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Explaining the Outcomes of Post-Soviet Revolutions: Insights from Kyrgyzstan and Georgia

Aram Terzyan



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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics and main features of post-revolution state-building in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. The findings suggest that while the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia led to significant political and economic changes, the 2005 and 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan did not produce the desired results. In contrast to Kyrgyzstan's "revolutionaries" the leader of the Georgian revolution Mikheil Saakashvili embarked on new Georgian identity construction. The core narratives dominating Saakashvili's discourse on post-revolution Georgia are as follows: "democratic Georgia" and "laboratory of democratic reforms," "stereotype breaker," "European Georgia," "peaceful Georgia," "powerful Georgia" and "security contributor," determined to homecoming to Europe. In contrast to Saakashvili's emphasis on escaping post-Soviet geopolitical space and gaining centrality in the EU-driven socio-political order, Kyrgyzstan's geographic remoteness and Central Asian legacies limited links to the West. A question remains of whether and to what extent the 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan and its leadership's ambitious agenda will translate into reality, thus leading the country to prosperity and stability.

Keywords: Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, color revolutions, regime change, state-building.

Introduction

The 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan has renewed scholarly interest in post-Soviet revolution studies. There is a lot of scholarship on the political and socioeconomic rationale behind post-Soviet revolutions. Given their 'anti-postSoviet' nature, there has been a tendency to regard 'colour revolutions' as major international setbacks to Putin's Russia (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). According to widely held beliefs, the 'colour revolutions' in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan sought to purge the Newly Independent States' ruling elites and political-economic systems of residual 'Sovietism' (Nikitin, 2007). In response to "democratic diffusion," Russia resorted to "authoritarian resistance," including a political, administrative and intellectual assault on the opposition and Western ideas of democracy promotion, integral part of which was the attempt to delegitimize the idea of liberal democracy itself (Ambrosio, 2007; Finkel and Brudny, 2012). Meanwhile, Russia's "indifference" to the 2018 "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia and the 2020 one in Kyrgyzstan prompts a rethink of such mainstream explanations. Arguably, in contrast to Georgia and Ukraine, the post-revolution Armenia's and Kyrgyzstan's political leaderships have committed themselves to further deepening ties with Russia, with no indication of pulling the countries out of the Russian influence.

In search for a parsimonious contribution to the political science literature on social protest, some works delve into the relationship between election and protests and thus apply

the collective action framework to ‘colour revolutions’. This approach posits that “electoral fraud can be a remarkably useful tool for solving the collective action problems faced by citizens in countries where governments are not appropriately restrained by the populace” (Tucker, 2007).

Admittedly, the above-mentioned revolutions were significantly fueled by the attempts of authoritarian leaders to sustain the long-term stability of their authoritarian regimes through electoral fraud and consolidation of autocratic control over society.

According to widely-held beliefs, the phenomenon of Color Revolutions describes a process in which the autocratic leadership of countries in transition is ousted following electoral fraud; achieved through non-violent, large-scale mass protests that are led by counter-elites and supported by international/Western assistance. Thereby, ‘success’ refers to a change of leadership; ‘attempt’ or ‘failure’ to the persistence of the incumbent leadership (Gerlach, 2014, p. 45).

Stephen Jones (2006) argues that there are four contexts to the Georgian revolutionary events of 2003: first, a popular and romantic yearning among Georgians for union with Europe; second, the dismal failings of the Shevardnadze regime; third, the combined impact of global economic models and Westernization in Georgia; and, fourth, the Soviet legacy (Jones, 2006).

Meanwhile, along with a series of economic and political factors, the 2005, 2010 and 2020 revolutions were considerably fueled by inter-ethnic tensions and clan politics.

In response to considerable debates over whether ‘colour revolutions’ produced real reform, Kennedy (2014) utilizes synthetic control method of comparative case studies to evaluate improvements following the revolutions. The results show divergent patterns. Ukraine increased democratic freedoms, but failed to control corruption. Georgia marginally improved the control of corruption, but little else. Kyrgyzstan appears to have become worse overall. The synthetic comparisons suggest that these divergent outcomes are largely due to influences present well in advance of political upheaval (Kennedy, 2014).

A question arises as to what the key factors are in facilitating or hindering post-revolution state-building in former Soviet Union countries. This study addressed the following research question: what are the factors that influenced the ‘success’ of the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and ‘failures’ of the 2005 and 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan?

The study builds its empirical argumentation by analyzing a broad variety of sources, including the newspaper articles, observations from political speeches, official documents, and interviews.

