

Roses and Tulips: Dynamics of Regime Change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan

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This paper compares and contrasts the regime changes in Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that resulted in the overthrow of Presidents Shevardnadze and Akaev and are often considered to be part of a common ‘coloured revolution’ phenomenon in the post-Soviet space. This article sheds light on the factors that contributed to the rise of successful opposition movements that dislodged the ruling regimes. In particular, the paper will challenge two popular views that, in turn, exaggerate the influence of foreign actors in the Rose and Tulip Revolutions, and over-estimate the unity of purpose among the main opposition parties. The paper is based primarily on primary sources and interviews conducted in both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan since 2001.

Introduction

Parliamentary elections in Georgia on 2 November 2003, and in Kyrgyzstan on 27 February and 13 March 2005, were the catalyst for the overthrow of two of the best-known post-soviet presidents, Eduard Shevardnadze and Askar Akaev. Shevardnadze's decision to falsify elections in 2003, which many suspected was designed to preserve his position beyond 2005, when he was constitutionally obliged to step down, proved a politically fatal mistake. Credible opposition leaders were in place and these combined with a plethora of non-state actors to inspire and mobilize tens of thousands to protest in the streets, ultimately leading to Shevardnadze's premature departure from office. In Kyrgyzstan the large crowds assembled to challenge the election results, although never reaching the levels witnessed in Kyiv and Tbilisi, were mainly to be found in peripheral towns and cities in the south and took the form of a popular uprising, temporarily displacing government officials and structures with 'revolutionary' ones. When Akaev went ahead and opened the new parliament on 22 March he was quickly dislodged from the 'White House' (the seat of government) by an angry mob and soon found himself on a plane to Moscow and political obscurity.

In this essay I identify the factors that influenced the timing and nature of the anti-regime efforts in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan that culminated in what are known as the Rose and Tulip revolutions. I inspect the role that political elites and personalities played in the unfolding dramas and evaluate the extent to which the media, youth groups and regional power bases helped or hindered the anti-government struggle. More specifically, I challenge two assumptions popular among analysts of the coloured revolution phenomenon. The first of these is the argument that opposition unity was a prerequisite for the presidents' overthrow : as will become clear, opposition parties found it too difficult to coordinate their actions and their leaders could not agree how best to challenge the election results. The second is the contention that the Rose and Tulip revolutions were orchestrated by Western agencies that sought to induce a change of government so as to further US interests in the region.

The Regimes

As has been pointed out elsewhere, revolutionaries rarely make revolutions, governments do. Shevardnadze's Georgia and Akaev's Kyrgyzstan fell considerably short of strong post-soviet authoritarian states such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. Whether we call them partial democracies, hybrid democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes, the Georgian and Kyrgyz states never monopolized politics. For Eduard Shevardnadze, the years immediately after 1991 were perhaps the most challenging and successful in his long and varied career. When he arrived in Tbilisi in March 1992, there was no legitimate government, only chaos and gunfire in the streets. Within two years, Georgia became an internationally recognized state with a constitution, a functioning parliament, and relatively fair and free elections. He proved no better than his predecessor Zviad Gamsakhurdia in tackling the thorny issue of secessionism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although he had demonstrated considerable personal valour by travelling to Sukhumi, the Abkhaz capital, at the height of the war and staying until the end of hostilities. By the end of the 1990s Shevardnadze was no longer a positive force in Georgian politics. Having put the institutions of the state in place he fell back on his instincts and skills, honed during the Brezhnev years, of managing people rather than implementing policy. In November 2003, on the eve of the revolution, Shevardnadze was 75 years old and constitutionally obliged to step down when his term ended in 2005. He did not relish conversations on this subject, however. 'Trying to talk to Shevardnadze four times in 2003 about what his future plans would be after his term ended', one of his closest advisors recalls, 'was like committing suicide four times'.² Many suspected that Shevardnadze would devise some way of preserving his interests and influence, perhaps by making constitutional changes and appointing a loyal successor.³

The United States and several European countries, particularly Germany, had generously supported Shevardnadze, and this was complemented by aid from international organizations aimed at facilitating democratization efforts in Georgia. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, Georgia

was one of the largest recipients of US aid per capita in the world. After the 2000 elections, however, there was a noticeable dampening of enthusiasm for Shevardnadze in the West, although important military assistance was given to help Georgia meet challenges in the Pankisi gorge.⁴ In 2003, however, the US announced funding cuts and the International Monetary Fund declared that it was suspending assistance to the Shevardnadze government.⁵ Funding for non-governmental organizations in Georgia remained constant.

In Kyrgyzstan, President Akaev, a politician by accident, had liberal instincts, reinforced by his country's lack of natural resources. Surrounded by poor or unfriendly states and with no oil to sell to the West, Akaev decided early on that his best bet was to offer America a democratic success story. With a range of progressive legislation introduced in the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan achieved a string of notable firsts in the Commonwealth of Independent States: it was the first state to privatize land, the first to break with the rouble and establish its own currency (1993), and the first to join the World Trade Organization (1998). Like Shevardnadze, had Akaev stepped down in 2000 he might have done so with a little gratitude and some applause, but his decision to seek another term sullied his liberal reputation. By this stage, Akaev had engineered a series of constitutional changes that had augmented his powers, and his family members had greatly enriched themselves. Far from becoming the 'Switzerland of Central Asia', as Akaev had once boasted, Kyrgyzstan had simply indulged in many of the excesses characteristic of other Central Asian executives, breeding a corrupt elite parasitically living off an impoverished and politically impotent citizenry. Like Shevardnadze before him, Akaev had attracted substantial international acclamation and funding only to see both evaporate shortly after the 2000 presidential election as it became clear that the regime had turned into merely a corrupt oligarchy. The greed of Akaev's family and allied clans grew as the economy declined. By the end, Akaev had lost the support of democrats, the intelligentsia and the south, and was increasingly beholden to a narrow stratum of northern clans. However, like Shevardnadze, Akaev managed to deflect the worst of the odium to his closest associates. Many believed that, while Akaev himself was a fundamentally decent person, he was unable to control the excesses of his wife, his children, and political hangers-on.⁶

In both countries there existed a general sense that the national interest was being pawned or sold to the highest bidder. The sale of Georgia's gas-distribution network to the Russian United Energy Systems in 2003 aroused criticism.⁷ Although the sale was occasioned by the American-Georgian company AES Telasi's desire to raise cash quickly by ridding itself of a troublesome investment, the Georgian government was blamed for failing to step in and purchase a controlling share.⁸ As the sale came hot on the heels of Shevardnadze's consent to a 25-year 'strategic co-operation' agreement with Russia's Gazprom, oppositionists portrayed the Shevardnadze regime as either falling back on Russian support to compensate for waning Western approval, or selling off Georgia's national interests simply to stay in power. Shevardnadze's failure to make headway on Abkhazia and South Ossetia was also increasingly attributed to indifference to the national good, which was secondary to managing and maintaining power. Akaev was similarly under fire, particularly in the south, for agreeing to transfer Kyrgyz territories, 90,000 hectares in all, to China. The presence of both US and Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan, while extolled as profitable pragmatism, was also viewed by some as political prostitution.

Ultimately both the Shevardnadze and the Akaev regimes fell not just because of determined efforts by the opposition, but also because of a lack of will among key state institutions to withstand attack or to defend the regime adequately. The government's unwillingness to use maximum force against the protesters was a crucial ingredient in the opposition's recipe for revolution. According to Ghia Nodia, Shevardnadze may not have been ideologically wedded to the non-violence but could not bring himself to use force when it might have been effective:

He did not want to use force; he counted on that. But as these protests continued and as time passed they gained strength rather than diminished strength – his plan crumbled because of that ... morale in the government was eroded, more and more people started to switch sides ... After being ousted from parliament I believe he was ready finally, psychologically ready, to use force but by that stage he simply did not have force to use. It was too late.⁹

Having seen security around parliament melt, Shevardnadze went for one last throw of the dice by declaring a state of emergency, but by then he could not command the loyalty of the security apparatus. Police units were defecting to the opposition in large numbers, creating potential for civil conflict had Shevardnadze not resigned promptly.

