

RSC BLOG

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Brace Yourselves, Spring is Coming Is the Post-Soviet Space Headed for its own “Arab Spring”?

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The Lessons of the Arab Spring

Five years ago, on January 25, 2011, a revolution erupted in the largest Arab country, marking a watershed in the history of what soon came to be known as the “Arab Spring.” As the world is still struggling to cope with the consequences of the processes unleashed by these events, it seems that trouble is brewing in another turbulent region, the former Soviet Union. Only within a couple of months we have witnessed protests in Moldovan capital,¹ unrest in the regions of Azerbaijan,² as well as announcement of snap election in Kazakhstan.³ All this against a background of plunging oil prices and currency devaluations.

And there are reasons to believe that there is yet more instability to come: dropping commodity prices, the economic decline of regional powerhouse Russia, as well as the continuing conflict between Russia and the West. Post-Soviet regimes may be headed for trouble, just like the Middle Eastern corrupt autocracies were five years ago.

Today, much of the optimism which initially accompanied the Arab Spring has given way to a debate on what lessons should be drawn. While these debates will probably continue for decades, it is hard to deny that the Arab Spring has confirmed certain truths, considered obvious to political scientists and historians, but often ignored by the politicians. Thus, it showed that the stability associated with autocracies is elusive, as several entrenched authoritarian regimes were either overthrown by protests or descended into the chaos of civil war and sectarian strife. This lesson may soon prove vital for the countries of the former Soviet Union.

The fate of an autocratic government is notoriously difficult to predict. Political scientists know that in a democracy, the results of elections are often unpredictable; but almost everything else is: whoever comes to power, fundamental aspects of the political system is unlikely to change.

¹ Ciorici, Dumitru, “Explanation: What is happening in Moldova,” Blog post, 21 January 2016.

<https://medium.com/@dumitruciorici/explanation-what-happens-in-moldova-9ca3d94d36ca#9cn6ovoqy>

² De Waal, Thomas, “Azerbaijan’s Perfect Storm,” *Carnegie Europe*, 19 January 2016.

<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62501>

³ Auyezov, Olzhas, “Kazakhstan election: Snap poll called as President Nursultan Nazarbayev bids to extend his 27-year rule,” *The Independent*, 20 January 2016.

www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/kazakhstan-election-snap-poll-called-as-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-bids-to-extend-his-27-year-a6823971.html

Autocratic governments are the opposite of that: the only thing that can be predicted is the outcome of elections, as the ruling party always wins, and often with by same percentage. But everything else is difficult to predict: an autocratic regime may last for decades or it may collapse in a matter of days, and this depends on a number of factors, which are virtually impossible to account for. History is full of examples of autocratic regimes that seemed invincible but disintegrated in a matter of days. And yet, some autocracies, which seem to be on the verge of collapse, manage to survive for decades.

Therefore, making predictions when it comes to every particular case may be quite a challenge. But, when it comes to assessing the situation in the Post-Soviet region as a whole, there are certain trends which are difficult to ignore, even though they may manifest themselves differently in case of each post-Soviet country. And this is where analogies with the Arab Spring may prove helpful.

Regimes that became the victims of the Arab Spring were quite diverse, but they had certain important similarities. All of them were highly personalized authoritarian regimes with long serving leaders (or successors appointed by the previous leaders). Most of them were democratic in form, as they imitated democratic procedures, such as elections, but did not have any real political competition. And most of them were characterized by a high degree of corruption.

If there is a part of the world that has a high concentration of personalized corrupt autocracies comparable to Middle East and North Africa, it is the post-Soviet space. The majority of post-Soviet countries have either personalized authoritarian regimes with long-serving leaders, or hybrid regimes floating between authoritarianism and democracy, and virtually in all cases, they exhibit high levels of institutionalized corruption. Moreover, like the majority of Middle Eastern regimes, most post-Soviet governments have had limited success in modernizing their societies and economies, something which certain authoritarian governments in other parts of the world have accomplished.

Why Now?

Even in the best of times, the majority of post-Soviet countries faced serious issues when it came to efficient government and economic development. Corruption, inequality, and technological backwardness plagued most former Soviet countries throughout the post-Soviet period, even at times

when the global economic trends were favorable to them. However, today, as the commodity prices are plunging, the developing world economies are slowing down, and the Russian economy is facing its most serious crisis in decades, the post-Soviet countries are probably facing the most serious challenges since the collapse of the USSR.

