



Title	Power, Weakness and Violence: Revolutions in the twenty-first century
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Citation	Power, Weakness and Violence: Revolutions in the twenty-first century. In Mees, B and Koehne, SP (Eds.), Terror, War, Tradition: Studies in European History, p. 183-206. Unley: Australian Humanities Press, 2007
Issued Date	2007
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/192917
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Power, Weakness and Violence in Revolutions for the Twenty-first Century

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Is it appropriate to talk about revolutions for the twenty-first century? Are 'classic' revolutions a thing of the past? The recent events that attracted this label, like the Rose Revolution of 2003 in Georgia and the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine, were neither radical in their means, nor in their outcomes. They can hardly be compared to the events that formed our understanding of revolution as a political concept, which implied a radical break with the past achieved usually through a violent overthrow of the ancien régime, as it happened during the French Revolution of 1789, or the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In their appearance, these new revolutions resembled a rock-concert, or a carnival; in their outcomes they seemed rather like elections that led merely to the replacement of one set of elites by another – not a radical restructuring of social, political and economic conditions. By any standard then, these were strange, even 'conservative' revolutions that sought not the total destruction of the 'old order', but rather aimed at the restoration of normality, which in many places – such as Ukraine and Georgia – might have never existed before. In both their aims and methods, the recent wave of revolutions resembled the self-limiting revolutions of 1989 in Central Europe,¹ but none of the better-known 'classical' models. However, even though these revolutions led neither to bloodletting nor the emergence of a radically new set of ideas, they opened the possibility for new beginnings.

To understand the paradoxical nature of non-violent revolution it is useful to turn to the 'anti-political' thinking of dissident intellectuals like Václav Havel, rather than the classic theorists and practitioners of revolutions. Havel's ideas about non-violent

¹ The idea of 'conservative' revolutions is discussed in Stefan Auer, 'The paradoxes of the revolutions of 1989 in Central Europe', *Critical Horizons* 4/1-2 (2004), 134.

resistance to post-totalitarian regimes² that was characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1980s seem more relevant to our understanding of the recent series of revolutions in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine than the revolutionary theories of Marx and Lenin. Similarly, Hannah Arendt's critique of Marx's glorification of violence and her writings about the 'lost treasure of the revolutions'³ are indispensable for the consideration of political challenges arising in our (post-)revolutionary times. This is not accidental. If the twentieth century was, as Lenin predicted, a century of wars and (violent) revolutions, at the beginning of the twenty first century one might hope that this will be a century of self-limiting revolutions.

It is telling that the 'short twentieth century'⁴ ended in 1989 with revolutions which were in many ways anti-Leninist. Dissident intellectuals at the heart of the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe were anxious not to repeat the mistakes of the regime they fought against and imposed limits on both their methods and goals. They rejected the Leninist notion of the necessity of violence and sought to maintain order and a sense of legality in the midst of revolutionary turmoil. Unlike their more radical predecessors, these revolutions were non-teleological. They were not directed towards yet another utopian end-goal, but rather sought to create the possibility of a new beginning without a radical break with the past. This rather new paradigm of revolutionary change has been emulated with greater or lesser success in places as different as Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

Lenin's reasoning about the necessity of revolutionary violence might have been plausible in his own times, and Lenin, the revolutionary leader, had the opportunity to prove Lenin, the theorist of revolution, right. Ever since the French Revolution, every revolutionary worth their salt accepted the Marxist premise that oppressive rulers would never voluntarily give up their privileged positions but must be forced to do so by violent means. 'To Marx', Arendt argued, 'violence, or rather the possession of the means of violence is the constituent element of all forms of government; the

² Václav Havel, 'The power of the powerless', in John Keane (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless* (Armonk, 1985), pp. 125-214.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York, 1961), p. 5.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The short twentieth century* (London, 1994).

state is the instrument of the ruling class by means of which it oppresses and exploits, and the whole sphere of political action is characterised by the use of violence.’⁵ Lenin, if anything, was even more willing to see politics as a violent struggle.⁶ In line with this, he urged his followers to be ruthless with their enemies and lived up to his words by personally signing thousands of death warrants. Those opposing this revolutionary orthodoxy were accused of being either naive, foolish or closet counter-revolutionaries. Their mistake was, as Robespierre noted, that they wanted ‘a revolution without a revolution.’ In contrast, the lesson of 1989 is that a revolution can *only* be successful to the extent to which it is non-violent. Since any genuine political power depends on consent, it must be attained and sustained by non-violent means. In their rejection of violence as a legitimate tool of revolutionary politics, the new revolutionaries in Central and Eastern Europe undermined Jacobin and Leninist traditions, vindicating alternative visions of politics articulated by the likes of Havel and Arendt.

This article seeks to employ the conceptual apparatus developed by Arendt and Havel in order to study the recent series of electoral revolutions as re-enactments of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989. While a number of scholars have investigated the connections between the events in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, little attention has been paid to the possible comparisons between these revolutions and their predecessors in Central Europe. As a Russian political scientist Sergei Markov recently argued, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, together with its Georgian and Serbian predecessors, ‘opened a new chapter in the theory and practice of revolutions.’ According to Markov these revolutions are no longer ‘military uprisings like in the nineteenth century,’ or revolutions by ‘professional political parties, like in the twentieth century.’ These are the new kind of revolutions, the so-called ‘revolutions by non-governmental organisations (*revolutsii nepravitel’stvennykh organizatsii*) – which are the revolutions of

⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 22.