The Tulip revolution followed the Georgian script with a Kyrgyz twist. Although police or army violence could never be entirely ruled out in Kyrgyzstan – these forces had, after all, killed six protesters in the southern town of Aksy in 2002 – few believed that Akaev would embark on a bloody defensive campaign to stay in power. Akaev himself had ruled out the use of force to quell the protests and as late as 20 March the Kyrgyz prime minister, Nikolai Tanaev, assured the public that law-enforcers sent to retake government buildings in the south did not carry weapons.¹⁰ In an effort to avoid bloodshed, Akaev had refused to declare a state of emergency, perhaps because he could not have relied on the entire security apparatus. Unlike Shevardnadze, or Kuchma in Ukraine, the question of Akaev staying in the country after the revolution was off the negotiating table and Kyrgyzstan's first president is condemned to a life in exile, raising the stakes for other post-soviet autocrats. Most importantly, perhaps, after the storming of the White House, Bishkek was convulsed in an orgy of violence and looting that left three dead and much of the commercial districts damaged. Foreign shops, particularly Turkish, were targeted and the process took on an unpleasant ethnic appearance as Russians and other minorities were intimidated.¹¹ Whether one interprets this as anarchy engineered by pro-Akaev elements (as some opposition figures argued) or a collective venting of pent-up anger, it damaged the image of the revolution and indicated that a qualitatively different process was at play from that experienced in Georgia and Ukraine.

Youth Groups

Youth organizations have achieved disproportionate attention in analyses of colour revolutions

partly because they symbolize radical endeavour and are alive to inventive means of diffusing ideas across borders.¹² Modelled on Serbia's Otpor (Resistance), Georgia's Kmara (Enough!): adopted a confrontational, often tongue-in-cheek, style of campaigning, and its high-profile stunts disguised its modest membership.¹⁴ Formal youth movements were far less prominent in Kyrgyzstan and did not play a decisive role in events.¹⁵ In January 2005, Kel-Kel (Renaissance) was formed, with the modest objective of ensuring free and fair elections; but even at the height of the election campaign Kel-Kel leaders claimed no more than 300 members, mostly Bishkek university students of whom only a small percentage were very active.¹⁶ A more radical group, Birge (Together), broke from Kel-Kel at the end of February 2005 but had only 20 activists, all in the capital.¹⁷ In what must rank as one of the most bizarre tactics devised to counter a coloured revolution, the Akaev regime manufactured a pro-government youth group also called Kel-Kel within two days of the 'real' Kel-Kel's foundation. The clone proceeded to adopt the same slogans, symbols and website (which was duly given to them) but articulated a different political message. The Akaev regime had studied the rise of similar youth movements in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine and concluded that they should be nipped in the bud.

Media

The independent media have received particular mention as influential actors in facilitating coloured revolutions in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, although their impact, while undoubtedly significant, is difficult to quantify accurately. At the time of the Rose revolution there were numerous low-circulation newspapers in Georgia of varying (though generally low) quality. Television had (and continues to have) a far greater impact, and Shevardnadze's failed attempts to tame the Rustavi 2 station underlined his weakness and vulnerability to popular disapproval.¹⁸ During the demonstrations, Rustavi 2 abandoned most pretences of objectivity, and through a series of coded messages appeared to embrace the opposition protesters. It advertised in advance the times and places when opposition meetings were to take place, and initially did its best to

magnify the number of protesters (although this was counterbalanced by state television's attempts to do the opposite). During the demonstrations the station broadcasted 'Bringing Down a Dictator', a documentary on Otpor's campaign in Serbia to topple Slobodan Milošević and, in case the message was insufficiently clear the first time, repeated the airing a few days later. Moreover, ample time was given to opposition leaders to present their case on Rustavi 2, and the station commissioned the damaging exit polls that quickly undermined confidence in the elections.

Kyrgyzstan had no television station supporting the opposition; most people relied on state or Russian television for information. In the run-up to the March 2005 elections, state television did make repeated reference to the coloured revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine but (unlike Rustavi 2's endorsement of the Serbian model) they presented these events as regrettable lapses from order and a curse on the peoples who had been forced to endure them.¹⁹ Whereas, in Georgia, Kmara was able to broadcast political advertisements that ended with the call 'Shevardnadze, you are the disease, get out!',²⁰ the situation in Kyrgyzstan was radically different, as one opposition leader explained during the election campaign:

They [State TV] show this clip of me speaking at a rally and then cut to a scene of a peasant who is milking a cow, a mother with a child, it's a very poor house, rural, peaceful life, they should be very happy that they are doing this, poor peasant enjoying simple life, and then there is this loud voice at a rally coming on and they look worried ... and so then the milk is spilt, the child starts crying, and you ask what is disturbing this stable life. And this is the objective. After seeing this for the only time – my mother, father, and I – we said 'of course, people want you to stay at home and live a poor simple life'. This is the idea that they want to promote; that the citizen is someone who tends to his daily chores, who thinks about his piece of bread and little else.²¹

There was diversity in the Kyrgyzstani print media, but in the last year of his term Akaev put

enormous pressure on the three major independent newspapers, largely in the form of crippling libel cases.²² Freedom House had stepped in to print the papers when they faced boycott from state publishers, but even this manoeuvre was thwarted during the election when Freedom House found its electricity cut off for much of the campaign.²³ In sum, the Georgia media played a critical role in framing the issue of electoral fraud and mobilizing the public while in Kyrgyzstan the state monopolized television and muzzled opposition newspapers.

Opposition Unity

Opposition unity is almost always cited as a fundamental prerequisite for a revolution of the type seen in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, be it called ‘electoral’ or ‘coloured’. In their article, ‘Favourable Conditions and Electoral Revolutions’, Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik cite the formation of a unified opposition as the first prerequisite for an electoral revolution.²⁴ Mark Bessinger also states that a ‘united opposition established in part by foreign prodding’ is a basic requirement.²⁵ Taking the example of Serbia, Marlene Spoerri argues that the formation of a united opposition coalition was a sine qua non for the toppling of Milošević in 2000.²⁶ Michael McFaul makes an important qualification when he states that ‘a united opposition – or at least the perception of one – is a ... factor that appears crucial for democratic breakthrough’.²⁷ This is a more modest estimation of the importance of opposition unity, and one that fits more comfortably with any explanation of the Rose and Tulip revolutions when a multitude of opposition leaders vied with each other and where the parties were generally weak, fragmented, disunited and personality-driven.

The lack of opposition unity in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan can partly be explained by the fact that candidates were running in parliamentary and not presidential elections, as was the case in the elections that led to the Serbian Bulldozer Revolution and Ukrainian Orange Revolution. Whereas a unified candidate against an unpopular incumbent could be presented as a necessity in a winner-takes-all presidential contest, the same could not be argued for parliamentary elections. Parties

could co-operate but not step aside and could collaborate only to the extent that this did not diminish their popularity, confuse their hard-core constituency, or compromise their party's longer-term interests.

The Georgian election did not offer a decisive victory to any opposition party, and, contrary to subsequent mythologizing, the opposition had not united prior to the election. This was not for want of attempts to get the opposition parties to co-operate with one another, particularly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), an influential American NGO. However, key elements within the opposition did unite after reports of election fraud filtered out and there was a coordinated protest engineered by Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement and the Burjanadze Democrats, which included Nino Burjanadze, Zurab Zhvania and Akaki Asatiani.²⁸ It is necessary to point out, however, that some important parties remained aloof and even attended the opening session of the disputed parliament.

The groups that emerged from the flawed 2003 elections can be put into three categories. The first comprised the parties willing to take to the streets to protest against the voter fraud; these were Saakashvili's National Movement and the Burjanadze Democrats. The US funded parallel vote tabulation (PVT), generally considered the most accurate estimation of the real vote, gave them a combined share of 37 per cent of the vote. In the second category, Shevardnadze's 'For A New Georgia' and its allies (including Aslan Abashidze's 'Revival' and 'Industry Will Save Georgia') received less than a third of the vote (32 per cent) and stood to lose most from the election.²⁹ The third group consisted of those oppositionists, such as the Labour and New Rights parties, that opposed the Shevardnadze regime but whose leaderships did not support the protests against the election.

