

# Authoritarian Difussion and the Failure of the "Colour Revolutions" to Spread

Written by Davide Giordanengo

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### Introduction

When the so-called "colour revolutions" swept across Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 onwards, the fall of corrupt and authoritarian governments was hailed as the beginning of the "third wave" of democratisation. However, these uprisings eventually led to an increase in the collaboration between authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space in order to avoid the further spread of democracy within their borders, a process which has been labelled "authoritarian diffusion". This essay situates itself within the scholarly debate around the causes of the substantial failure of the colour revolution to propagate in other FSU countries. It will argue that a process of authoritarian diffusion has in fact occurred in the post-Soviet space, and has managed to prevent the advance of democracy. However, this can only explain partially the outcome, and more factors, such as domestic variables, are to be considered.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first one will analyse what is authoritarian diffusion and how this concept may be useful in explaining Russian behaviour. It will do so by applying to the theoretical framework of authoritarian diffusion proposed by Ambrosio (2010), which highlights the role of appropriateness and effectiveness as influencing factors. The second section will examine how relationship among Russia and the other states of the FSU in the aftermath of the colour revolutions has been shaped by authoritarian diffusion. The third part will finally tackle the limits of employing authoritarian diffusion as the unique explanation, instead emphasising the role of internal structures of the recipient states, and the possibility of backlash entailed in the process of diffusion. It will then conclude by underlining that diffusion *per se* is not a one-way process, but the complex result of multiple layers.

### The spread of authoritarianism

The unsuccessful spread of the colour revolution and the repressive measures that illiberal regimes have undertaken in response have prompted some scholars to argue that a "democratic recession" (Diamond 2008) or a "backlash against democracy aid" (Carothers 2006) is occurring. Gat, for instance, argues that the rise of "authoritarian capitalist great powers" poses a more dangerous threat to the liberal world order than the growth of radical Islamic movements (Gat 2007). However, some of these claims are exaggerated, and arise primarily by a misconception about the real nature and aims behind the diffusion of authoritarianism.

The concept of "authoritarian diffusion" refers to any effort undertaken by an external actor to influence the domestic politics of a recipient state in order to favour an illiberal party and/or government. Therefore, the attempt need not to be intentional, i.e. as part of a coherent strategy directed towards helping a particular actor, as diffusion can also happen in a more indirect way, though inspiration or normative influences (Ambrosio 2010; Van Soest 2015). Even though some scholars treat diffusion merely as a mechanism of "uncoordinated interdependence" (Elkins 2005), for the purpose of this essay diffusion will also entails instances of direct influence or coercion toward a particular target state. This conceptualisation is helpful in that it accounts for "change agents that spread new practices" (Strang and Soule 1998: 271).

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The concept of authoritarian diffusion is here distinguished from the more general idea of "autocracy promotion", or "autocracy export", as Burnell (2010) frames it. This process does not require the intentional spread of authoritarianism abroad as an ideology, as some scholars instead claim (Silitski 2010; Vanderhill 2013; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016). The propagation of authoritarian practices can be best described rather as a "self-serving project", which "helps to safeguard authoritarian powers' developmental and geostrategic interests as well as to prevent democracy at home" (Von Soest 2015: 629). Authoritarian states do not attempt to create an alternative normative framework which can serve as the basis for a legitimization of their behaviour at the international level. Although profoundly inconsistent with one another (Deyermond 2016), Russian justifications for meddling in its "near abroad" are mirroring Western discourses rather than proposing a competing narrative.

Ambrosio (2010) has proposed an effective conceptual framework of authoritarian diffusion that will here be employed in order to analyse the behaviour of Russia. He suggests that authoritarian diffusion be understood as a normative mechanism, whereby authoritarian great powers are "creating global conditions under which democracy promotion is blunted and state sovereignty [...] is entrenched" rather than "aggressively spreading a particular form of government" (Ambrosio 2010: 376). Ambrosio identifies two components of authoritarian diffusion. The first one is appropriateness, which refers to the normative process whereby the spread of a model of government worldwide increases its legitimacy and may induce other states to adopt or strengthen it. The second element he outlines is effectiveness, i.e. the degree of efficiency of a governing system.