This paper is an in-depth case analysis that uses policy analysis and process tracing to examine main dynamics of post-revolution state-building in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Understanding post-Rose Revolution state-building in Georgia

The 2003 “Rose Revolution” in Georgia ushered Mikheil Saakashvili into power, who came to govern a nation ‘cracked open by three breakaway regions, racked by corruption and a tsunami of crime, reeling from two civil wars, pocked by constant electricity and water shortages and unable to collect taxes from its citizens ...’(Greenberg, 2004).

Shevardnadze’s rule was marred by economic downturn, growing poverty and rampant corruption. The situation had become politically tense since 2000, when Shevardnadze first lost international and then domestic support. His party, the Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG), started to fall apart (Gerlach, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the Georgian revolution’s leader Mikheil Sahakashvili denounced the plight of declining Georgia on all sides, committing his government to overturning the fundamental basis of the country. He depicted Georgia as a failed state that was “disintegrated, demoralized and humiliated. It was a country that had lost all attributes of statehood; a country where corruption, lawlessness and injustice reigned supreme; a country where ordinary citizens were routinely cheated by the state...” (Saakashvili, 2005a).

No wonder he hailed the “Rose Revolution” as a ‘mental revolution’, which would herald Georgia’s shift from a failed post-soviet state to a European democracy (Jones, 2014, p. 320).

Saakashvili used the following narratives to construct the post-revolution Georgia’s political identity:

- ”*European Georgia*” - as the EU’s *model neighbor*, which seeks to become European center and a hub for the region ‘in respect of trade, reforms, development, visual aspects and purely quality matters’ (Saakashvili, 2011a). In Saakashvili-led discourse Georgia’s rapprochement with the European Union and NATO was largely framed as an identity-driven foreign policy path and as a civilizational choice: “European and Georgian civilizations are so intertwined that it’s difficult to determine whether Europe is Georgia’s roots or on the contrary” (Saakashvili, 2008a).

No wonder Saakashvili asserted that “Europe above all - this is the main slogan of our foreign policy and it is the main landmark” (Saakashvili, 2007a). Studies show that Georgia’s devotion to the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration as a “sacred destiny” amongst the country’s elite has had significant foreign policy implications (Kakachia, Minesashvili, 2015).

Notably, Saakashvili would invariably emphasize Black Sea rather than Caucasian dimension of Georgia’s political identity, stating that Georgia is a Black Sea European nation, with a political system that is very similar to countries like Romania and Bulgaria (Saakashvili, 2010a). Clearly, in terms of its geographic location and broader cultural identity, Georgia is a typical Caucasian country. Nevertheless, Saakashvili consistently strived to reframe Georgia as a Black Sea country, in line with Bulgaria and Romania. Presumably, the latters’ success stories of EU and NATO memberships led Saakashvili to the conclusion, that Georgia would gain better acceptance by the Euro-Atlantic community as a Black Sea country. Put simply, given that the Black Sea is an inseparable part of Euro-Atlantic security system, Georgia’s membership of the Black Sea community would make it inherently European (Minesashvili, 2016, p. 26).

Therefore, the Georgian discourse would distance the country from conflict-prone and ‘backward’ Caucasus region- largely viewed as a ‘sphere of Russian influence’.

“*Democratic Georgia*” and “*laboratory of democratic reforms*” in the post-soviet space, which would serve as a living example of how governing transparently, through democratic principles, breeds lasting stability and shared prosperity (Saakashvili, 2010b, Saakashvili, 2007b).

Saakashvili’s discourse suggests that democracy promotion would be pivotal to boosting partnerships with Georgia’s most desired partners – European Union and NATO. Therefore, consistent and fundamental democratic reforms would enable Georgia to knock at the door of its natural home - the European Union (Saakashvili, 2012a). Saakashvili invariably stressed the necessity of big steps and groundbreaking reforms, given that Georgia was in no position to slow down, and there was no alternative to fundamental reforms: “either we will be successful or Georgia will not exist any longer” (Saakashvili, 2010c). Furthermore, he hailed democracy as a buffer against hostilities towards Georgia “Democracy defends our country and destroys our enemy” (Saakashvili, 2008b).

