Union that were attached to it about 20 years later than the rest. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

*The second zone* consists of regimes such as the ones in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (the Belarusian and Russian ones are, in part, also close to them), where so far, there either has not been any transfer of power at all, or there has been one, but through succession. Strictly speaking, elections in these countries are nothing more than an instrument of the purely external legitimization of non-rotational governments. Had it not been for pressure from the West, there might have been no elections in these countries at all. But since there is an external standard, which must be conformed to, in general, the population goes to the polls in a disciplined fashion and votes for *the* leader, who often stands for the office unopposed.

It is quite clear why neither the first nor the second zone experience phenomena like Colour Revolutions. In the first zone, street revolutions are not necessary, as society simply does not feel the need because it has at its disposal a reliable working mechanism for the change of leaders. This, in my opinion, was the reason for the failure of the Moldovan revolution. In the second zone, Colour Revolutions are not feasible (in theory, there can only be bloody uprisings, similar to the events in Andizhan), because there are no prerequisites for the emergence of relevant forces and structures, including political opposition, independent media, political parties, etc.

Accordingly, halfway between the countries of the first and second zones there is a *third zone* where the system of rotation of government is already in place in one form or another, or it has started to take shape but has not yet fully formed and is not legitimized. Government in these countries changes sometimes, but not always in compliance with the law; whatever the outcome of elections, their results are not

recognized by the losing party, which is not allowed to take power but is not physically destroyed either. Thus, elections in the third zone are not perceived by society as an effective mechanism for the change of government. The main thing is that because the culture of legitimizing elections has not yet developed in these countries, they face a gap that allows the standard scenario of Colour Revolutions to unfold.

The *scenario* of these revolutions usually plays out as follows: elections are held, with the opposition preparing for defeat in advance and having no expectation whatsoever to win, either because of the established practice of election fraud in the country, or because of the weakness of the opposition, or both; the reasons in this case are secondary, the important thing is that the opposition cannot actually win at the polls. Next, the opposition challenges the election result and brings out the people to the streets. Sometimes it is at this stage that the leadership of the revolution forms; that was what happened, for example, in Georgia: the Burjanadze-Zhvania-Saakashvili trio transformed into Saakashvili's leadership; sometimes the leader changes in the course of events (Kulov-Bakiev in Kyrgyzstan). Sometimes at this stage, the revolution suffers a defeat. If not, then a period of pressure and a strong-willed game follows, and if the government is weak, it surrenders, and if not, it withstands the pressure. Next, the myth of the revolution is created for external consumption, becoming a topic of discussions everywhere as either a role model or a scarecrow.

The *leaders* of Colour Revolutions share a common and apparently non-incidental trait: all of them used to serve in the government. In this, they are different from the leaders of genuine revolutions, like the ones that happened in late 1980s and early 1990s, when not only personalities but also social order was changing. Neither Ter-Petrossyan, nor Elchibey nor Gamsakhurdia originated from the government, whereas the new leaders, to the contrary, are formed by the government. It is no accident that in all three countries of the South Caucasus the quasi-Russian term *obizhennik* (literally, someone who has a grudge) is widely used to describe people nursing a grievance against the government for, in their opinion, unfair expulsion from its ranks. This expression certainly deserves to be introduced into glossaries of political science terms, for it represents a specific phenomenon that does not coincide with political opposition, in the broadest sense of that word. Experience shows that the opposition formed 'outside' the government does not initiate Colour Revolutions. It probably does not have enough knowledge of government operation or understanding of its rules. The present revolutionary leaders, who had, for various reasons, lost their top government jobs in the past, were able to form the opposition at the moment when the government was weak, because power was being

transferred, elites were insecure and the political system was under stress. The result of the revolution is a kind of ‘reinstatement’ of illegally dismissed former officials.

All these phenomena are typical to *capital cities*. Strictly speaking, we are not dealing with Georgian, Abkhaz and Ukrainian revolutions, but with Tbilisi, Sukhumi and Kiev revolutions. Rallies may, of course, happen in provinces, too, as they did in Donetsk and in Batumi; moreover, they may go the opposite direction, but still the outcome of the revolution is determined in the capital city, or, more precisely, in its “social centre.” A *special kind of vote* usually acts as a catalytic mechanism. I am using the term in italics on purpose; even though the expression of one’s will by rallying on the squares of the capital is a very specific kind of mass participation in national politics, yet it is what makes these events worthy of the name of revolution, in contrast to cabinet coups, transfer of power to heirs and other means of rotation of government that are employed in the region under study. It is important to note that this form of “voting” does not express the opinion of the whole population, but only of the socially active segment of the capital’s population. After all, casting a ballot paper into a ballot box is not sufficient for “casting a vote”: one must also be ready to come out into the street and stand there for hours and days, resist, freeze, and take risks. To do this, one must be rather strongly motivated. The organizers and technologists of revolutions can only count on victory if this mechanism works. In this situation, it does not matter what happens in provinces and, generally, in the more socially passive strata of the society, for this is not a struggle for advantage on a “one man one vote” basis but a battle of social energies.