According to the PVT, the National Movement won just over a quarter of the vote. Had none of the other opposition parties united with Saakashvili he would have been left with not a national mission to save Georgia for democracy but a desire to preserve his own rightful share of the vote – a far less inspiring rallying call. In this sense, the addition of the Burjanadze Democrats to the protest campaign gave a lifeline without which it is unlikely that the Rose Revolution would have

developed as a mass event. An alternative scenario would have been for the National Movement simply to appeal through the courts, having some district level recounts, improving their representation slightly but lacking the momentum that led to Shevardnadze's departure. Without the Burjanadze Democrats support, all opposition party leaderships would have demurred from protesting on the streets, except the National Movement (a fact that could have been attributed to Saakashvili's emotionalism or inability to compromise). Also, it would have implied that a majority of the opposition, in terms of the stance taken by their leaders and the party vote estimated by the PVT, did not support the protests; this would have made it impossible for Saakashvili and his National Movement to claim to represent the national will against a decaying autocracy. More important, it may be argued, was the coming on board of Zhvania and Burjanadze rather than their parties. Georgian political parties are almost always constructed around strong personalities rather than institutionalized organizations, solid membership, ideology or cleavage. Saakashvili, Zhvania and Burjanadze were probably the best known and most popular opposition personalities. Personal rivalries and different outlooks prevented Shalva Natelashvili and David Gamkrelidze, leaders of the Labour and New Rights parties respectively, from joining the protests although they were out of step with much of their support base on this issue.³⁰

Therefore, if we are to take the PVT as accurate, the protesting opposition represented less than 40 per cent. At the last moment, the New Rights Party, which had announced that it would join the parliamentary boycott, made a secret pact with Shevardnadze and most of its elected representatives rushed to parliament to provide the quota necessary for opening the disputed legislature.³¹ The lack of opposition unity can partially be attributed to Shevardnadze's stature as the dominant political figure in Georgia since 1972, a survivor who seemed politically immortal. Not all were willing to confront him at this time and many were jockeying for position in anticipation of the presidential contest that was due in just over a year.

Opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan were, by the eve of Akaev's removal, reasonably united on paper but this meant comparatively little in practice given their structural flaws, not least in terms

of membership and organization. To a much greater extent than in Georgia, Kyrgyz political parties were devoid of ideological underpinning. In Kyrgyzstan politics divided not on a left–right but on a north–south basis. Moreover, while there were many parties there were not many party members: in 1995, in the whole of Kyrgyzstan, only 13,000 citizens were members of a political party.³² Parliamentary representation was also notable for the preponderance of ‘independents’ elected, which some commentators attributed in part to the electoral law that made no provision for party lists while permitting independents to stand for election. Moreover, a revised electoral law, introduced under international pressure and designed to give parties more representation, did little to reverse this trend and at the March 2000 elections independents secured 73 of the places in the 105-seat legislature (69.6 per cent). Without a party, independent deputies enjoyed freedom of action and were not subjected to the normal rigours of party life, such as discipline, collective responsibility, or the need to devise policies on national issues. Akaev reinforced this trend by never making a serious effort to establish a ruling party that would represent the president’s platform, put it before the electorate and seek endorsement. He too contested the 1995 presidential election as an independent and the fact that he ran a well-organized and -publicized campaign without the support of a party machine illustrates how politics was conducted in Kyrgyzstan prior to the Tulip revolution. Local notables realized that access to power would not be achieved through political parties with their formal rules, transparent structures and open membership: rather, influence would be secured through patronage networks, and a place in parliament or close to the president was considered preferable to working through a party organization – it was more lucrative and less transparent and no accountability was required except to one’s own kin and allies. Thus parliamentarians relied on their clan networks rather than party organizations to propel them to power. For those outside the clan networks, politics seemed particularly futile. Parties lacked a popular base and real power lay with the regional groups; but, while one could join an open party, the same did not necessarily apply to kin-based clans. These realities were also reflected in turnout; in the Russified and individualistic capital of Bishkek turnout hovered at the 60 per cent mark, whereas clan-dominated regions could engineer figures of more than 90 per

cent.³³

Kyrgyz parties were unable to serve as the vital link between state and citizen. They fulfilled few of the duties normally associated with political parties; as one commentator lamented ‘they cannot conduct negotiations with the government, can’t work with the population, do not have the trust of the people, and do not have a strategy’.³⁴ In the 2005 elections, as before, prospective candidates spent large amounts on securing legislative seats as these were seen as vital means of protecting existing interests and accumulating new ones. They were often government officials or ‘businessmen’, a nebulous concept in Kyrgyzstan that hinted at shady dealings and ill-gotten gains. Kyrgyzstani opposition figures made attempts to coordinate their efforts, but in such a political environment talk of ‘opposition unity’ meant little as the opposition did not represent a large section of the electorate. On 10 March, several notables including Kurmanbek Bakiev, Azimbek Beknazarov and Ishengul Boljurova came together to form a common front, but the alliance was of personalities rather than parties and played a negligible role in the dismissal of Akaev.³⁵ The north–south unity team of Bakiev and Feliks Kulov was a marriage of convenience that later ended in an acrimonious divorce, and by 2007 many of the most prominent members of the fragile opposition coalition hastily convened in March 2005 had defected to opposition politics.

The Role of the West

Where Georgians saw roses, Moscow could only see the thorns, while what took shape on the streets of Bishkek looked less like a tulip than a weed. Most of the post-soviet elites were hostile to the coloured revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, condemned what they argued were American-backed coups d’état, and delivered sermons on the criminal injustice of ‘foreign intervention’.³⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the revolutions to be acts of ‘political technology’ skilfully managed by the West. Russian analysts weighed in with critical evaluations: small numbers of professional revolutionaries had supposedly been trained with the sole intention

of artificially fermenting political upheaval while giving the false impression that such revolts were spontaneous and enjoyed popular support (obvious comparisons to Leninist revolutionary tactics generally escaped these writers). According to this view, these ‘manufactured democracies’ were merely a cover for more sinister motives, and aimed generally at extending US influence over the CIS. It is a position also supported by some of the coloured revolutions’ chief victims such as Aslan Abashidze and Askar Akaev. The Kyrgyz authorities presented George Soros, a frequent visitor to Kyrgyzstan and former ally of Akaev in the 1990s, as a bogeyman inciting mawkish youth to rebellion.³⁷ Moreover, in an interview given shortly after his removal from office Akaev said that, whereas Russia and China had always contributed to Central Asian security and adopted a policy of non-intervention in internal affairs, the same could not be said of the Western powers:

As for the West’s influence [on the 24 March events] – this was obvious and it was no secret to anyone ... Over the last year in Kyrgyzstan ... much work was carried out by numerous international organizations to set in motion the technology of a coloured revolution, so, of course, the prevailing factor here was precisely the West’s influence and it prompted the instructors from Ukraine and Georgia, people who already had experience in carrying out an orange [and] a rose revolution, to call in on us. So, my view remains the same; it was the outside factor, the West, of course, and first and foremost the USA.³⁸

Shevardnadze also lent credibility to the conspiracy theory that Western actors were out to manufacture regime-change when, during the Rose revolution protests, he publicly blamed George Soros for the course of events. While admitting some shortcomings in the electoral process, Shevardnadze continued by asking: ‘but why are international forces getting involved? What does Soros want? I am declaring a categorical protest against the actions of Soros’.³⁹ Moreover, shortly after he was overthrown Shevardnadze attributed his downfall to a combination of the NDI, Soros and US embassy officials ‘who had a particular mission to accomplish’,

lamenting that ‘the Yugoslav scenario was played out here’.⁴⁰ Although the Georgian president was a figure of hatred for many in Russia and held responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union, a consensus emerged in the Kremlin that the Rose revolution represented a defeat for Russian power in the region and resulted from a carefully orchestrated American conspiracy to install a more malleable regime in Tbilisi. Moreover, desperate for some good news in view of the deteriorating situation in Iraq, the White House in Washington quickly claimed ownership of the revolutions. Praising US policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Wall Street Journal fancifully described Kyrgyzstan as the latest state to join ‘the global march of freedom led by President Bush’.⁴¹ Articles appeared in the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune, which argued that US aid for Kyrgyz NGOs and media had been a decisive factor.⁴² The US Ambassador Stephen Young’s immediate welcoming of Akaev’s overthrow – ‘the United States is proud to have assisted the process’ – further fuelled suspicions of an American master plan, as did a joint message to the Kyrgyz people by the presidents of Georgia and Ukraine.⁴³

Certainly, Akaev’s departure aroused jubilation among key American-funded NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, including the National Democratic Institute and the Soros Foundation, but this confirmed their political leanings not their role in removing Akaev.⁴⁴ Let us consider briefly how, and to what extent, Western actors supported efforts that contributed to the political and electoral processes in both countries. During the first 13 years of Kyrgyzstan’s independence (1992–2005), the country received almost \$800 million in US aid, \$120.7 million of which took the form of grants for NGOs.⁴⁵ While the focus had perhaps naturally concentrated on funding for independent media and civil and human rights, it should be stressed that it also included funds for NGOs devoted to less overtly political issues such as the environment, children and pensioners. In the year prior to the revolution, the Freedom Support Act spent \$12m on democracy programmes out of a total US aid package of \$50.8 million.⁴⁶ Bakiev and Kulov, among others, had been brought to the US on American programmes. Rosa Otunbaeva, a darling of the West, was a former ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom, and immediately prior to the election had been deputy head of the UN mission to Georgia. The Americans had also been

heavily involved in the election process. The US government had spent \$170,000 through the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) to provide the equipment necessary for ‘marking’ fingertips (mainly ink and ultraviolet lights) to all 1,300 polling districts and for the training of polling station officials. A further \$320,000 was provided to train local election commission members, \$100,000 to train local observers, and \$300,000 to disseminate voter education literature through local NGOs and media outlets.⁴⁷ The US government also paid for 75 Kyrgyz citizens to go to Ukraine for the 2004 presidential elections as part of a mission led by Edil Baisalov.⁴⁸