Therefore, democracy promotion, rather than military build-up would be key to addressing foreign policy threats posed to Georgia chiefly by its belligerent neighbor Russia. Most importantly, democracy and prosperity would equip Georgia with ‘soft’ tools for reintegrating separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia into a common Georgian state. ‘When we talk about what democracy means, it is a chance for Georgia to solve its problems, problems with our neighbors, problems associated with our conflicts’ (Saakashvili, 2005b). Democratic and *peaceful Georgia* would respond to military build-ups with programs to lift children out of poverty through access to modern technologies, with new hotels and new bicycling roads, new boulevards (Civil Georgia, 2011). Furthermore, peaceful Georgia “will never use force to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty” (Georgia Journal, 2010).

- “*Stereotype breaker Georgia*” as its “success destroys the myth that corruption is cultural and gives hope to reformers everywhere who aspire to clean up their public services” (Saakashvili, 2012b). Saakashvili’s Georgia had a special mission of conveying the idea of Georgia’s freedom - spread it in all of the post-Soviet space (Saakashvili, 2011b).

Saakashvili’s discourse suggests that the ‘mental revolution ‘made Georgia a role model for post-soviet countries. More specifically, it served as an ardent catalyst for the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine and “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan.’ Furthermore, Saakashvili regarded the “Rose Revolution” as ‘the second wave of Europe’s liberation, the first one being the velvet revolutions in Prague and Warsaw’ (Saakashvili, 2005c). Overall, Georgia has been portrayed as a front-runner in the region, which should be a model for neighboring countries (Minesashvili, 2016, p. 19).

- “*Powerful Georgia.*” Saakashvili vehemently questioned the notion of ‘tiny Georgia’, noting that the weight of a state should not be measured by the size of its territory or military capabilities. Rather, it is measured by its culture, the quality of democracy, and ability to undergo fundamental reforms. “In terms of land area, Georgia is twice the size of the Netherlands and bigger than Slovakia, but I have never read or heard of anyone referring to these countries as "tiny Netherlands" or "tiny Slovakia". I have never even heard "tiny Luxembourg", even though that country is about as big as central Tbilisi. These are the clichés that are gradually falling by the wayside” (Saakashvili, 2007c).

Therefore, his discourse suggests that Georgia is powerful enough to stand up for its sovereignty, reinforce its territorial integrity and would not cede even an inch of its territory (Saakashvili, 2006). Thus, Georgia was portrayed as a powerful country that would no longer carry the stigmas of a weak and puppet state, that would never fall to its knees since as ‘It is impossible to defeat Georgia’ (Saakashvili, 2007d).

Saakashvili redefined Georgia’s international actorness shifting it from passive recipient to an active player, from a security consumer, to a *security contributor*, particularly within the NATO. Not surprisingly Georgia deployed its armed forces in Afghanistan and undertook considerable measures to redefine its actorness in Euro-Atlantic security community (Saakashvili, 2012b).

Studies show that despite a series of setbacks and shortcomings Saakashvili’s rhetorical commitments tended to translate into reality (Aliyev, 2014). This particularly applies to the fight against corruption, poverty reduction, economic growth and overall democratic reforms. All this found its expression in Investment Climate Statement, 2014 of the US Department of State, which underlines Georgia’s sweeping economic reforms since the “Rose Revolution,” that moved the country from a near-failed state in 2003 to a relatively well-functioning market economy in 2014 (State.gov 2014) .

By 2013, Georgia could boast one of the lowest levels of perceived corruption in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, having improved to 55th out of 174 countries in the Transparency International index. According to Georgia’s Justice Ministry, from 2003 through 2010, roughly a thousand public officials—including a half-dozen members of Parliament and fifteen deputy ministers—faced corruption charges (Kupatadze, 2016).

Georgia’s broader anti-corruption agenda would be cited as a model for other countries. The World Bank praised Georgia’s anti-corruption, licensing, and other business-oriented reforms (Light, 2013). Since 2003, there have also been major improvements in police services. More specifically, major crime has declined dramatically, while Georgia’s organized crime groups effectively crushed early in Saakashvili’s tenure in office (Light, 2013)

There has been significant growth in state revenues in the immediate period after the „Rose Revolution“ due to improvements in the tax collection, decreasing corruption, restoration of authority over Adjara and increasing external financial aid. Original targets for tax revenues had to be revised upward twice in 2004 because of the boom in tax collection.

The government also gained a rise in state revenues through an important degree of increase of foreign aid to the country. As early as summer 2004, the government ensured the revitalization of the IMF program and restructuring of the country's dept. Afterwards, Georgia was granted credit and grants amounting to \$1 billion by donor countries (Aydin, 2011).