⁶ As Andrzej Walicki demonstrated, Lenin consistently argued that a revolution necessitated violence. ‘Not a single problem of the class struggle has ever been solved in history except by violence,’ argued Lenin. Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom* (Stanford, 1995), p. 307.

the age of globalisation and information society.’⁷ A renewed attention to Arendt’s insights into **the relationship** between violence and political power, and how **this** can play out in a revolution, will reveal that the series of electoral revolutions in the post-communist world are not as radically new as such analysis would suggest. Similarly, Havel’s insights into the nature of the post-totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s are applicable to the semi-authoritarian regimes that emerged after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

Arendt on power and violence

Arendt challenged the widespread tendency to confuse political power with violence, by averring that ‘power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent.’⁸ This insight has profound consequences for political actions. The destruction of liberty in France under Robespierre, according to Arendt, was not just a historic accident, but resulted partly from his misconceived assumptions about the relationship between power and violence. Once ‘freedom and power have parted company’, what followed was ‘the fateful equating of power with violence, of the political with government, and of government with a necessary evil.’⁹ This conceptual confusion helps to explain why most revolutions in the past tended to result in the establishment of a regime more oppressive than the one they were directed against. In Arendt’s understanding, political power is always people power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.¹⁰

⁷ Sergei Markov, ‘“Oranzhevaia Revoliutsiia” – primer revoliutsii global’nogo soobshestva’, in Mikhail B. Pogrebinskii (ed.), “*Oranzhevaia Revoliutsiia*” (Moscow, 2005), pp. 70-71.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego, 1969), p. 56.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), p. 134.

¹⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 44. It is worth noting that Arendt’s usage of the term ‘power’ is somewhat idiosyncratic. To translate it into a more contemporary

Those political rulers who resort to violence, far from demonstrating their political power, unwittingly admit their weakness. This is not to say that violence cannot be used in a system of domination. In fact, countless historical examples have shown that it is possible to substitute violence for power. As Arendt put it, ‘violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power.’¹¹ This is because political power is not manifested in the blind and unconditional obedience of people, but rather it depends on the capacity of individuals to gain genuine support of others. Co-operation and support of others cannot be imposed by force. Thus, ‘to speak of non-violent power is actually redundant.’¹² Arendt’s account of power echoes the insights of David Hume, Montesquieu and the American federalists who shared the belief that to some extent at least ‘all governments rest on opinion’ (James Madison). Since no rule can ever be sustained by brute force only, tyrannical regimes are inherently weak. ‘Even the tyrant, the One who rules against all, needs helpers in the business of violence,’ observed Arendt.¹³

The enigma of the post-totalitarian regime: the ‘power of the powerless’

However, neither the countries of Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, nor Ukraine in the 1990s could be described as tyrannical in the traditional sense – far from it. The political regimes in Central Europe developed new and more refined ways of domination and control that increasingly depended less and less on violence. As Havel observed in post-Prague Spring Czechoslovakia, the regime was no longer sustained primarily by the ‘armed might of its soldiers and

idiom of political science one could talk about ‘social power’ or ‘structural power’. See e.g. Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (Boston, 1980), pp. 147-48. For a very useful overview of contemporary conceptions of power, particularly in the field of international relations, see Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, *International Organization* 59/1 (2005), 39-75.

¹¹ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

police’,¹⁴ but by the passive support of a population that appeared to have accepted the lies of the dominant ideology. In fact, to the extent that people internalised their roles in the system, society could no longer be clearly divided between those who ruled and those who were oppressed. The line of division went through every single individual who, by accepting their assigned role in society, abdicated their personal responsibility and suppressed their desire for authentic action. In this way people were made to be complicit in the very system that they detested. As Havel put it, there is no need for people to accept fully the lie of the regime: ‘It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.’¹⁵ Hence, according to Havel, life in a post-totalitarian system is ‘thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies’:

Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.¹⁶

Havel alerted the people in Czechoslovakia to the fact that their political system had been maintained thanks to them accepting it. They could only do it, however, by ‘living a lie’. With some simplification one could say that the regime was sustained by the prevalent attitude of people characterised by a mixture of apathy, cynicism and opportunism. But the fact that the system relied on the tacit support of a vast majority of the population also meant, ironically, that it was very vulnerable. This is the reason why the ‘powerless’ masses were in fact potentially very powerful. The ‘power of the powerless’ would be realised once more and more people rejected a life of lies and attempted to ‘live in truth’.

¹⁴ Havel, ‘The power of the powerless’, p. 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.

Havel's ideas about the need to defend authentic politics against encroachment by the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe resonated with the thinking of other dissident intellectuals in the region. While the terms they used were at times different, their underlying strategies were remarkably similar. Whether we recall Adam Michnik in Poland and his call for 'a new evolutionism', György Konrád in Hungary and his ideal of an 'anti-politics', or Havel and the 'power of the powerless', the aim that all these intellectuals had in common was to reclaim free space in their societies for the kind of civic activities that make freedom possible and worthwhile.¹⁷ They refrained from fighting actively against the government of the day and the political system it represented, and focused instead on the creation of a 'parallel polis',¹⁸ a civil society independent of the state.

This was clearly an Arendtian understanding of politics, however confusing the different terms that describe it might look. Arendt would have recognised in the principles of 'anti-politics' the constitutive features of any politics worth their name. Similarly, the only genuine power according to Arendt was Havel's 'power of the powerless' and the only genuine polis Benda's 'parallel polis'. At any rate, the Central European dissident intellectuals seem to have learned the Arendtian lesson about the relation between power and violence (whether from their own experience, or the writings of Arendt and her predecessors). This is not surprising given that Arendt's political thinking developed in similar circumstances, as in her dealing with the challenge of totalitarianism. What *is* surprising was the fact that even those corrupt communist leaders who in the past showed little reluctance to resort to violence seem to have accepted the very same Arendtian lesson; they learned that their power could no longer be sustained by violence.