For many years Georgia had the distinction of being the largest per capita recipient of US aid after Israel. America received ever-diminishing returns, as corruption thrived and democratization was exposed as a platitude designed to attract aid rather than a real government objective. As a result, six weeks before the 2003 elections the US government announced that it would be cutting aid, on grounds of insufficient reforms in Georgia.⁴⁹ A myriad of foreign-funded NGOs undermined Shevardnadze’s credibility; among them the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Liberty Institute were particularly active, the later subsequently providing some capable figures for Saakashvili’s administration. The Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF, also known as the Soros Foundation) was a prominent supporter of independent media and NGOs: it provided money for the independent TV channel Rustavi 2 in its early days and a related newspaper 24 Saati (24 Hours). It organized trips to Belgrade for the Liberty Institute, opposition leaders and the youth movement Kmara. The head of OSGF, Kakha Lomia, went to Belgrade in February 2003 with other NGO activists to reinforce links between Georgian and Serbian civil society actors. The OSGF administered an election support programme with a budget of \$300,000 to fund a number of election-related activities, including ‘get out the vote’ programmes and voter education, and grants for civil society actors.⁵⁰ It also provided money to Rustavi 2 to conduct vital exit polls.

The idea of a Soros–Bush joint conspiracy is difficult to reconcile with the largesse dispensed by the Hungarian billionaire to unseat George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential contest, which took

place between the revolutions. It should also be remembered that during the 1990s and beyond, Soros had no more receptive ears in the former USSR than those of Shevardnadze and Akaev. Externally funded NGOs and other actors played a much smaller role in Kyrgyzstan than in Georgia and Ukraine, although much greater than in some other post-soviet countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. There was no strong correlation between NGO presence and anti-Akaev protests, because most Western-funded NGOs were based in the capital Bishkek and not in the rebellious south, the heartland of the Tulip revolution, where alternative institutions of administration were established to challenge the Akaev government.

Prominent activists and NGO leaders in Georgia reject the notion that the Rose revolution was a coup manufactured by the West, as the Liberty Institute director, Levan Ramishvili, explained:

It's not only in Moscow [that this argument is popular]; it was also said in some Western media outlets. It reminds me of Soviet propaganda; when everything that was not controlled by the Kremlin and by the Politburo was perceived as a CIA plot. It's maybe some sort of racism; that only white people in western Europe can be the initiators of democratic peaceful revolution, that we in this part of the world just can kill each other and if something happens that means it was somehow imported because we intellectually can somehow not handle this, because we are too stupid to be democratic agents.⁵¹

The director of the Soros Foundation in Georgia, Kakha Lomia, also rejects the Russian view that his organization, in alliance with the US government, plotted to overthrow Shevardnadze. He attributes the popularity of this view to Russia's sense of loss after the Rose Revolution and its fear that Georgia was leaving the Kremlin orbit. 'They were looking for someone to blame', Lomia argues 'and the most convenient target was Soros, a mythological figure in their understanding who was ousted from the Russian Federation, from Uzbekistan, from Belarus, and from Serbia'. In Lomia's view, to blame Soros or 'the West' is a way of denying agency to Georgians, since to suggest otherwise would mean that 'they would have to admit that the major

driving force behind these events was the Georgian people ... so I think that was their primitive way of underestimating the power of the people'.⁵²

Rather than being the sites of some grand American strategy for regime change – a softer, better-packaged, version of the forced democratization projects in Iraq and Afghanistan – the truth was more mundane. In Georgia, the US government adopted a cautious approach throughout the crisis. Until the end, the US embassy in Tbilisi had identified its role as that of mediator between Shevardnadze and the opposition. Indeed, according to one well-placed observer, the US ambassador 'tried to calm down the revolutionaries and stop them from being too radical'.⁵³ All the Americans demanded was free and fair elections, but, since the regime did not intend to grant them, US involvement appeared a blatant endorsement of the opposition. Similarly, NDI's training sessions for political parties were unwelcome not because they excluded pro-government parties (they did not) but simply because the government, with its administrative resources, needed assistance least and such training therefore disproportionately benefited opposition parties. In Kyrgyzstan, no clear alternative to Akaev was evident; what had presented itself was an amalgam of different personalities and interests, and it was not clear who would prevail in a post-Akaev scenario. The fear of social and political meltdown should not be underestimated. Free and fair elections were one thing, but not at the price of state collapse and resulting anarchy and chaos.

What the 'West', broadly defined, certainly did in the run-up to the historic elections was provide modest assistance to a relatively small group of organizations with a remit to bolster civil society, strengthen social capital, and promote transparency, accountability and fairness in government and in the electoral process.⁵⁴ They failed almost entirely in the latter objective. Government in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan was more corrupt and less democratic on the eve of the revolutions than a decade earlier despite vast sums of money provided to the Shevardnadze and Akaev regimes.⁵⁵ Western displeasure with increasing authoritarianism was reflected in declining financial support for both regimes after 2000. American funding was increasingly diverted to NGOs, considered a more effective way of distributing aid and achieving results. However, the regimes still received

substantial assistance from the West, not least because of their strategic importance. Earlier in 2003, Shevardnadze immediately signed Georgia up for America's 'coalition of the willing', while Kyrgyzstan was home to a US military base, an integral part of its operations in Afghanistan. It is also largely forgotten that, during the election campaign, Akaev received a significant boost by having a large part of Kyrgyzstan's debt written off by the Paris Club.⁵⁶ Outraged oppositionists contrasted the critical evaluations of Akaev's reign with this concrete support and accused the West of hypocrisy, of propping up a dictator. Just over a week before Akaev's toppling, a patently frustrated chief political editor of Kyrgyzstan's main opposition paper put the case as follows:

Every two or three months there have been delegations from the European Union, the European Commission [and] OSCE and during our meetings with these people I would say 'you are just political tourists' ... In fact, they [the West] compensate whatever the [Akaev] family doesn't pay as tax. We need to maintain our teachers, pensioners and all the social sections with our taxes but whenever taxes are paid, it is a very small figure. An example: the president writes a programme to fight poverty, European countries are asked for money to help fight poverty, and no one says 'let your [Akaev's] children pay taxes' ... I am tired of explaining this to people from Europe and the United States – everybody who comes here. ... However, they do not want to think about these issues and think we are exaggerating. That is why this year we are going to have blood in our country because the international community could have prevented that but didn't want to do anything.⁵⁷

The argument here, therefore, is that it was Western neglect of democracy promotion and not Western intervention that caused the revolutions. To compensate for the lack of credible evidence of Western espionage, and prove the existence of foreign intrigues, unconventional initiatives were taken. One of the most bizarre was a memorandum reputed to have been composed by the US ambassador to Kyrgyzstan for his colleagues back in Washington, DC.⁵⁸ The document

described Akaev as ‘a protégé of Russia ... guided by Moscow’, and went on to advocate that tens of millions be spent on promoting the interests of promising opposition personalities such as Bakiev, Kulov and Otunbaeva whose interests and outlook allegedly converged with those of America. The embassy’s primary objective would be to sow distrust in the authorities, inspire riots and manipulate young people the better to ‘popularize the American way of life among them [and] diminish Russian influence’. The document was circulated on 19 March, as protests reached a climax, and was hailed as proof that the US was plotting to overthrow Akaev. Although the substandard English used in the memo suggested that the authors were more likely connected to the White House in Bishkek than to that in Washington, DC, many ardently but unconvincingly defended its authenticity.