According to the "Economist": 'Apart of those [governments] of the Baltic countries, Mr. Saakashvili's may be the most accomplished post-Soviet governments now in office' and 'there have been big achievements, chief among them an impressive crackdown on corruption ... more tax is being collected, economic growth will reach double figures this year ...'(Economist, 2006).

To sum up, to construct new political identity for post-revolution Georgia, Saakashvili made extensive use of the following narratives: "democratic Georgia" and "laboratory of democratic reforms," "European Georgia," "Peaceful Georgia," "Stereotype breaker," "Powerful Georgia" and "Security contributor" (Terzyan, 2020). All these narratives were used to distance Georgia from "post-Sovietism" and prepare ground for its homecoming to Europe, in the form of accession into the European Union and NATO. These narratives considerably guided the Georgian government's actions, leading country to significant economic and political reforms.

Moving beyond Russia's authoritarian diffusion

"Rose" or "Mental revolution" significantly redefined the conceptions of friends and foe in Georgian political discourse. Regarding the Soviet legacy as the biggest impediment to Georgia's democratic development, Saakashvili explicitly prioritized country's full-scale Europeanization. Nevertheless, in early stages of his presidency he steered away from overly negative stances on Russia. Rather, Saakashvili started off with a positive note, stressing the importance of having good relationship with Russia and solve every issue through partnership and negotiations.

Yet, from the outset he put forth the issue of redefining asymmetric i.e., 'patron-client' relations and focused on building resilience against Russian imperial and coercive policies: 'We should have boundless trust that we as a country will never be defeated by [Russia's] 11th army [like in 1921 when Bolshevik Russia occupied Georgia] no matter in what shape it comes here. No alien force will ever be able to make us turn back. We should have boundless trust that all of us together have a common and very bright future. This trust will help us win a victory (Saakashvili, 2007e).

Saakashvili's discourse suggests that "reborn" Georgia would make most out of the partnerships with its strategic allies US, NATO, and the EU as a buffer against the Kremlin's imperial ambitions.

Saakashvili's position on Russia hardened as the latter took measures to suppress the emerging democracy in its neighborhood. More specifically, in March 2006 Russia decided to ban all imports of Georgian wine. Besides, a series of discriminatory measures were employed against the Georgian population in Russia (Terzyan, 2019, p. 133-134). The situation came to a head in August 2008, manifested in the eruption of Russian-Georgian war. The Russian simmering aggression towards Georgia brought Saakashvili to the conclusion that "old KGB followers decided to finish the so-called "Georgian project", our common attempt to create a modern, European, democratic, successful state in Caucasus (Terzyan, p. 134).

Remarkably, Saakashvili would frequently contrast Georgia's values with those of Russia, pointing to major gaps and differences. More specifically, 'Georgia is a democracy, unlike Russia, which is not a democracy' (Saakashvili, 2008c). He contrasted peaceful Georgia with 'aggressor' Russia, which suffers from imperialistic adventurism and unrealistic illusions of restoring the Russian empire (The Guardian, 2009).

Moreover, he hailed Russian-Georgian conflict as an ideological confrontation, in which the Kremlin abuses its status as a "great power" to coerce "a small and insubordinate neighbor. "In one word this is an ideological confrontation. From the subjective perspective of Russia's today's Government - Russia is a "street boy". Its leadership has criminal authority and Georgia all the sudden turned into a "best student" - a boy or a girl, he is getting the best marks, everybody likes, everybody cuddles, everybody want to help, everybody wants to open the way to him. Of course, he is not obeying the rules set by the "street boy". "The street boy" hits him once, second, third time it pushed him with a shoulder, then it cursed him... finally the "street boy" decided to hit him well, but the "best student" slept back his hand and poked "street boy" back... Of course, for the mentality of "street boy" this is absolutely unacceptable situation "(Saakashvili, 2010 d).

The five-day war against Georgia prompted Saakashvili to put Russia in the category of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union: "This is the first attempt since Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, when a large state tried to at first force a neighboring state to kneel

down and then tries to openly annex two regions, hence is trying to redraw borders in Europe' (Saakashvili, 2008d).

Essentially, Saakashvili consistently strived to put Russian-Georgian conflict in the framework of Russia-West/EU confrontation, to garner support from Western allies.

He asserted that the underlying objective of the Russian aggression was to destroy, occupy and capture Georgian territories as an episode of the European history (Saakashvili, 2008e).