¹⁷ This is not to deny the vast diversity of views that can be found amongst dissident intellectuals in Central Europe. For a more systematic overview of dissident thought on 'anti-politics' and civil society see Alan Renwick, 'Anti-political or just anti-Communist? Varieties of dissidence in East-Central Europe and their implications for the development of political society', *East European Politics and Societies* 20/2 (2006), 286-318.

¹⁸ Václav Benda, 'Paralelní polis', in Vilém Prečan (ed.), *Charta 77, Od morální k demokratické revoluci* (Bratislava, 1990), pp. 43-50.

This is not to say that the actual collapse of communism in 1989 in Central Europe simply vindicated Havel and his insights into the mechanisms of post-totalitarian power. To say that ‘truth prevailed’ in 1989, as Havel argued in *Summer Meditations*, might be too idealistic an account of the revolutions in Central Europe.¹⁹ Clearly, there were other factors involved, including the changed international context that removed the threat of another Soviet invasion. It could even be asserted that opportunism prevailed in 1989.²⁰ Once it became obvious that the regime was losing its power, it was no longer opportune to support it. Even communist leaders realised this; some of them realised it earlier than anyone else. This led to elite defection on a large scale, which in turn rapidly weakened the regime leading to its **swift** demise. The rapid speed of elite defection partly accounts for the speed of the non-violent revolutions in Central Europe which all too often surprised equally both the participants and outside observers. As Timur Kuran astutely observed:

Before long, fear changed sides: where people had been afraid to oppose the regime, they came to fear being caught defending it. Party members rushed to burn their cards, claiming they were always reformists at heart. Top officials began sensing that they might face retribution for resistance. They hastened to accept the opposition’s demands, only to be confronted with bolder ones.²¹

In Arendtian terms, one can say that once people realise that a regime has very little popular support, power instantly shifts from governing elites to the people, as members of elites try to save themselves by quickly changing their allegiances. While a vast majority of people **feigned** allegiance to the old regime, the changing revolutionary

¹⁹ Václav Havel, *Letní přemítání* (Prague, 1991).

²⁰ For a perceptive critique of Havel’s somewhat idealistic account of the collapse of communism see, for example, Ernst Gellner, ‘The price of velvet: Tomas Masaryk and Vaclav Havel’, in Gellner (ed.), *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994), p. 128.

²¹ Timur Kuran, ‘The East European revolution of 1989: is it surprising that we were surprised?’, *American Economic Review* 81/2 (1991), 124. For a similar argument see also Mancur Olson, ‘The logic of collective action in Soviet-type societies’, *Journal of Soviet Nationalities* 1/2 (1990), 8-27.

situation can quickly **work to undermine** this **apparent consensus** – a significant part of the population ends up **transferring their consent** to the emerging regime.²² As a result, there were very few people left who could serve as ‘helpers in the business of violence.’²³ Regardless of whether Havel’s ideal of ‘living in truth’ or sheer opportunism prevailed in 1989, it is plausible to see these events as a late vindication of Arendt’s understanding of power.²⁴ Her hope that political power would ultimately prevail over violence was validated (e.g. in Poland and Czechoslovakia), as was her fear that rulers reluctant to admit weakness would find the temptation to resort to violence **irresistible** (e.g. **as occurred** in China).

Global norms, local actors: the Velvet Revolution as an international norm

All the same, it is useful to reiterate that the actual collapse of communism took most analysts and actors by surprise.²⁵ Surprising was its timing, non-violent character and – as mentioned above – its

²² In Kuran’s words: ‘the East European Revolution has been billed as the triumph of truth over lying. This designation conveys the end of feigned support for communism, but it conceals the continuation of preference falsification. Lying has not ceased but changed character. Now it provides cover to East Europeans afraid to admit their yearnings for the old order.’ Kuran, ‘Is it surprising that we were surprised?’ This can also account for setbacks, or rapid reversals of support after a relatively successful revolution. Consider the most recent paradoxical development in Ukraine: in March 2006, Viktor Yanukovich, the unambiguous loser of the Orange Revolution, became notionally the winner of the first genuinely free and fair elections.

²³ Arendt, *On Violence*.

²⁴ As Margaret Canovan noted, ‘The revolutions of 1989 were notably Arendtian, illustrating her account of how power can spring up as if from nowhere when people begin to ‘act in concern,’ and can ebb away unexpectedly from apparently powerful regimes.’ Margaret Canovan, ‘Introduction’, in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998), pp. xvii-xviii. See also Winfried Thaa, *Die Wiedergeburt des Politischen* (Opladen, 1996).

²⁵ Arendt was quite unique in identifying the inherent weakness of the Soviet empire already in 1969. Her comments on the Soviet led military suppression of Prague Spring seem remarkably prescient today: ‘Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost; it is precisely the shrinking power of the Russian government, internally and externally, that became manifest in its ‘solution’ of the Czechoslovak problem.’ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 53.

speed. The memorable quip by Timothy Garton Ash that the revolution took ten years in Poland, ten months in Hungary and would only take ten days in Czechoslovakia became a self-fulfilling prophecy.²⁶ But this outcome was not pre-ordained. The rulers still had the option to resort to violence. In Central Europe, they chose not to. In Poland, the communist rulers might have realised that this option was no longer feasible. Clearly, once the Soviet Union renounced its infamous Brezhnev doctrine, there seemed to be no force left that could be used against the Polish people – at that stage at least it was inconceivable that Poles would fight against Poles in order to preserve communism. In Czechoslovakia, the rulers seemed to have learned the Polish lesson of 1989 that showed that it was better for them to save themselves in peaceful negotiations rather than to attempt to save a doomed regime. As all the actors in the 1989 revolution in Czechoslovakia had the possibility to learn from the Polish and Hungarian experiences, they were able to proceed with radical political changes significantly faster. Adam Przeworski observed this domino effect shortly after the events. What occurred in Czechoslovakia:

resulted from the breakdown in East Germany, what stimulated masses of people to fill the streets in East Germany followed the political changes in Hungary, what showed Hungarians a way out was the success of the negotiations in Poland ... The entire event was one single snowball [and] once hundreds of thousands of people had flooded the streets of Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin, once the wall had fallen, the pressure on Czechoslovakia was irresistible.²⁷

A similar dynamic developed more recently in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) in societies that were very different from Central Europe in the 1980s. Once all the basic ingredients of a ‘Velvet Revolution’ were in place, i.e. perceived weakness of the regime, mass demonstrations and credible opposition leaders, a revolution could **occur** within a matter of weeks.

²⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern* (New York, 1990).

²⁷ Adam Przeworski, ‘The “East” becomes the “South”? The “Autumn of the People” and the future of Eastern Europe’, *PS* 24/1 (1991), 21.

It has been noted that the opposition movements in Ukraine received generous financial and organisational support from abroad, which led some observers to question the authenticity of the Orange Revolution.²⁸ Yet, even more important than this practical Western assistance (that could, at any rate, be seen as a legitimate attempt to counterbalance the interference of Russia), was the less tangible, though certainly not less important, **development** of international norms. As a number of studies have demonstrated, the behaviour of domestic actors across the globe is increasingly influenced and constrained by international norms such as human rights.²⁹ This makes semi-authoritarian regimes with democratic pretences vulnerable to the outside pressure that can strengthen the position of domestic opponents. This happened in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, but also previously in the post-totalitarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. The rhetorical commitments that these communist regimes made to democracy and human rights, exemplified in their ratification of the Helsinki Final Act agreement of 1975, inspired and strengthened the dissident movements such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland.³⁰ It also lent legitimacy to the direct and indirect support that the Western powers gave to these movements.³¹ What is new about the more recent series of ‘electoral revolutions’, is the fact that they

²⁸ For a Russian skeptical perspective on the authenticity of ‘coloured’ revolutions see, for example, T.L. Poliannikov and G.V. Pokopov, ‘Sindrom tsvetnukh revoliutsii’, *Svobodnaia mysl* 21/6 (2005). For a similar argument from a Western perspective see Jonathan Steele, who commented that ‘intervening in foreign elections, under the guise of an impartial interest in helping civil society, has become the run-up to the postmodern coup d’etat, the CIA-sponsored third world uprising of cold war days adapted to post-Soviet conditions.’ Jonathan Steele, ‘Ukraine’s postmodern coup d’etat’, *The Guardian*, 26 Nov 2004. See also Mark Almond, ‘The price of people power,’ *The Guardian*, 7 Dec 2004.

²⁹ See, for example, Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds), *The Power of Human Rights* (Cambridge, 1999).

³⁰ See, for example, Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect* (Princeton, 2001).

³¹ Not much attention has been paid in scholarly literature to the impact that Western support had on opposition movements in Central and Eastern Europe. It is worth noting, for example, that the CIA under Reagan administration spent approximately \$8million per year to provide Solidarity with ‘advanced communication equipment and material assistance.’ Peter Schweizer, ‘Who broke the Evil Empire?’, *National Review* 46/10 (1994), 47.

could rely not only on this kind of Western support, but also on the ideals of the Velvet Revolution. It is telling that the best-known dissident movement in Belarus calls itself Charter 97.³²

Employing the language of constructivist theories of international relations, one could argue that the repeated re-enactment of the Velvet Revolution is engendering a new set of international norms that will help to constrain actors who find themselves in the midst of revolutionary upheavals triggered by the decline of a semi-authoritarian regime. In other words, the 'script' of the Velvet Revolution offers a new model for radical political change. The basic assumption of constructivist theories of international relations is that 'international structure is determined by the international distribution of ideas.' In line with this, 'shared ideas, expectations, and beliefs about appropriate behaviour are what give the world structure, order, and stability.'³³ Once more and more people accept these ideas as self-evident, one can talk about 'norm internalisation' in any given society, in which 'norms acquire a taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of broad public debate.'³⁴ Every successful re-enactment of the Velvet Revolution has the potential to strengthen the credibility of a new set of norms regulating behaviour of both the revolutionary activists as well as their opponents. Once successful, these norms will undermine the first dogma of all traditional revolutionists, that radical changes can only be achieved by radical, that is violent means.

The 'revolution before the revolution'

In fact, a careful study of past revolutions, informed by an Arendtian understanding of power, reveals that violence was rarely essential to their success. As Jonathan Schell has suggested in a recent historical study, all revolutions take place first 'in the minds of the people' and are thus in some ways 'over before they begin – or, at least, before they are seen to begin.'³⁵ Interestingly, Schell's comparative survey

³² The group was 'founded in conscious tribute to the Czechoslovak Charter 77 movement.' Timothy Garton Ash, 'Real and fake in Belarus', *Guardian Weekly*, 31 Mar-6 Apr 2006. For more details see www.charter97.org.

³³ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52/4 (1998), 894.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 895.

³⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World* (New York, 2003), p. 167.

of ‘the revolutions before the revolutions’ revealed that they were relatively peaceful in their initial stage and only descended to violence later:

In the French Revolution, as in the English and the American, the stage of overthrow was nearly bloodless; but the stage of foundation was bloody – establishing a pattern that was to be repeated in more than one revolution thereafter, and never with more fearsome consequences than in the Russian Revolution of 1917.³⁶

Clearly, Schell’s interpretation seems to be contradicted by innumerable images that stress, or even celebrate the violent character of these revolutions. From Eugene Delacroix’s *Liberty Guiding the People* to Sergei Eisenstein’s *October: Ten days that shook the world*, revolutions were usually depicted as exceedingly bloody affairs. But it is telling that more people may have died in the numerous re-enactments of the Russian Revolution of 1917 – whether during the festivals commemorating the revolution, or the making of Eisenstein’s *October* – than in the actual event. The communist leaders realised that since a revolution was by definition supposed to be a *violent* overthrow of the old regime, they made it appear so with their propaganda.³⁷ (This also helped to legitimise revolutionary violence long after 1917, especially under Stalin.) It can be seen as a sign of moral progress that the new revolutionaries, from Adam Michnik and Václav Havel to Mikhail Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko, have seen it as their duty to stress the non-violent nature of their political struggle.