Finally, the allure of Europe for Georgia should be noted. Georgia was admitted to the Council of Europe in 1999, which was interpreted by Georgians as recognition of their rightful place in Europe.⁵⁹ It was Zurab Zhvania who had coined the phrase ‘I am Georgian, therefore I am European’, which according to one seasoned observer formed ‘the core of the anti-Shevardnadze opposition ... the major outcome of the revolution is that Georgians have started to feel European again’.⁶⁰ The velvet revolution was, after all, associated with Central and Eastern Europe, and by executing a mass non-violent revolution, Georgians had shed the sense that they were a people incapable of resolving their differences peacefully. This re-entry to Europe was symbolized by a new flag that stressed Georgia’s Christian character with not one but no fewer than five crosses of Saint George. The EU flag is flown throughout Tbilisi, including outside all major government institutions.⁶¹ Understandably, the European factor played little role in motivating activists in Kyrgyzstan. The country was in a rather dangerous neighbourhood and prior to the Tulip revolution many key opposition figures believed that the Kyrgyzstan could not go the way of Georgia and Ukraine owing to its geographical position. [interviews with Rina Prijivoit and Mambet Abylov cited in footnotes]

Regional Factors

In his important contribution to understanding the diffusion of the coloured revolutions, Mark Bessinger maintains that Georgia and Kyrgyzstan (along with Ukraine) possess ‘strong regional dimensions within the dominant cultural group’. He elaborates: ‘In Georgia the major base for the opposition was in Western Georgia in the area of Mingrelia – a region long associated with Georgian nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia and in which Shevardnadze had always been unpopular’.⁶² This exaggerates greatly the relevance of Mingrelia as a factor. True, Saakashvili has enjoyed higher than average support there but this cannot be compared to the east–west division in Ukraine or north–south in Kyrgyzstan. Other divisions in Georgia (apart from the separatist republics that claim no part in Georgian affairs) include the Armenian and Azeri populated regions (Samtskhe-Javakheti and parts of Kvemo Kartli respectively) in the south and east of the country and Adjara. The Armenian and Azeri populated regions always voted for the incumbent, with regional bosses delivering the vote. Adjara might constitute a regional division but for most of the time Abashidze separated himself from mainstream Georgian politics. He toyed with the centre only with a view to acquiring dominance – not to become subordinate part of the larger entity (for Abashidze the existing status of de facto independence was preferable to closer integration with a Georgia he did not control). Abashidze’s role in the Rose revolution was as a crutch for Shevardnadze, but his support was personal rather than regional and did not reflect any expressed wish of the Adjara citizenry.

While the regional aspect played a negligible role in Georgia’s Rose revolution, it was very influential in Kyrgyzstan where a numerous southern population harboured strong anti-Akaev sentiments. With their greater attachment to tradition, religion and language, many southern Kyrgyz had never felt close to Akaev, who hailed from the more liberal, secular and Russified north.⁶³ These differences would probably not have become fatal to Akaev’s career had he not handed out the vast majority of plum posts to northerners and kept southern clans out of many of the most lucrative businesses. The sense of injustice provoked by this was exacerbated by the fact

that over half of Kyrgyzstan's population resided in the south and Akaev's key allies in the region were ethnic Uzbeks who preferred Akaev to a more nationalist alternative but were the object of suspicion and dislike among many southern Kyrgyz. Akaev had traditionally won support from those outside the clan rivalries within the Kyrgyz population. The most significant of these were the ethnic Russians, situated predominately in the north, the Uzbeks, the vast majority of whom lived in the southern Ferghana region that bordered Uzbekistan, and the Uyghurs. Each of these groups felt it had much to fear from a resurgent Kyrgyz nationalism and attached great significance to the ranting of local populists. Initially, Akaev had earned this support by successfully defending ethnic minorities against nationalistic forces and acting as a bulwark against discrimination. The importance of preserving inter-ethnic harmony cannot be overestimated, as was illustrated by the 1990 Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes in Osh that left up to 300 dead.⁶⁵ Increasingly, however, Akaev's support for ethnic minorities was rhetorical, his support symbolic rather than substantial, the threat more manufactured for personal gain than an accurate reflection of reality. By the same token, Uzbek and Russian support for Akaev became increasingly formal, more a case of choosing the lesser of two evils than signifying an enthusiastic endorsement.

As his foothold in the north looked increasingly shaky, Akaev made token gestures towards the south by appointing a succession of southerners – although only those with weak clan ties – to the position of prime minister. Kurmanbek Bakiev was one such example, although he was eventually sacrificed to appease public outrage arising from the Aksy killings of 2002. It was a cruel irony that to appease southern anger at the killing of protesters in Aksy, the southerners lost 'their' prime minister. Bakiev was replaced by Nikolay Tanayev, an ethnic Russian born in Russia and therefore unlikely to have strong clan allegiances in Kyrgyzstan. In the final analysis, regionalism is an integral feature of Kyrgyzstan's politics and played a decisive role in the overthrow of Akaev. By contrast, the strongest ethnic opponents of Shevardnadze's regime, those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, were not part of mainstream Georgian politics, and other potentially troublesome minorities had been domesticated.

The Role of Elites and Personalities

In the literature on coloured revolutions, there has been a marked tendency to focus on the actions of domestic elites. Henry Hale, for example, has advocated that rather than framing research in terms of transitions to democracy or autocracy or dwelling on hybrids in between, we should see events as ‘just one swing in a regular cyclical process’.⁶⁶ For Hale the key is the presidential term, the observance of term limits and the intention of incumbents.⁶⁷ If an incumbent president is stepping down, there will be uncertainty among the elite members who then jockey for position fearing the new dispensation will challenge their interests.⁶⁸ With the high stakes in these winner-takes-all contests, elites mobilize everything they can, and in such struggles all resources, including popular mobilization on the street, can be deployed.

However, as has been argued here, the opposition elite could not unite against the regime, and some held out for a deal with Shevardnadze that would further their interests. The masses compensated for opposition disunity, a battering ram against the fortress of power without which opposition leaders would have been left howling at the moon. The crowds needed a coherent message and it was provided primarily by Mikheil Saakashvili who from an early stage called for Shevardnadze’s resignation. Both Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze readily confessed that the Rose Revolution would never have happened without the single-mindedness of Saakashvili, who from the first reports of electoral fraud correctly interpreted the popular mood and translated the sense of outrage into a demand that Shevardnadze must go. Up until the day Shevardnadze resigned, Zhvania and Burjanadze were willing to cut a deal with Shevardnadze that would have allowed him to stay in power in return for overturning the vote in key districts and demanding recounts. Indeed, Burjanadze also admits that she was practically forced by Saakashvili to declare herself acting president moments before Shevardnadze was due to open the new parliament. Ghia Nodia argues that there should be a ‘great man’ dimension to our understanding of the unfolding drama:

That's how history is. Zhvania is not the type who can lead a revolution, Burjanadze is not the type who can lead a revolution; there should be some leader who leads the revolution. That's why it was successful ... At turning points in history, I believe that ['great man'] theory is true. Afterwards, when there is stabilization, sustainability, consolidation, that cannot just be explained by great men but at critical turning-points in landmark events everything is so uncertain and very small things can have very big results.⁶⁹

Georgian politics had always been an arena of intrigue, rumours and constant jockeying for power, which often resulted in a plethora of fragile, ad hoc alliances. This court politics was not based on policy, and there was an excessive reliance on personalities who competed for inclusion in Shevardnadze's inner circle. Saakashvili's innovation did not lie in introducing new policies or taking a position on the left-right spectrum, for his National Movement was established as a catch-all party encompassing all classes and creeds. What separated Saakashvili was his style and political technique, much of which he learnt while in the United States. While minister for justice he published a book, ostensibly to outline his policies but in reality to introduce himself to the public as a man of vision. The title – The Decisive Struggle for Georgia – gave a clue to the messianic persona of the author and the scale of his ambitions.⁷⁰ His manner of departure from the cabinet after a mere ten months in the post of justice minister, with a public declaration that the government was bedevilled with high-level corruption, was also quintessential. There was nothing that Saakashvili would do quietly and little that was not done with an eye to future political advancement. While ministers were driven in Mercedes limousines to their offices, Saakashvili ostentatiously walked around Tbilisi, greeting passers-by, smiling profusely, ever ready to listen to grievances. He realized that emotions alone would not catapult him to power; he had to build a national organization.⁷¹ Unlike most politicians who saw elite bargaining as the way to secure positions, Saakashvili set about touring the country, meeting people, building up an organization

and making as much direct contact with the people as possible. This strategy quickly brought dividends when the National Movement took a quarter of the vote in Tbilisi's 2002 local elections, resulting in Saakashvili's election as chairman of Tbilisi city council (sakrebulo). The victory was all the sweeter as it coincided with the annihilation of Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), which failed to overcome the 4 per cent threshold and thus won no seats, bringing a reality of sorts to the National Movement's election slogan 'Tbilisi without Shevardnadze'.⁷² As newly elected chair of Tbilisi city council, Saakashvili was well placed to increase his profile and work towards the more difficult task of 'Georgia without Shevardnadze'. Again, he displayed a keen eye for 'people politics' and used the very limited powers at his disposal to launch popular initiatives that renovated apartment block elevators, built local stadiums for the young, and increased pensions by a symbolic amount. These initiatives provided ample photo opportunities and reinforced Saakashvili's image as a 'doer'; as one observer put it, the message was very much 'Look at what I am doing with the little authority I have, and just imagine what I will be able to do with real power'.⁷³