Thus, Europe had a crucial mission of standing up for 'oldest Europeans'. Saakashvili would repeatedly contend that Georgia's accession into EU and NATO would produce a geopolitical breakthrough and significantly constrain Russia's mounting assertiveness. 'Our goal - and I have already appealed to all the concerned leaders - is accelerated integration into NATO to prevent reoccurrence of past mistakes and Georgia's accelerated integration into European Union. We are part of the democratic world and the democratic world should embrace Georgia' (Civil Georgia, 2008).

Not surprisingly, Saakashvili frequently contrasted Europe with Russia framing it as a confrontation between the rule of law and the rule of fear (Civil Georgia, 2010). The Georgian political elite has consistently fed the "clash of civilizations" narrative asserting that the Russian model will eventually fail as it is not compatible with the modern era (Minesashvili, 2016, p. 22).

In conclusion, the Rose revolution in Georgia produced major foreign policy breakthroughs. Saakashvili contrasted 'European' and 'democratic' Georgia with 'imperial' and 'coercive' Russia and prescribed the path that would pull the country out of the Russian autocratic influence and lead to its homecoming to the European family of democracies.

Understanding the causes of the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan

Throughout the 1990s, democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan would provide grounds for optimism. Notably, the country would be largely referred to as "an island of democracy" in Central Asia (Akiner, 2016, p. 13). The major achievements, with some reservations, included freedom of speech, freedom of press, supported by active civil society, political opposition, along with the strides towards economic liberalization (Juraev, 2008, pp. 254-255).

The first pro-democratic president Askar Akayev introduced new democratic institutions and replaced the Soviet *nomenklatura* (a political and administrative upper class) with a new generation of young politicians. Along with political reforms, Akayev's

government introduced comprehensive market reforms despite their insufficiency in terms of producing significant economic outputs (Haerpfer and Kizilova, 2020). Nevertheless, democratization in Kyrgyzstan was not a linear process, with the country constantly finding itself in disarray compounded by the surges of ethnic clashes.

The constitutional amendments adopted by the national referenda in 1996, 1998 and 2000 significantly increased the presidential power while limiting that of the parliament. Through constitutional changes, Akayev ran for third term as president in 2000, amid mounting public discontent (Temirkulov, 2010). In effect, the 2005 parliamentary elections were marred by serious irregularities, including vote buying (Heathershaw, 2009, p. 304). The mass mobilization that picked up speed in the aftermath of the elections, served as a “catalyst” for overthrowing Akayev’s regime.

As a matter of fact, one of the main driving forces behind the Kyrgyz revolutions was the clan politics that divided north and south in the struggle for power. Overall, the clan hierarchy has been an unmistakable characteristic of Central Asian political systems for centuries. Kyrgyzstan is no exception. The country’s elite groups have long cleaved along North-South clan, with greater Russian influence in the North and stronger Uzbek presence in the South. Akayev belonged to the northern power base, meaning that the South had a particular interest in having him overthrown. Besides, the President had “northern” rivals (Hale, 2006, p. 315).

The social discontent also stemmed from presidential family’s full-scale involvement in critical political and economic decision making across the country. According to widely - held beliefs, Akayev’s wife was strongly involved in personnel policies with her powerful influence over the distribution of resources. Moreover, the president’s eldest daughter supervised the presidential party “Alga Kyrgyzstan” (Temirkulov, 2010, p. 591). Not surprisingly, the political regime of Kyrgyzstan is often regarded as neo-patrimonial (Laurelle, 2012). That said, it is not uncommon for political relations to be based on private interests, personal connections, favors, promises, and privileges. This leads to blurred lines between personal and universal gains. This phenomenon is prevalent in authoritarian regimes, where the incumbents rely on a formal bureaucracy and patronage networks to sustain their power (Marat, 2012).

The crackdown on opposition leaders, protestors and independent mass media was among the crucial factors that triggered massive protests. Much of the direct political

background leading to the 2005 events (known as Tulip revolution) stemmed from the Aksy crisis in 2002. Even though the events received little media coverage, the opposition capitalized on them in terms of undermining the legitimacy of the ruling regime (Lewis, 2008, pp 267). Overall, the events of Aksy served as a prelude to the Tulip revolution. In 2002, people from Aksy region in Kyrgyzstan vigorously protested politically motivated arrest of their Parliament member. In terms of their organization and scale, the protests were unprecedented in Central Asia (Radnitz, 2005).