The commodity-exporting countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan) are facing the consequences of the global drop in commodity prices. While it is virtually impossible to predict how long the current drop in oil prices will last, most experts agree that even if the prices rebound they are unlikely to reach the levels of several years ago. This is bad news for the economies and political systems of those post-Soviet countries, whose economies are based on oil and gas exports.

Of course, most governments claim that they have used the oil windfall profits to modernize their countries and they are fully equipped to face the hard times, but the current drop in oil prices has already put those claims to a test. Both the population and the state apparatus are used to a high level of government spending that kept the economy afloat and helped to increase the quality of life. Without the oil windfall profits it would be difficult for these governments to continue buying the loyalties of their populations, as they had done in the past.

Moreover, during the windfall years, the government apparatus in these counties has been inflated, and to keep it afloat, the governments will need to be extracting more financial resources from the population, something which would hardly increase their popularity.

The countries that do not enjoy the blessing (or the curse) of vast hydrocarbon reserves, however, do not fare much better. These countries benefitted either from transit of other countries' hydrocarbon resources (e.g. in the cases of Belarus and Russia), or from exporting cheap labor to other countries, most of all Russia (Armenia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, to a lesser extent Uzbekistan). Both transit benefits and labor migration played a role similar to the hydrocarbon profits, keeping the economy afloat and helping the governments to fill their budgets without resorting to modernization and reform.

Labor migration also has the added benefit of removing a significant part of young male population, which, had it stayed in the country, could have become the main force of protest.

Had Mohamed Bouazizi been born in Armenia or Tajikistan, instead of Tunisia, for example, he would probably never set himself on fire, as he would have been able to find a job in Russia. Hence, the rulers of these countries were less likely to repeat the fate of Tunisia's Ben-Ali.

But as the Russian economy is contracting and the ruble is plunging to new lows, labor migration to Russia is losing its economic sense. If this process continues, soon some post-Soviet governments will be faced with the drying up of the migrant's remittances, exacerbated by an influx of angry young men with no jobs.

Autocrat's Dilemma

In the new reality, shaped by falling oil prices and a failing Russian economy, the political elites of the post-Soviet countries will find themselves facing various internal challenges. Whether the regime in a given country is relatively democratic or outright autocratic, and whether its foreign policy orientation is pro-Western, pro-Russian, "multi-vector," "complementarist," or isolationist, it will still be affected by these developments. Endemic corruption is a major part of the political and economic systems in the majority of post-Soviet countries.

And, as the economic situation is worsening, the price that corruption exerts on the country is rising, and the tolerance for corrupt practices among the population will be running out at some point. The "Electric Yerevan" protests against the rising electricity price in Armenia or the truck-drivers' protests against the "PLATON" system in Russia, may be the most well-publicized cases of social protest in the post-Soviet space in 2015, but they are by far not the only ones.

In both these cases, protests stopped short of airing political demands, but today in Moldova we are witnessing how anti-corruption slogans are giving way to political demands. It may be a matter of time, before this model starts reproducing itself in other parts of the post-Soviet space. In the case of Moldova, the protests may have been facilitated by a relatively democratic political system, as well as by the fact that the country strives to meet European democratic standards, which means staying clear of repression.

However, it does not mean that the countries that have more closed, repressive authoritarian systems are immune from such developments. On the contrary, those regimes that have suppressed the

opposition, free press and civil society, have deprived themselves of a valve that could have been used for channeling discontent into a less dangerous form, and thus, may find themselves in even greater danger.

In 2016, many post-Soviet leaders will be facing a dilemma typical for an autocratic ruler. Should they "tighten the screws," as the expression goes, i.e. intensify the repression, they may face an aggressive backlash of an enraged population that has been drawn to desperation by the worsening economy. Should they try to attempt political liberalization and economic reform, they risk creating the impression of weakness, losing support of their own supporters and strengthening their opposition.

While repressive measures may sometimes prove efficient in averting danger to the regime in the short term, they often fail to prevent an explosion in the long run, unless the government undertakes reforms addressing the fundamental problems that have led to the protests.

Whether the political elites of the post-Soviet countries will be able to deal with this complicated situation depends on whether they are able to learn the right lessons from the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, so far it seems that for many of the post-Soviet leaders have drawn the wrong lessons from it.

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