In the heady days that followed the 2003 election Saakashvili alone would not compromise or broker an elite deal that fell short of his maximum demands. He based his power almost exclusively on the crowds he could mobilize to the streets and (more significantly) whom he could inspire to stay throughout several cold November nights. Georgians had endured a long dark night of the soul, in which the whole purpose and value of independence had to be assessed anew. They had won sovereignty but were worse off as a result in every measurable sphere. The drive to vindicate the vote was as much about restoring national self-respect as about securing immediate individual gain.⁷⁴ Saakashvili's innovation was to abandon court politics for courting the people. As one of his advisors and election team managers put it:

Saakashvili appeared absolutely different from everyone else; he was the only one who suggested something new ... Saakashvili was the first guy who refused to play these [elite power] games. And that gave him his originality ... He was the first guy even who

suggested doing the door-to-door system. Let us understand that firstly we have still no election culture as such. For the people, the guy who appears on TV screens surrounded by bodyguards makes people somehow more respectful of him. Saakashvili broke this technology ... Even on the [National Movement election] team not everybody was sure that it would work, there were hesitations because Georgian society is more traditional, maybe it would be better to strengthen his high position [with the elite] rather than to bring him down to the ordinary level. But it worked and now everybody is doing this.⁷⁵

The decisive moment that signalled the end of Shevardnadze's reign – the storming of parliament with Saakashvili in the lead. – was typical of the National Movement leader: dramatic, determined and high-risk. It also paid off as Saakashvili's bold gesture dramatically upped the ante at a critical juncture.

In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, there was no leader who decisively ousted President Akaev. Unlike Saakashvili's storming of parliament, to this day no one can identify the personalities who forced their way past the Kyrgyz police and occupied the presidential palace. Speculation has centred on whether clan leaders or drug barons paid protesters for their trouble. What is for certain is that opposition leaders were not among those who attacked the White House; none had advocated such an assault and it was clear that they were surprised by the turn of events. The chief beneficiary of the Tulip revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiev, was an unlikely choice in many respects having been Akaev's prime minister who presided over the Aksy killings. Azimbek Beknazarov, the hero of Aksy and a popular southern leader, has repeatedly claimed that Bakiev was chosen as nominal leader of the opposition front because he was financing protests in the southern city of Jalalabad and that 'back in 2005, we nominated the man who fed protesters, no more'.⁷⁶

The movement that swept Saakashvili to power in Georgia represented a break with the corrupt polity under Shevardnadze. Saakashvili demonstrated his intention of introducing a new ruling class by promoting to high positions young, Western-educated men and women. A sort of 'kindergarten cabinet' developed, with the majority of cabinet members in their thirties and many

twenty-something junior ministers. Kyrgyzstan's political elite, by contrast, was unmistakably Soviet in origin. . Although the Kyrgyz supreme court had annulled the elections on 24 March, the new post-Akaev leadership decided to retain the new parliament for all its faults, despite the expectation of the outgoing parliament and many opposition activists that free and fair elections would be held to produce a new legislature, the legitimacy of which would be beyond reproach. By keeping the parliament that Akaev had sought to fashion for his own ends, the new leadership avoided upsetting the incoming parliamentarians who had invested so much in winning their seats but, as so often in the past, exchanged liberty for stability. Far from being a child of the revolution, the parliament was to be the same legislature that Akaev had conceived and delivered. The democratic impulse was further suppressed when the two major contenders for the presidency, Kurmanbek Bakiev and Felix Kulov, negotiated a pact whereby they would divide the spoils: Bakiev would take the presidency while Kulov would be prime minister. While presented by supporters as a victory for democracy and inter-ethnic harmony (Bakiev's support base was in the south whereas Kulov was strongest in the north), the deal deprived the electorate of a clear choice and made the subsequent presidential election in July 2005 more a coronation than a contest.

The Rose and Tulip revolutions were both remarkably bereft of a guiding ideology that distinguished them from the regimes they replaced. As the revolutions unfolded, and in their immediate aftermath, there was a rush to paint Shevardnadze and Akaev as the antithesis of the new leaders. But closer inspection reveals that what distinguished the new from the old rulers was less an ideology than an understanding that they would be more sincere and focused in achieving common objectives. Many protesters in both revolutions wanted a prosperous, peaceful society free from war, want and corruption; in Georgia they also wanted the lost provinces back, and further integration into Euro-Atlantic political structures – all political values and objectives espoused by the ruling regime. To stress a pro-Western orientation among the new victors was to forget that both Shevardnadze and Akaev had been considered the most pro-Western leaders in their respective regions and both had initiated extensive co-operation with the US military. What

was offered by the Georgian opposition generally, and by Saakashvili in particular, was not new goals but a determined effort to achieve them. As Lincoln Mitchell has argued, the protesters' main demand was for Shevardnadze's resignation and not 'some sweeping change in the country's governing political philosophy'. The goal of securing Shevardnadze's resignation was concrete and achievable, the rest 'all apple-pie'.⁷⁷ In Kyrgyzstan, too, the Tulip revolution leaders and organizers lacked a distinctive ideology and were a motley crew with little uniting them save a common will to challenge the elections. Their ranks included regional clans, urban intellectuals, student activists, farmers, nationalists, Russophiles, Western-orientated politicians, and civil society leaders. Each had his or her advocates, but there was no single leader or group that united these disparate interests or channelled their hopes into a coherent call for change.

Conclusion

Georgia and Kyrgyzstan shared many structural conditions that facilitated a coloured revolution: an unpopular president on the verge of stepping down, electoral irregularities, a reasonably strong civil society complemented by opposition parties, independent media outlets, and Western assistance. Several factors converged to create the necessary conditions for Georgia's Rose revolution. In the twilight of his political career, Shevardnadze presided over a corrupt oligarchy, and when opposition emerged to the rigged elections he miscalculated and underestimated the strength of resistance. Had Shevardnadze chosen to negotiate, he would have found willing partners in Zhvania and Burjanadze, and therefore it was Saakashvili, with his uncompromising stance and bold rhetoric, that caught the popular mood better than rival opposition leaders. Having patiently laid the organizational groundwork, Saakashvili provided vital energy and singularity of focus. At critical moments other opposition leaders vacillated and were unsure whether their objective was to reverse the election results partially or in full, or to effect regime change and fundamental systemic reforms. Saakashvili's strength, however, depended on the large crowds he managed to inspire and mobilize.

While Kyrgyzstan's Tulip revolution may have had many of the ingredients of its Georgian or Ukrainian counterparts, it was half-baked. People rushed to action without having the conceptual ground paved; the result was minimal institutional change and rapid popular disillusionment. Insufficient time had been available to build a mass democratic movement, and the accusation sometimes levied against the Rose and Orange revolutions – that what resulted was merely a circulation of elites⁷⁸ – carries more weight in Kyrgyzstan's case. Cognisant of pressure from powerful neighbours such as Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and aware of the lukewarm support of distant democratic regimes, the post-Akaev government in Bishkek did little to move Kyrgyzstan towards liberal democratic values. What happened in Kyrgyzstan was more a popular revolution than a democratic one. Akaev had few supporters but the opposition party leaders who replaced him differed little in age, background or mentality.⁷⁹ Although the key beneficiaries of the Tulip revolution may have been found wanting, there is reason to believe that civic activism is on the rise, as witnessed by the activities of the umbrella movement 'For Reform'; moreover, the large demonstrations throughout 2006 and 2007 to implement key democratic reforms indicate that the departure of Akaev has not put most of the basic issues facing the Kyrgyz people to rest.⁸⁰

Opposition unity prior to the revolutions has been overstated. Since these were parliamentary and not presidential elections, the opposition could not simply unite around a single candidate. In Georgia, complete national unity was momentarily achieved after the resignation of Shevardnadze rather than before. Saakashvili received 96 per cent of the vote in the presidential elections of January 2004, although as subsequent events were to demonstrate this overwhelming mandate was rather fragile. Kyrgyzstan not only lacked a united opposition, it was bereft of strong party organizations. While many opposition leaders had united on paper shortly before the Tulip revolution, the parties that they maintained were small and little bound them together save a common will to power and a desire to see Akaev's departure. It soon became evident that Kyrgyzstan's opposition had leap-frogged to power despite a lack of preparation and having been denied some of the structural advantages enjoyed by their counterparts in Georgia and Ukraine. In

the short term, Western organizations basked in what seemed like another democratic success story, and in July 2005 Kurmenbek Bakiev was elected president with 89 per cent of the vote, and he promptly appointed Feliks Kulov as prime minister in what was trumpeted as a north–south unity ‘dream team’. This partnership of convenience unravelled rather quickly, and many of Bakiev’s erstwhile allies of the Tulip revolution elections are today among his staunchest critics.