There is an exception, though, in this chain: Kyrgyzstan. There, the revolution originated in the town of Osh rather than in Bishkek. There was a good reason for that: in Kyrgyzstan, the opposition’s energy formed mostly at the regional rather than the political level. Regional clans assumed the role of political parties. And in terms of both the availability of an opposition ‘mass’ and a place where such impulses originate from, Osh may, in a sense, be called the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

Colour Revolutions are online revolutions, i.e. they require *technology*, expertise and management: in particular, coordinating the work of the media, lobbying outside the country, managing the course of rallies, transportation arrangements, supply of food to protesters, etc. Technologies may vary; for example, in Abkhazia, lobbying the West was not possible because of its non-recognized status, the flow of money from abroad was limited, and the participation of foreign media was minimal. Accordingly, other technologies were used there: rallies were used instead of the press (the compact size of Sukhumi allows that), and money supplied by the Abkhaz diaspora in Russia was used instead of “Soros money.” In Kyrgyzstan, re-

gional differences took the place of political delimitations. But technology and a certain degree of organization are always necessary, and, therefore, the availability of a structure capable of leading a revolution (i.e. *counter-elite*) is a prerequisite for a revolution; where this structure does not exist, the initiation of a revolution fails.

Therefore, another common trait of all successful Colour Revolutions is the *split of economic elites*. They feel the weakness of the state like no one else (in any case, often much better than professional analysts do) and begin to switch – in parts - from the government to the opposition side, supporting the latter just in case. If this element of the shift of economic elites to the opposition side is absent, then it means that the state is so consolidated that it has managed to form a kind of continuum, which includes the big business (at the national level, of course), the criminal community, the military elite, the corrupt bureaucracy, etc. This continuum simply does not allow for the emergence of counter-elites capable of organizing a revolution. Conversely, if the state is not able to consolidate elites, then some of them have the opportunity to either defect to the opposition or create one. This is an essential condition for Colour Revolutions to happen. For instance, the decentralization of corruption enables corrupt businesspeople to bet on different forces - this opened the way for the revolution in Georgia, for example, where Shevardnadze's regime simply lacked sufficient power resources to remove and appoint local princelings. In places where there is no such split and economic elites are more or less consolidated, the opposition has to fight alone, as was the case in Armenia's failed 1996 revolution.

The often overestimated influence of external forces may be included in the list of characteristic features of Colour Revolutions only with great reservations. External influence, in my opinion, is a private factor: it was not present everywhere, and where it was, its role was clearly overstated. It was, for instance, virtually absent in the successful revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and in Abkhazia, the external influence was directed against the revolution: tiny Abkhazia ultimately elected Bagapsh despite enormous pressure from Russia. The lesson is that external influence does not hurt, but it is never anything more than that.

It is too early to sum up the results of Colour Revolutions, of course. However, some of their direct results are already observable.

**First**, as a consequence of these revolutions *the level of democratic rhetoric often increases while the actual level of democracy decreases*. I am referring to that very specific level of democracy that enables these revolutions to take place. As a result of Colour Revolutions, people who led the counter-elite come to power. Left without a leader, the counter-elite has nowhere to recruit new leaders from - at least for a while - until the new government begins to disintegrate. Accordingly, for a while



the new government is free from the pressure of opposition forces. In addition, the revolution produces an increase in the influence of politics on the economy, with the latter becoming more and more controlled and centralized, hence becoming more similar to the models of those countries that have not had a revolution, because they were able to avoid the split of elites. Thus, Colour Revolutions are an element of nation-building in countries that failed to develop effective mechanisms for the consolidation of their elites and created, in their stead, Bonapartist regimes balancing between the interests of various, often regional, elite groups.

**Secondly**, the revolution results in a sort of *a premature change of generations*, i.e. the image of the country changes to a 'pro-Western' one despite the fact that relevant elites have not yet emerged. The public wants to distance itself from the former metropolis, and the result sometimes turns out to be very funny. For example, everyone knows that Saakashvili graduated from a Western university and is very fluent in English, and few people are aware that he began by graduating from the hardened Soviet Kiev Institute of International Relations and is at least as fluent in Russian as in English. The urge to change the image turned Bakiyev into a democrat and Bagapsh into a nearly anti-Russian politician. The truth is that potentially "non-Soviet" political leaders have not yet reached adulthood, whereas the development of a new mindset has already gone far enough for socially active people to try and escape the yoke of corrupt regimes, especially if the regimes are rotten enough for such an attempt to stand a chance of success.

**Third**, and perhaps the most important point, after revolutionary *countries remain as they used to be*. The main resource of the new Georgia is the same as the main resource of the old Georgia, i.e. the image of its ruler – a democratic, pro-Western ruler battling "external circumstances" (i.e. Russia) and domestic inertia; the only thing that has changed is his name: it is now Saakashvili and not Shevardnadze. Financial and industrial groups continue to tear Ukraine to pieces, dividing a nation that has not yet properly formed between the East and the West along political, economic, ethnic-cultural and even religious divides - not along the Washington-Moscow line, as it is sometimes seen by observers from the outside, but along the Lviv-Donetsk line. Kyrgyzstan remains divided among semi-criminal regional elites that alternately come to power; in this case, though, the division runs along the North-South line.

So far, no country in the world has succeeded in getting rid of its inherent political culture overnight. In the "third zone," where the government can change, but still cannot do so in a truly legitimate way, a kind of gap emerges with revolutions bursting into it. These revolutions are a personification of the natural desire of the

people, tired of the long-drawn out post-Soviet transformation, to change - with a scoop - the unsatisfactory reality of their life. However, it seems unlikely that a week or two of mass rallies on city squares and furious branding campaigns can replace years of political struggle, development of political institutions and the education and upbringing of people in the spirit of democratic freedoms.