Unlike Georgia and Ukraine, there was not a single individual, who would be perceived as a primary leader of the opposition forces before the revolution. In effect, the Tulip Revolution was rural and driven by an ad hoc opposition led by regional elites rather than a unified opposition organized via NGO networks (Hess, 2010, p. 32). Prior to the revolution, various opposition groups emerged and tried to take advantage of the popular discontent over authoritarian malpractices, including rising social inequality and declining living standards. Nevertheless, opposition parties have always been markedly weak, mostly due to regional rivalry and clan politics (Tudoroiu, 2007).

Interestingly, the domestic change of 2005 has been largely viewed as more of a coup d'état than a revolution. Even the President Bakiyev, the primary victor of the event, avoided framing it as the "Tulip Revolution," while calling it "March 2005 events" (Bond and Koch, 2010). Some commentators contend that the Tulip Revolution produced non-democratic results and that it was "elite, not mass instigated" (Juraev, 2008). The lack of a strong opposition, the government's inability to carry out fundamental reforms in terms of addressing clan politics, along with persisting north-south divisions, were among the critical factors that led to a new revolution in 2010.

The rationale behind the 2010 revolution was like that of the 2005 one. The new rulers headed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev came up with a promising development program. They promised to defeat corruption and nepotism inherited from Akayev's regime. Nevertheless, the democratic promises never translated into reality and five years later Bakiyev faced Akayev's destiny (Collins, 2011).

Bakiyev's regime tended to heavily rely on particularistic ties based on family and kinship. Local and regional divisions became even more salient. The president sought to radically redress the dominance of northern elites over the country's politics by promoting southerners, mainly from his native Jalal-Abad region (Engvall, 2011, p. 58). Restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and independent media deteriorated and reached an

unprecedented high level. A draft constitution was prepared in November 2006, and subsequently passed by Parliament. This was regarded as a victory for opposition groups as the new constitution included measures that would limit the presidential power. Nevertheless, a month later, pro-presidential supporters pushed for amendments, that essentially reasserted president's power (Gullette, 2010, p. 93).

In essence the situation preceding the second revolution was not much different from the one that led to Akayev's decline, characterized by rampant corruption, declining living standards, rising poverty, elite divisions, along with an extensive crackdown on free media (Kubatbek, 2012, p. 61). Since 2008, electricity shortages and forced restrictions became a daily reminder of the government's ineptitude, corruption, and regional vulnerability (Wooden, 2014).

Bakiyev's victory in 2009 elections, prompted his newly strengthened regime into taking further repressive measures. The democratic opposition began to rely more on informal institution of the 'kurultai' or popular assembly—a method of bringing people together with deeper cultural roots and more influence (especially among the rural and small-town ethnic-Kyrgyz majority) (Collins, 2011).

Like the events following the Tulip Revolution, the ouster of the central authority led to violence against minority communities, including ethnic Uzbeks. Meanwhile, the interethnic violence of 2010 took an unprecedented form. It resembled the tragedy that had occurred 20 years before- in the summer of 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (BTI, 2020). The hostilities were concentrated primarily in Uzbek-populated Osh Province, and to a less extent in Jalalabad and Batken provinces bordering Uzbekistan in southern Kyrgyzstan's portion of the Fergana Valley (*Ibid*).

Along with a series of internal factors, the geopolitical setting surrounding the country became more complex before the 2010 conflict. Kyrgyzstan needed to manage intra-regional relations while balancing the rivalries and ambitions of extra-regional players. Kyrgyzstan consistently strived to achieve a reasonable balance, while being a member of various regional organizations, such as the Tehran-led Economic Cooperation Organization, the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States and affiliated groups, the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, various Turkish initiatives, as well as the Western-led NATO Partnership for Peace program and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe. At this point Kyrgyzstan's main partners were Russia and the United States with

their specific and quite often mutually incompatible agendas. Meanwhile, China was smoothly emerging as a significant regional power. This complex situation fed the narratives of conspiracy theories, that were often used to explain the upheavals of 2010 (Akiner, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is hard to overestimate the significance of geopolitical factors. Essentially, Kyrgyzstan's neo-patrimonial rule, characterized by personalization of power and monopolization of the country's scarce resources was the main driving force behind the revolutions. The situation was compounded by north-south clan-based politics, deep animosities between ethnic communities and a complexity of geopolitical setting.

Violent protests flared up in October 2020, after the contested parliamentary elections. As in 2005 and 2010, the unrest in the capital was accompanied by a turmoil in key provincial cities (Helf, 2020).