The opposition, while not united, had reached a critical mass sufficient to discredit the elections and provide a focus for a disenfranchised electorate. A critical element to the success of the Rose revolution was popular mobilization, which added so much weight to opposition demands and credibility. The regional element was a crucial factor in Kyrgyzstan but not in Georgia. However, both Shevardnadze and Akaev secured the bulk of votes from ethnic minorities in their respective countries by fair means and foul. Having pillaged scarce resources for private gain, the Shevardnadze and Akaev regimes had but the appearance of states but little of the substance. Neither could survive a frontal assault against state institutions, and neither could rely on state armed forces for protection. The unwillingness of the Shevardnadze and Akaev regimes to use force against protesters, partially for fear of arousing further domestic and foreign odium, was a basic condition for opposition success. However, the Tulip revolution diverged from its Rose and Orange predecessors when the capital descended into anarchy following the president’s capitulation.

In an echo of the popular Soviet tactic of blaming domestic problems on foreign sabotage, the West in general – and the US in particular – have been accused of engineering the Rose and Tulip revolutions to further their interests in the region. However, notwithstanding considerable funding for NGOs in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan from abroad, foreign actors played a remarkably quiescent role during the Rose and Tulip revolutions. Funding for NGOs in the two countries was eclipsed by the huge sums given to the Shevardnadze and Akaev regimes since the early 1990s. Despite disliking Shevardnadze, Russia preferred an old familiar adversary to a new unpredictable one while the United States had learned to live with disappointment and never considered supporting Shevardnadze’s premature departure. Similarly in Kyrgyzstan, Akaev was neither loved nor

despised by Washington and there is no evidence that the US plotted his downfall. And while the Kremlin initially took the Tulip revolution as a geopolitical setback, it had learned from the Orange debacle in Ukraine to diversify its contacts so that the new regime did much to facilitate Russian interests in the region. Indeed, there is much to suggest that it was Western neglect rather than intervention that contributed to the revolutions by keeping unpopular autocrats in power well past their sell-by date. By pumping money into friendly dictatorships without calling them sufficiently to account, the West may have postponed revolution rather than precipitated it.

NOTES

1. See Stephen F. Jones's reference to Lewis Namier's Vanquished Supremacies (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), in 'Reflection on the Rose Revolution: A Tale of Two Rallies', Harvard International Review, 16 March 2008.
2. Zurab Karumidze and James V. Wertsch (eds.), Enough! The Rose Revolution in the Republic of Georgia (New York: Nova, 2005), p.59.
3. Mark Mullen, director of NDI in Georgia 1997–2004, in conversation with the author. London, 30 April 2008.
4. See Tracey C. German, 'The Pankisi Gorge: Georgia's Achilles' heel in its relations with Russia?', Central Asian Survey, Vol.23, No.1 (2004) pp.27–39.
5. Cory Welt, 'Georgia: Causes of the Rose Revolution and Lessons for Democracy Assistance' (Washington ,DC: USAID, 18 March 2005), p.9.
6. Based on interviews conducted by the author in Kyrgyzstan throughout 2003–8.
7. 'AES Posed to Pull Out, Russian Company Takes Over', Civil Georgia, 29 July 2003, at <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=4657>>, accessed 18 July 2008.
8. The travails of AES Telasi are vividly portrayed in the documentary film 'Power Trip'.
9. Ghia Nodia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
10. RIA news agency, Moscow (in Russian), 20 March 2005: BBC Monitoring

11. Based on author's interviews with Bishkek residents, March–May 2005.
12. Matthew Collin, The Time of the Rebels (London: Serpent's Tail, 2007), which looks at youth movements in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Serbia and Azerbaijan, is an example of the genre.
13. Levan Ramishvili, interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
14. Giorgi Kandelaki (Kmara leader), interview with author, Tbilisi, 31 July 2005, and Kakha Lomaia (Director of Soros Foundation Georgia in 2003), interview with author, Tbilisi, 29 Jan. 2008.
15. See Alisher Khamidov, 'Kyrgyzstan's Revolutionary Youth: Between State and Opposition', SAIS Review, Vol.26, No.2 (2006), pp.85–93.
16. Burul Usmanalieva, interview with author, Bishkek, 9 March 2005.
17. Mirsuljan Namazaliev (leader of Birge), interview with author, Bishkek, 30 May 2008.
18. In 2001 Shevardnadze tried to shut down Rustavi 2 but this merely provoked large-scale demonstrations and the Georgian president was forced to backtrack; this was an important victory for anti-Shevardnadze forces and demonstrated both the weakness of the regime and the potential strength of collective action: Levan Ramishvili (Director of Liberty Institute), interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
19. Burul Usmanalieva (Kel Kel leader) and Tima Moldogaziev (OSCE long-term media monitor in the run-up and during February–March 2005), interview with author, 9 and 12 March 2005 respectively.
20. Giorgi Kandelaki (Kmara leader), interview with author, Tbilisi, 30 July 2005; The ditty rhymes in Georgian: 'Shevardnadze, shen xar seni, dagvekhseni'.
21. Edil Baisalov (then head of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society), interview with author, Bishkek, 12 March 2005.
22. Rina Prijivoit (chief political editor of MSN newspaper, subsequently appointed on 13 September 2005 Kyrgyzstan's Ambassador to the OSCE, Austria, Czech Republic and Hungary until dismissed by presidential decree on 22 December 2008), interview with author, Bishkek, 10

March 2005, and Zamira Sydykova (editor of Respublika newspaper, later in 2005, Ms. Sydykova was appointed Kyrgyzstan's Ambassador to the United States and Canada), interview with author, Bishkek, 11 March 2005.

23. Zamira Sydykova, interview with author, Bishkek, 11 March 2005.

24. The five conditions listed are: 1. the formation of a unified opposition; 2. an increase in voter registration and turnout accomplishing an improvement in the quality of voter lists; 3. focusing the campaign debate on what damage the regime has done and how protest against the regime is beneficial; 4. the ability to monitor election results independently; and 5. the ability to challenge the election if it indeed is stolen by the incumbent regime: Valerie J Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik. 'Favourable Conditions and Electoral Revolution', Journal of Democracy, Vol.17, No.4 (2006), pp.5–18 (p.6).

25. Mark R. Bessinger, 'Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions', Perspectives on Politics, Vol.5, No.2 (2007), pp.259–76 (p.261).

26. Marlene Spoerri, 'Uniting the Opposition in the Run-up to Electoral Revolution: Lessons from Serbia 1990–2000', Totalitarismus und Demokratie, Vol.5, No.1 (2008), pp.67–85.

27. Michael McFaul, 'Transitions from Postcommunism', Journal of Democracy, Vol.16, No.3 (2005), pp.5–19 (p.9); emphasis added.

28. Though Asatiani was second on the Burjanadze-Democrats electoral list, his Traditionalist Party quickly parted ways with the Rose revolution administration: Akaki Asatiani, interview with author, Tbilisi, 30 Jan. 2008.

29. In terms of parliamentary seats, the pro-Shevardnadze group would have been less well represented as the PVT indicated that 'Industry Will Save Georgia' with 5.2 per cent of the vote did not overcome the 7 per cent threshold.

30. Lincoln Mitchell (co-director of NDI 2002-4), interview with author, New York, 19 April 2008. Among prominent New Rights Party leaders who rejected the decision to attend parliament was Levan Gachechiladze. Natelashvili's decision not to support the protests led to numerous

defections from his party: ‘Labor Leader Supports Shevardnadze’, Civil Georgia, 23 Nov. 2003, at <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5616&search=>>, accessed 26 Aug. 2008.

31. ‘New Rights Boycott Parliament’, Civil Georgia, 22 Nov. 2003, at <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5595&search=>>, accessed 26 Aug. 2008. The parliamentary quorum, consisting of representatives of For A New Georgia, Revival, and the New Rights Party, was based on the fictitious official results. An intimate, although understandably partisan, perspective on the New Rights Party volte-face is provided by party activist Irakly Areshidze in his book Democracy and Autocracy in Eurasia: Georgia in Transition (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2008), esp. pp.175–7).