But how real was such a revolution going to be? How pervasive and sustainable was its impact? How radical were the implemented changes? If it is doubtful whether the events of 1989 can be

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ As Fredrick C. Corney demonstrated in his book-length study of the ‘memory and the making of the Bolshevik Revolution’, it required a concerted effort on behalf of the Soviet propagandists to create a captivating story of the revolution. To pursue this goal, the Winter Palace was turned into the Russian equivalent of the Bastille, establishing a kind of symbolic connection with the French Revolution that was initially rejected by a number of Bolshevik leaders. Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October* (Ithaca, 2004), pp. 34-35.

adequately described as revolutions,³⁸ how appropriate is the term with respect to Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan? If a revolution is defined as an attempt to create a radically new political order that is accompanied by the abolition of old privileges and the redistribution of property, then neither the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe, nor the more recent series of ‘electoral revolutions’ seem to qualify fully as revolutions. If, however, a revolution is understood more modestly as a historic event that makes new beginnings possible by political actions that seemed inconceivable under the constraints of the existing political regime, then the description appears to be **more acceptable**. Having said this, it is important to recognise differences between the first series of Velvet Revolutions in 1989 and their more recent reincarnations. Clearly, the political changes implemented in the countries of Central Europe in 1989 were much more radical than anything that is likely to happen in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Whereas the revolutions in Central Europe resulted in communism being replaced with Western-style liberal democracy (with all its imperfections), the electoral revolution in Ukraine led to the defeat of a corrupt regime that at least in its appearance never attempted to be radically different from a Western-style liberal democracy. As Michael McFaul astutely observed:

those who took to the streets to defy Kuchma’s regime did not seek the destruction of Ukraine’s existing political institutions or the rewriting of Ukraine’s political rules of the game ... Rather, Ukrainians protested in order to guarantee that the rules and institutions of democracy – formally outlined in the constitution and other documents but informally undermined by corrupt government practices – were followed.³⁹

³⁸ According to Alexander J. Motyl, for example, ‘Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Estonia have not, contrary to conventional wisdom, experienced revolution but something akin to radical reform, transition, or transformation’; Alexander J. Motyl, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires* (New York, 1999), p. 53.

³⁹ Michael McFaul, ‘Conclusion: the Orange Revolution in a comparative perspective’, in Anders Åslund and Michael McFaul (ed.), *Revolution in Orange* (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 190-91.

This resonates with an earlier assessment of the Rosa Revolution in Georgia:

the most paradoxical element of it was that it did not involve a clash with the existing political regime as described in the Georgian constitution. To the contrary, the November events may be described as a revolt in defense of the constitution, an attempt to uphold (at least formally) accepted democratic rules.⁴⁰

It is worth remembering, however, that even in 1989 there were significant differences between individual countries in Central Europe with respect to the kind of revolutionary situation that emerged there: the level of public mobilisation differed as widely as the speed of change. In Poland, the ‘revolution before the revolution’ took more than ten years and was characterised by the emergence of a mass movement that was unprecedented in the communist bloc; Solidarity in its heyday had up to ten million members. In Czechoslovakia, in contrast, there was very little mass mobilisation before November 1989 and the opposition movement was largely limited to a relatively small number of non-conformist intellectuals and artists (even the Charter 77 had relatively few signatories). The lethargy that characterised Czechoslovak society after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968-69 seems to have been overcome virtually overnight – a development that surprised external observers as much as it did the leading actors directly involved in the Velvet Revolution. (It suffices to recall that no less a figure than Havel was very sceptical about the possibility of an anti-communist revolution in Czechoslovakia as late as in the summer of 1989.) In November 1989, as if to compensate for the lack of public engagement in post-1968 ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia, people flooded the streets of Prague, Bratislava and all the other major cities, surprising them-selves **with these displays of** civic courage. But this sudden manifestation of civic virtue was in reality a poor substitute for civil society. In this sense the revolution in Czechoslovakia seems rather less ‘real’ than its Polish predecessor. It appears that Czechoslovak society no longer needed to undergo all

⁴⁰ Ghia Nodia, ‘Breaking the mold of powerlessness: the meaning of Georgia’s latest revolution’, in Zurab Karumidze and James V. Wertsch (eds), *‘Enough!’ The Rose Revolution in the Republic of Georgia 2003* (New York, 2005), p. 99.

the profound changes that anticipated the collapse of communism in Poland because it was able to make use of the Polish ‘revolution before the revolution.’

This is not to deny the authenticity of the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, but rather it is an attempt to put it into perspective. In their struggle of 1989, Czechs and Slovaks were able to invoke the best aspects of their respective national traditions, including the legacy of the First Czechoslovak Republic and the Prague Spring.⁴¹ In addition, however, they were able to build on Polish experiences and facilitate their own goals by using tools imported from abroad.⁴² Moreover, the Czechoslovak communist elites also learned their lesson from Poland and accepted their defeat without giving in to the temptation of resorting to violence. Ironically, the roundtable discussions in Czechoslovakia that paved the way for a peaceful transfer of power were instigated by the communist leaders rather than the opposition movements, **the latter of which accepted this process** only reluctantly.⁴³

A similar dynamic was in place fifteen years later in Ukraine. Clearly, all the actors involved in the revolutionary turmoil in Ukraine of November 2004 were aware of the historic precedence of a non-violent revolution. In fact, they might have been reminded of this precedence by the crucial players from the Polish revolution of 1980-89, such as Alexander Kwaśniewski and Lech Walesa, who became directly involved in the Ukrainian events. Furthermore, the opposition movement even produced a book that advised its supporters on the politics of non-violent action – a translation of Gene Sharp’s study *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, which is something of a manual for ‘non-revolutionary revolutionaries’.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See also Stefan Auer, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe* (London, 2004).