Pro-government parties representing the interests of the 'southern' group won the elections. Supporters of the defeated parties rallied to protest the irregularities documented during the campaign and demanded that the result be annulled (Schmitz, 2021). Even though the allegations of vote-buying are not new in Kyrgyzstan, this time they prompted the Kyrgyz society into action. The day after the election, demonstrators ransacked Bishkek's White House (European Parliament, 2020).

The turmoil resembled the 2005 events given that protests emerged as a reaction to flawed parliamentary elections. In terms of its pace and violent forms, these events have much more in common with the turmoil of 2010. However, this time the opposition leaders did not even ride the wave of demonstrations. They were slow to take strides towards taking the matter into their hands (Engvall, 2020). The revolution was finally hijacked by the politicians from the old elite. Namely, over the course of ten days Sadyr Japarov managed to escape from prison and rose to power (Umarov, 2020).

Kyrgyzstan's presidential election and constitutional referendum held on 10 January 2021 reportedly represent a provisional endpoint of a volatile phase that has gripped the country since October 2020. Sadyr Japarov's victory and his agenda that is focused on establishing stability and prosperity, not least through switching to a presidential system of government provides grounds for cautious optimism (Schmitz, 2021).

Beyond the revolutions: The challenges of post-revolution state-building

The personalization of power in Central Asia has led to a situation, where state-building depends on personal decisions and performances of handful of individuals, rather than on well-established and functioning institutions. Given the authoritarian context within which

Central Asian nation building has been unfolding, the distinction between institutional and political dynamics is often blurred, i.e., institutions are frequently politicized, and political objectives are institutionalized (Kamrava, 2019). Thus, one of the most formidable challenges facing Kyrgyzstan is “transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms, and contingent solutions . . . into relationships that are reliably known, regularly practiced and normatively accepted” (Uzul, 2010).

While, on paper, Kyrgyzstan’s leaders have created institutions that are mostly in line with international standards, the reality is quite different. The weakness of state institutions and continuous drawbacks in state-building are well evidenced by the three revolutions faced by Kyrgyzstan.

Essentially, there are three major actors, that have been involved in state-building in Kyrgyzstan: the government, the international community, and local civil society organizations. Following inter-communal clashes in 2010, the country has received significant support in the form of international peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs (Lottholz, 2018). Relations between Kyrgyzstan and the EU intensified after the overthrow of the Bakiyev regime. The EU opened a full-fledged Delegation in Bishkek the same year and has proclaimed that it is committed to supporting reforms and post-conflict reconciliation (European External Action Service, 2012).

In contrast to its regional neighbors, Kyrgyzstan stands out due to its relatively vocal civil society that played a critical role in deposing President Akayev during the Tulip revolution. Meanwhile, much of that activism was concentrated in urban areas and civil society organizations were largely dependent on donor funding. The initial liberal orientation of President Akayev made Kyrgyzstan the main Central Asian target of the Western support aimed at promoting a Western-style civil society advancement across the country (Pierobon, 2018, p. 114). Recent years have seen a variety of civil society engagement, beyond donor-funded NGOs. Voluntary civic groups have formed around the issues of environmental protection, while the civic activism has been on the rise. Nevertheless, “such activities have often been sporadic, short-term and incapable of sustained engagement on salient public issues where longer-term activities would be necessary” (BTI, 2020).

The US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, the European Commission (EC), and the United Nations with the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) were among

the most active donors (Terzyan, 2021). Notably, the government has not been actively involved in the implementation of development programs due to the ruling elites' reluctance to implement policies that could adversely affect their personal and political interests (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 144).

Despite the government's efforts at demonstrating significant accomplishments to donors and international community in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, the underlying issues have not been resolved (Lottholz, 2018). In the aftermath of the March 2005 overthrow of Askar Akaev, International Crisis Group (ICG) report framed Kyrgyzstan as 'a faltering state' and warned that without significant international support 'there is a real risk that... the country will drift into irreversible criminality and permanent low-level violence' (ICG, 2005).

Admittedly, the challenges of post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan have been compounded by inter-ethnic tensions, with the Uzbek community not identifying itself with the state of Kyrgyzstan. It has different and sometimes contrasting perceptions on political and social reconstruction. These historically rooted cleavages cause serious problems in state-building. The outbreak of interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Jalalabad in late May 2010 and ensuing the eruption of violence in Osh region on June 9 seemed to reinforce worst fears about Kyrgyzstan's plight (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 139).