32. Kathleen Collins, Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.234.

33. Ibid., p.236.

34. Tolesan Ismailova, quoted in ‘Kyrgyzstan’s Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy’ (Osh and Brussels: International Crisis Group, 29 Aug. 2002), p.14.

35. The author attended the inaugural meeting of this alliance at which Bakiev, Beknazarov, Buljarova were present. They met in a small room across from the Communist Party headquarters and apart from a few Kyrgyz journalists there were very few present.

36. See Graeme P. Herd, ‘Colourful Revolutions and the CIS. “Manufactured” Versus “Managed” Democracy?’, Problems of Post Communism, Vol.52, No.2 (2005), pp.3–18, and Igor Torbakov, ‘Russian Policy Experts Believe Ukraine’s Revolutionary Fervour is Contagious’, Eurasia Insight, 20 Dec. 2004, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav122004.shtml>. The popular mood in Russia was perhaps best captured in the title of one article published in the influential Komsomolskaya Pravda: ‘Are We Losing Kyrgyzstan?’; this corresponded with the popular notion that Russia somehow ‘possessed’ the Central Asian state: Komsomolskaya Pravda, 23 March 2005, p.2.

37. On 27 January, the official government newspaper Kyrgyz Tuusu published an article accusing the American billionaire of ‘preparing young generations for revolutions’.
38. ‘Ekho Moskvyy’ radio, Moscow (in Russian), 13 July 2005. BBC Monitoring
39. Giga Chikhladze and Irkali Chikhladze, ‘The Rose Revolution: A Chronicle’, in Karumidze and Wertsch (eds.), Enough!, pp.1–20 (p.8).
40. Eduard Shevardnadze, interview with Zurab Karumidze, in Karumidze and Wertsch (eds.), Enough!, pp.29–33 (pp.29 and 30); in citing ‘the Yugoslav scenario’, Shevardnadze was alluding to the anti-Milošević protests in Serbia, sometimes referred to as the ‘Bulldozer revolution’.
41. As quoted in Stefan Wagstyl, ‘Writing on the Wall for Soviet-era Leaders’, Financial Times, 25 March 2005.
42. ‘U.S. Helped to Prepare the Way for Kyrgyzstan’s Uprising’, New York Times, 30 March 2005; ‘An uprising Nourished by Western Aid’, International Herald Tribune, 31 March 2005.
43. Ambassador Young quoted in Marat Kazakpaev, ‘US–Kyrgyzstan: Partners in Different Weight Divisions’, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Vol.3, No.39 (2006), pp.50–54 (p.53). For the full text of the Saakashvili–Yushchenko message see the President of Georgia website <<http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=10&st=10&id=28>>, accessed 22 Dec. 2007.
44. Author’s recollections of meetings with National Democratic Institute, Open Society Institute and International Crisis Group in Bishkek, March–May 2005.
45. Kazakpaev, ‘US–Kyrgyzstan’, p.52.
46. A comprehensive breakdown of US assistance to Kyrgyzstan in 2004 is available at <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/35990.htm>>, accessed 27 Feb. 2008.
47. In conversation with David Mikosz (then director of IFES in Kyrgyzstan), 28 Feb. 2005; USAID, A Study of Political Party Assistance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia (Washington, DC: USAID, June 2007).
48. Edil Baisalov, interview with author, Bishkek, 12 March 2005.

49. Natalia Antelava, 'United States Cuts Development Aid to Georgia', Eurasia Insight, 29 Sept. 2003, at <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092903.shtml>>, accessed 28 Aug. 2008; 'US Announced Cut in Aid to Georgia', Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst, 26 Sept. 2003, at <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/1554>>, accessed 28 Aug. 2008.
50. Kakha Lomia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 30 Jan. 2008.
51. Levan Ramishvili, interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
52. Kakha Lomia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 30 Jan. 2008.
53. Ghia Nodia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
54. The US ambassador reflects on his role during the Rose revolution in an interview published in Karumidze and Wertsch (eds.), Enough!, pp.69–77; and former Secretary of State James Baker in the same collection, pp.79–2. The position of the US embassy in Kyrgyzstan was outlined in interview given by Ambassador Stephen Young to Gennadi Pavliuk, editor-in-chief of the Kyrgyzstan newspaper Argumenty i fakty, on 27 Jan. 2005 and published on 2 Feb. 2005 in that paper.
55. In 1997, for example, Kyrgyzstan was given a score of 4.25 for governance (1 being perfect, 7 being the worst score), which put it on a par with states such as Bulgaria and Romania; by 2004, this score had dropped to 6, putting Kyrgyzstan alongside Tajikistan and Azerbaijan; Georgia's score dropped from 4.5 to 5.5 during the same period: see Freedom House reports at <<http://www.freedomhouse.org>>, accessed on various dates.
56. On 11 March 2005, the Paris Club of creditors agreed to write off \$124 million owed by the Akaev government and reschedule almost half a billion dollars in debts.
57. Rina Prijivoit, interview with author, Bishkek, 11 March 2005.
58. Memorandum signed by 'Steven Young' dated 30 December 2004; copy in author's possession.
59. OSCE membership as it was offered to all post-soviet countries.
60. Ghia Nodia, 'Breaking the Mould of Powerlessness: The Meaning of Georgia's Latest Revolution', in Karumidze and Wertsch (eds.), Enough!, pp. 95-104_ (p.104).

61. When I queried the flying of the EU flag while not being an EU member I was told that the flag was also that of the Council of Europe and it is open to all members of this body to fly the flag. This is true; the Council of Europe adopted the 12-star flag in 1955, three decades before the EU.
62. Bessinger, 'Structure and Example', p.271.
63. 'All power is with the northern side. The Southern part is very active because people there are much poorer and they mix with other nations – Uzbeks, Tajiks – this makes them more political. The Northern side – you have lots of land and not many are interested in politics': Mambet Abylov (leader of Democratic Party of Development}, interview with author, Bishkek 10 March 2005.
64. Witness the inter-ethnic riots of 1990 in the Kyrgyz city of Osh.
65. See Valery Tishkov, "'Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!': An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict', Journal of Peace Research, Vol.32, No.2 (1995), pp.133–49. According to Akaev, the supreme soviet had wanted land to be allocated to ethnic Kyrgyz only but he had vetoed his and managed to pass a more liberal alternative only on the third attempt after putting his career on the line: 'Thus the Russians, and other nationalities, think that I not only declare equal rights for all nationalities, but actually defend them': see Collins, Clan Politics, p.145.
66. Henry E. Hale, 'Democracy and Revolution in the Postcommunist World: From Chasing Events to Building Theory', Working Paper No.24, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (Washington, DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, April 2005), p.2.
67. Ibid., p.17.
68. Hale's argument of election cycles does not explain Saakashvili's first-term difficulties. The Georgian president was completing his first term and showed no sign of stepping down, yet he faced a robust challenge from opposition leaders during 2007–8.
69. Ghia Nodia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.
70. Mikheil Saakashvili, *The Decisive Struggle for Georgia* (Tbilisi, 2001)

71. Merab Basilaia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 10 March 2006.
72. Jonathan Wheatley, "Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union" (Ashgate 2005), p.174-5. 'CEC Refuses to Recount Votes', Civil Georgia, 7 June 2002, at <[http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=2039&search=>](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=2039&search=), accessed 26 Aug. 2008; Areshidze, Democracy and Autocracy, pp.69–81.
73. Areshidze, Democracy and Autocracy, p.92.
74. Saakashvili, an inspiring orator at his best, constantly challenged the electorate to stand up for their rights At one rally, he declared: 'We do not intend to turn back. They are wrong if they a Georgian person has no dignity, there are wrong if they think that the Georgian people are so easily cheated': 24 Saati, 9 Nov. 2003, p.3.
75. Merab Basilaia, interview with author, Tbilisi, 10 March 2006.
76. 'Opposition Leader Azimbek Beknazarov Threatens the Authorities', interview with Ferghana.ru, 6 March 2008, available at <<http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2337>>, accessed 21 March 2008.
77. Lincoln Mitchell, interview with author, New York, 19 April 2008. See also his article 'What was the Rose Revolution For?: Understanding the Georgian Revolution', Harvard International Review, 27 Feb. 2008.
78. See for example Theodor Tudoroiu, 'Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The failed Post-Soviet Revolutions', Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Vol.40, No.3, (2007), pp.315–34.
79. Akaev himself noted this in an article published in Izvestiya six weeks after his defeat, when he wrote that it was 'laughable' to call his successors a new political elite for they were mainly 'those who sprang from the [Communist] party nomenklatura': Izvestiya, 12 May 2005.
80. International Crisis Group, 'Kyrgyzstan On the Edge' (Osh and Brussels: ICG, 9 Nov. 2006)