⁴² This point is further discussed in Stefan Auer, ‘After 1989, who are the Czechs?’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 12 (2006), forthcoming.

⁴³ Jiří Suk, *Labyrinthem Revoluce* (Prague, 2003).

⁴⁴ The American scholar Gene Sharp at the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston, Massachusetts, has published numerous books advocating the virtues of non-violent struggle for justice. In line with Arendt, Sharp is very critical of the use of, and justification for revolutionary violence. See, for example, Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom*, particularly chapter 6, ‘Freedom and revolution: a review of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*’, pp. 141-60. Like Arendt and Havel, Sharp is fascinated by the experience of the Czechoslovak peaceful resistance in 1968-

Andrew Wilson, in his detailed account of the Orange Revolution, reports that many opposition activists feared the very real possibility that a Romania-like scenario might emerge in Ukraine. Yet, in hindsight it seems plausible to suggest that not only the opposition but also the powers that be might have feared such a scenario and opted reluctantly for negotiations, rather than risking a full-blown violent confrontation. Walesa surely overstated his influence by claiming that he single-handedly prevented bloodshed in Ukraine by talking to Yanukovich and urging him not to use brute force.⁴⁵ Yet, it is safe to assume that both Kuchma and Yanukovich knew that by renouncing violence they would dramatically decrease the danger of becoming victims of violent retributions after their defeat. This was also one of the lessons of the Velvet Revolution – the opposition leaders' principled rejection of violence made it easier for the rulers to accept their defeat, as by accepting their loss of power they were not risking their lives. (To put it simply, they had a choice between the fate of General Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland and that of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania.) It is quite telling that after the event, there has been a veritable competition amongst the major actors as to who should take more credit for preventing bloodshed.⁴⁶

1969. See Gene Sharp, *Making Europe Unconquerable* (London, 1985), pp. 47-49. However, it is worth noting that Havel was not totally opposed to violence, and even criticised 'the blindness of European pacifism' that he saw as 'one of the factors that prepared the ground for the Second World War;' Havel, 'The power of the powerless.'

⁴⁵ Daniel McLaughlin, 'Walesa says he averted Ukraine clashes', *The Observer*, 1 May 2005. Walesa's warning was reinforced by Alexander Kwasniewski, who, by virtue of being a former communist and a trusted partner of Kuchma, was likely to have had more influence on Yanukovich. For more details see Marcin Bosacki and Marcin Wojciechowski, 'Kulisy rewolucji ukraińskiej', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 3 Apr 2005, Marcin Wojciechowski, 'Druga misja Kwasniewskiego na Ukrainie', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 30 Nov 2004. For the initial involvement of Lech Walesa see also Piotr Adamowicz and Pawel Reszka, 'Polska solidarna z Ukrainą', *Rzeczpospolita*, 26 Nov 2004.

⁴⁶ Taras Kuzio, 'The opposition's road to success', *Journal of Democracy* 16/2 (2005), 117-30. In a similar vein, General Jaruzelski in Poland defended his decision to declare martial law in December 1981 with the argument that this was necessary in order to preempt a Soviet invasion and so prevent more bloodshed.

Post-communist Ukraine as a paradigm of defective democracy

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and Ukraine declared its independence, many people assumed that the country could join Central Europe in its **quick** progress towards liberal democracy. Some ten years later the prospects seemed distinctly less optimistic, the mood more despondent. The common denominator of most studies of Ukraine published before (or during!) the Orange Revolution was the identification of a weak, or non-existent civil society and the concern with poorly functioning democratic institutions. As Ilya Prizel observed, ‘decades of brutal repression in Ukraine by both foreign and domestic rulers had created a remarkably isolated, atomised, and malleable population’⁴⁷ that seemed forever captured by its corrupt elites. There was no end in sight for ‘Ukraine’s hollow decade’, as long as society remained atomised and the elites corrupt, selfish and cynical. In a similar vein, Elena Korosteleva argued that Ukraine, along with Belarus, epitomised a new kind of regime that can be labelled a ‘quasi-democracy’, an ‘almost democracy’ or a ‘demagogical democracy’. Even though this was ‘a borderline case, being neither democracy, nor dictatorship,’⁴⁸ it was characterised by a remarkable degree of political stability:

A demagogical democracy functions to create the perfect illusion of a democratic partnership between those in power and their retinue who elect them on their behalf, and to make voters believe that their opinion matters ... The essence of such democracy, however, is *manipulation*, and no matter how quasi-inclusive and competitive the relationship is, it suggests a strong bias towards the rulers – the demagogues – who use the low level of public consciousness to negotiate their benefits from the system legally.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ilya Prizel, ‘Ukraine’s hollow decade’, *East European Politics and Societies* 16/2 (2002), 363-85.