The government's attempts at dealing with the challenges of post-conflict peacebuilding have been reflected in the 'Conception for Strengthening National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations'- national policy strategy adopted by the presidential administration in 2013. The commitment to restoring interethnic trust and harmony has been reflected in the Conception's core values of: 1) acknowledgement of unity in diversity, including ethnic, cultural, linguistic, age and other differences in different spheres of social life; 2) appreciation of the historical-cultural heritage of the people of Kyrgyzstan, of the history of the state, the conservation of national values developed over centuries and ideals of unity, the uniqueness of ethnicities...(Lottholz, 2018, p. 9). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, in December 2019, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes visited Kyrgyzstan and found that ethnic relations "remain fragile" and that factors including "underrepresentation of minorities" and "unfair treatment by law enforcement" could "bring the level of inter-ethnic tension to a breaking point" (HRW, 2021).

Not only do the divisions along regional, tribal and clan lines negatively impact the cohesiveness of the Kyrgyz nation, but they also give rise to a series of socio-economic and

political problems. Clan politics strongly undermines state-building efforts. Long-standing clan divisions became particularly salient under former President Askar Akayev's presidency from mid-1990s onwards, as well as after the 2005 revolution when the struggle for power and economic resources became more intense (Berdikeeva, 2006).

Moreover, the lack of national unity and national ideology in Kyrgyzstan considerably contributed to the ongoing divisions of the society. National ideologies have been a crucial element of state-building in Central Asia, that helped the ruling elites to mobilize the society and alleviate intra-elite frictions. However, as Marat (2008) aptly notes "in their efforts gain dominance, the ruling elites ran into a dilemma typical of many developing states: while increasing their authority against competing forces, they failed to enact effective state policies" (Marat, 2008, p. 13).

The interplay between formal and informal institutions is another typical characteristic of state-building in Central Asia. Notably, traditional informal institutions, such as Aksakals and religious leaders (imams), have played a significant role in local communities across Kyrgyzstan. This is particularly true for the rural areas, where informal leaders have a strong reputation and a powerful influence. Aksakals are involved in conflict mediation between cross-border villages. Local governments tend to use Aksakals to mobilize voters during elections or support a particular candidate. Aksakals are also the ones who mediate between disputing parties within Aksakals courts. Aksakals courts were formalized in 1993, and previously, they existed as a pre-Soviet mechanism of a customary law (Sheranova, 2020).

Beyond this, there is a series of other factors that pose formidable challenges to state-building in Kyrgyzstan, including organized crime, contestation of power and resources among various groups, and the weakness of the state in the areas where border delimitation is yet to be reached with neighboring countries (BTI, 2020).

Notably, in 2021, Kyrgyzstan's status declined from "partly free" to "not free" given that the aftermath of the flawed parliamentary elections entailed significant political violence and intimidation (Freedom in the World, 2021). According to Freedom House report (2021), after two revolutions that ousted the authoritarian presidents, governing coalitions have proven unstable, while corruption remained rampant. The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan consolidated power over several years, using the justice system to suppress

political opponents and civil society critics. Moreover, the unrest surrounding the annulled 2020 parliamentary elections led to significant political upheaval (*ibid*).

Overall, the episodes of relative stability and provisional reforms are not testaments to fundamental changes. The progress in state-building remains limited, with the country's heavy reliance on international donors, and weakness of democratic institutions.

Conclusion

This paper examined various factors that influence the ‘success’ and ‘failure’ of the post-Soviet revolutions. The findings suggest that while the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia led to significant political and economic changes, the 2005 and 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan did not produce the desired results. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan has turned into the Central Asian “island of instability”. The situation is compounded by deep rooted inter-ethnic tensions, the prevalence of traditional informal institutions, and weakness of democratic institutions, as well as country’s heavy reliance on international donors.

In contrast to Kyrgyzstan’s “revolutionaries” the leader of the Georgian revolution Mikheil Saakashvili embarked on new Georgian identity construction. The core narratives dominating Saakashvili’s discourse on post-revolution Georgia are as follows: “democratic Georgia” and “laboratory of democratic reforms,” “stereotype breaker,” “European Georgia,” “peaceful Georgia,” “powerful Georgia” and “security contributor,” determined to homecoming to Europe. In contrast to Saakashvili’s emphasis on escaping post-Soviet geopolitical space and gaining centrality in the EU-driven socio-political order, Kyrgyzstan’s geographic remoteness and Central Asian legacies limited links to the West. The presidential elections and constitutional referendum of 2021 have provided grounds for cautious optimism. Further research is essential for answering the question of whether and to what extent the 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan and its leadership’s ambitious agenda will translate into reality, thus leading the country to prosperity and stability.

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