⁴⁸ Elena A. Korosteleva, ‘The quality of democracy in Belarus and Ukraine’, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 20/1 (2004), 127.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

This description echoes Havel's insights into the working of a post-totalitarian system in communist Czechoslovakia. Both assessments stress the importance of appearances for the maintenance of the respective repressive systems and offer a nuanced account of the power relationship within respective societies. But while Havel as a political activist attempted to show how vulnerable the system was once people understood its underlying logic, Korosteleva as a political analyst seeks to demonstrate how stable such a regime can be. As in Czechoslovakia before 1989, however, neither the political activists, nor the external observers really expected any radical changes to occur in Ukraine. Both regimes succeeded in creating the illusion of stability. As Paul Kubicek has noted, 'given the stagnation in society and powers of the existing elite, it is hard to see how Ukraine will extricate itself from the mire of stagnation.'⁵⁰ Similarly, Korosteleva concluded her study by arguing that people in Ukraine were 'emotionally ... not yet ready for democracy, advocating strong and single-handed leadership and being uncertain about the supremacy of law in a crisis.'⁵¹ In contrast, most observers of Ukraine writing after the revolution stress the 'active and politically sophisticated' nature of Ukrainian society.⁵²

⁵⁰ Paul Kubicek, 'The limits of electoral democracy in Ukraine', *Democratization* 8/2 (2001), 131. Tim Beichelt concurred with these findings. The electoral regime of Ukraine, in which 'not democratic competition, but loyalty to the president is the dominant game in town,' was likely to lead to political paralysis, not change. 'This makes it rather improbable that the defective democracy of ... Ukraine will bring in more liberal and less delegative government practices, in the short term at last.' Tim Beichelt, 'Autocracy and democracy in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine', *Democratization* 11/5 (2004), 126 and 129.

⁵¹ Korosteleva makes much of the point that 75% of Ukrainians surveyed did not 'believe that participation in politics is "a duty" ' (which is re-phrased rather misleadingly as '75 per cent of respondents believe that "participation in politics" has nothing to do with citizens' rights and responsibilities'), but she largely ignores her more encouraging findings that point towards growing awareness of Ukrainian citizens of deficiencies of Kuchma's regime. For example, the study quotes people describing the situation in Ukraine as 'criminal democracy', 'shambles democracy', 'clan democracy' and a 'corrupt state'. Surely the awareness of problems is the first pre-condition of addressing them! Korosteleva, 'The quality of democracy in Belarus and Ukraine', pp. 132 and 134.

⁵² McFaul, 'Conclusion: the Orange Revolution in a comparative perspective', p. 167.

Orange Revolution: people power or Western plot?

With the privilege of hindsight, it is easy to point out that most analysts underestimated the potential of a ‘defective democracy’ in Ukraine to turn towards a more substantive democracy. There are two simple strategies to deal with this challenge: it is either possible to argue that there was significantly more civil society than most observers previously allowed for,⁵³ or it is possible to argue that the revolution was simply imposed on the people of Ukraine by the Western powers, such as the US, with their well-funded programs of ‘democracy promotion’.⁵⁴ These explanatory strategies are incomplete, if not misleading.

Clearly, both grass root activities of civil society movements *and* Western pressure played an important role in the Orange Revolution.⁵⁵ However, in order to fully understand the dynamics of political changes in Ukraine it is also important to consider the role that the Velvet Revolution had as a precedence demonstrating the possibility of radical changes achieved by relatively moderate means. The Velvet Revolution was not only a source of inspiration for the opposition movement, but informed the behavior of the incumbent rulers who seem to have realised, if only reluctantly and at a very late stage, that the costs of their defeat could have been better managed in a roundtable discussion than in an open military confrontation. While Kuchma had warned in early November 2004, that is shortly before the second round of presidential elections, that ‘revolution will not be tolerated,’⁵⁶ by the time the opposition movement managed to

⁵³ Nadia Diuk writes that ‘without doubt, Ukraine has had the most mature civil society of any post-Soviet state.’ Nadia Diuk, ‘The triumph of civil society’, in Anders Åslund and Michael McFaul (eds), *Revolution in Orange* (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 82-83.

⁵⁴ For a more balanced and sophisticated account of these influences see Oleksandr Sushko and Olena Prystayko, ‘Western influence’, in Anders Åslund and Michael McFaul (eds), *Revolution in Orange* (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 125-44, Andrew Wilson, ‘Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, NGOs and the role of the West’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19/1 (2006), 21-33.

⁵⁵ See for example Markov, ‘“Oranzhevaia Revoliutsia”’.

⁵⁶ See Lucan Way, ‘Kuchma’s failed authoritarianism’, *Journal of Democracy* 16/2 (2005), 142. Way also reports (ibid.) that ‘police chief Mykola Bilokon appeared on television to assure viewers that in Ukraine, in contrast to Georgia, the police would defend “the constitutional order”.’

mobilise mass demonstrations in late November, Kuchma may not have had the option of using violence in his defence. It was clear, at any rate, that ‘by this point, such a move would have been immensely risky. It is likely that many in the security forces would have refused to follow orders to suppress the demonstrations, and it is possible that such orders would have sparked violent conflict between the different branches of government.’⁵⁷ This corroborates Arendt’s insight into the relationship between power and violence in a revolutionary upheaval:

In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact – that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case, the situation changes abruptly.⁵⁸

If – as political theorists from David Hume to Hannah Arendt have reminded us – even a tyrannical regime depends on support of the people, this must be much more so in a non-democratic regime that pretends to emulate a liberal democratic model. This is why it can be difficult in the long run to sustain a regime that seeks to hide its autocratic practices behind a façade of democracy. Political analysts had rightly warned that the existence of formal democratic institutions in Ukraine, including elections, is ‘only a necessary, not sufficient component of democracy,’⁵⁹ but they underestimated the potential of these institutional arrangements to lead to genuine political contestation. Whether the Ukrainian regime was called ‘electoral democracy’, ‘defective democracy’, or a ‘blackmail state’,⁶⁰ the assumption was that it would not democratise fully, at least not in the foreseeable future. But even ‘Potemkin’ democracy,⁶¹ or fake democratic practices, can – albeit indirectly – lead to more

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 48.

⁵⁹ Kubicek, ‘The limits of electoral democracy in Ukraine’.

⁶⁰ Keith A. Darden, ‘Blackmail as a tool of state domination: Ukraine under Kuchma’, *East European Constitutional Review* 10/2-3 (2001), 67-71.

⁶¹ Charles King, ‘Potemkin democracy: four myths of post-Soviet Georgia’, *The National Interest* (Summer 2001), 93-104.

genuine democratisation. As Lucan A. Way has recently argued, most observers failed to notice the inherent weakness of a Ukrainian ‘competitive authoritarianism’, which relied on a mixture of corruption, blackmail and manipulation of public opinion.⁶² If ‘the ballot box’ had been seen until recently as ‘the coffin of revolutionaries’,⁶³ the new phenomenon of electoral revolutions is turning this dictum around: *fraudulent* elections can actually trigger a revolution.

The character and the outcome of such revolution is determined not only by relevant domestic actors and their particular circumstances, but increasingly also by the emerging paradigm of Velvet Revolution, that provides these actors with a script easily adaptable to their own predicament. But as in Central Europe, this outcome was not preordained and it is plausible to think of alternative outcomes in which violence could have prevailed. There is no reason to assume that Kuchma and his supporters had any principled objections against the use of brute force, but they may have learned from their own experience that violence does not always bring the intended results. The killing of the opposition journalist Georgi Gongadze, for which Kuchma was allegedly responsible, may have silenced one critical voice, but resulted at the same time in a public outcry that severely *weakened* Kuchma’s power. Similarly, the poisoning of Yushchenko failed to eliminate him as the most promising political competitor. If anything, it might have increased his credibility as a trustworthy political leader, and strengthened his own determination to defeat Kuchma’s corrupt regime. Yushchenko’s near-death experience turned him into a convincing oppositionist; his disfigured face became a symbol of the people’s defiance of the old regime. (It is open to speculation whether the death of Yushchenko could have saved Kuchma’s corrupt regime. It might have galvanised the opposition movement no less than his survival and subsequent political actions.)

⁶² Way, ‘Kuchma’s failed authoritarianism’.

⁶³ Jeff Goodwin, ‘The renewal of socialism and the decline of revolution’, in John Foran (ed.), *The Future of Revolutions* (London, 2003), pp. 59-72.

Arendt or Fukuyama ~ Ukraine or Uzbekistan

Whatever the more pessimistic alternatives to the success of the Orange Revolution might have been, they did not eventuate. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine, alongside with Georgia (2003), Serbia (2000) – and their predecessors in Central Europe (1989) – were driven according to the script of the Velvet Revolution in which good prevails over evil, truth over hypocrisy and democratic ideals over tyranny. Political leaders who until yesterday were seen as hopeless dreamers are suddenly admired as great pragmatists, thanks to their determination to fight for justice. Wherever and whenever it occurs, the story of the Velvet Revolution has fairytale-like qualities. They are reminiscent more of the dreams of optimistic liberals like Francis Fukuyama who believe that the future is bright because it is liberal, rather than the likes of Arendt who are acutely aware of the dangers to liberty.

But there is no need to betray Arendt's heritage here. The story of the Velvet Revolution would be incomplete without considering its darker side. Firstly, wherever and whenever the Velvet Revolution occurs, it is followed by some kind of 'Velvet' corruption. There is, for example, a small industry that seeks to prove Havel's high ideals wrong by highlighting his own personal failings as well as the shortcomings of Czech democracy.⁶⁴ Similarly, observers of the more recent developments in Georgia have already identified the 'thorns of the Rose Revolution'.⁶⁵ More recently still, no lesser figure than Havel identified the 'post-Orange blues' in Ukraine.⁶⁶ This is not

⁶⁴ See, for example, John Keane, *Václav Havel: A political tragedy in six acts* (London, 1999) or the more balanced study by Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh, 2000).

⁶⁵ Jasper von Altenbockum, 'Die Stacheln der Rosenrevolution', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 Apr 2005; Melik Kaylan, 'After the roses, the thorns', *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 10 May 2005.

⁶⁶ 'All revolutions, in the end, turn from euphoria to disillusion.' Václav Havel, 'Another stage in self-liberation from communism', *The Australian*, 27 Mar 2006, p. 15. Havel's observations on the eve of the elections day seemed to be vindicated by the results. But whether the relative success of the Yanukovich's 'Party of the Regions' meant that 'darkness descend[ed] on Ukraine's new dawn,' as a headline in *The Guardian Weekly* put it, remains to be seen. Tom Parfitt, 'Orange Revolution turns blue: darkness descends on Ukraine's new dawn as in-fighting hands vote to old guard', *The Guardian Weekly* 31 Mar-6 Apr 2006, p. 1.

surprising. ‘The history of revolutions’, Arendt observed, ‘could be told in a parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a *fata morgana*.’⁶⁷ Even when the revolution seems relatively successful and non-violent, its future is far from certain. Moreover, the script of the Velvet Revolution often failed even in its initial stage; clearly, truth does not always prevail. This is the second, more sobering lesson of the Velvet Revolution. The revolutionary experience of 1989 also includes a Chinese solution to the problem of power, and there were many more failed attempts to challenge authoritarian rule ever since: it suffices to mention Azerbaijan in October 2003 and Uzbekistan in May 2005 as timely reminders of the fact that violence *can* destroy power. As Arendt cautioned:

we do not know where these developments will lead us, but we know, or should know, that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.⁶⁸

The guarded optimism of this article is based on the assumption that this fatal temptation is significantly weakened by the possibility, created by the script of the Velvet Revolution, of accepting defeat without resorting to violence. This is not the end of history. Whereas the script of the Velvet Revolution needs a happy end, history has no such ends, and the best we can hope for is to create possibilities for new beginnings.

The more recent headlines are, at any rate, more optimistic: Steven Lee Myers writes about ‘Ukraine on verge of new pro-Western coalition’, *New York Times*, 21 June 2006.

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 87.