Russian behaviour appears to be consistent with this theoretical framework. The growing assertiveness of Russia in its "near abroad" following the colour revolutions has contributed to strengthen the image of Russia as a "re-emerging great power" (Kanet 2007). The successful operations that Russia has managed to undertake abroad function as a factor of external legitimization of its domestic politics, namely a strong, authoritarian presidency that suppress dissent in the name of internal stability whilst at the same time achieving important foreign policy goals. If a strong Russia continues to act relatively without constraints within its sphere of influence and to prevent effort at democratisation both at home and in the "near abroad", other non-democratic countries may be induced to resist democratisation as well.

Effectiveness is another mechanism which can be highlighted in the analysis of authoritarian diffusion applied to Russia. The strong grip on power that President Vladimir Putin has demonstrated since his election in 2000 has been an element of inspiration for other illiberal countries in the FSU. The colour revolutions provide again an example of how autocrats in the region have learnt from Russia how to hold on power, and have turned to Russia for help. As Vanderhill (2013) rightly argues, both Belarusian president Lukashenko and Ukrainian presidential candidate Yanukovich developed strong ties with United Russia, Putin's political party, and used similar strategies to rig elections to their advantage.

## **Russia and the colour revolutions**

Having assessed the relevance of appropriateness and effectiveness as explanatory factors, the essay will now turn to the analysis of relations among Russia and countries in the post-Soviet space and will try to demonstrate that authoritarian diffusion was pivotal in counter-democratisation efforts.

Moscow saw the challenges to friendly governments following the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as a plot orchestrated by the United States in order to weaken Russia, disguised as democracy promotion (Wilson 2010), and feared the outcomes for two reasons. Firstly, Moscow was worried that the rise to power of pro-Western regimes would result in a rapprochement of these states with the West and in closer relations with Western institutions such as NATO and the EU. Secondly, it feared a spill-over effect within Russia itself, especially during the electoral period of 2007-2008, when elites were concerned with assuring a smooth transition towards Putin's successor (Horvath 2011; Duncan 2013). Thus, the colour revolutions were interpreted by Russia as a potential existential threat both to its domestic and its foreign policies.

According to Von Soest, "it is in situations of (perceived) crisis abroad [...] that authoritarian powers provide deliberate support" to fellow non-democratic states (Von Soest 2015: 631). For this reason, it is not surprising that in

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the wake of the colour revolutions Moscow attempted to strengthen ties with other authoritarian regimes within the post-Soviet region, engaging in a sort of "diffusion-proofing" (Koesel and Bunce 2013). A pivotal role in this regard was played by political parties, especially by United Russia, Putin's party. Roberts (2015) highlights that in Central Asia what he calls a "hierarchical party system" has emerged which is based on the model of Russian party system, where there is an unequal competition among parties which favours the ruling party, while "soft" opposition parties exist only to give the system an appearance of legitimacy and pluralism. This model has proved successful in Russia, where the liberal opposition against Putin has been constantly marginalised, whereas opposition parties elected in the parliament are compliant with the regime (Sakwa 2008).

The effectiveness of the "Russian system" (Shevtsova 2012) has induced other authoritarian governments to adopt it, notably Uzbekistan, where President Karimov enjoys links with all the parties represented in parliament (Roberts 2015), and Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan. The latter is a clear example of the process of authoritarian norm diffusion, since the ruling party is inspired by United Russia, from the structural organisation to the formation of youth group modelled on Nashi, the pro-Kremlin youth association created in order to tame young political activists. The Kazakhstani ruling party, Nur Otan, has adapted to the changing environment following the colour revolutions in an attempt to avoid the spread of democratisation. Thus, it has allowed party primaries and committees to reinforce the ties with civil society, as United Russia had done a few years before (Roberts 2015).

Furthermore, Russia acted as a "black night", a negative external actor interfering with the domestic politics of another country, usually to help the regime bolstering the elections by providing financial aids or political assistance (Levitsky and Way 2010). Tolstrup (2015) has demonstrated how Russia intervened in the elections of Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine in order to support the pro-Kremlin candidates. He underlines how elections represent a moment of uncertainty when the survival of a regime is in danger, a fact that would explain why Russia felt the need to lend support to generally stable autocracies. This account shows how authoritarian regimes were threatened by what they perceived as a wave of democratisation, and learnt from Russia and even acquiesced to direct Russian intervention in their countries.

A more indirect mechanism of authoritarian diffusion is the lack of effective electoral laws in post-Soviet states. The countries of the FSU have borrowed or adapted their electoral laws from Soviet-era or Russian regulations, whilst disregarding suggestions and recommendations from the OSCE and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (Bader 2014). This process of normative diffusion does demonstrate the indirect appeal that Russian authoritarianism exercised over the newly formed states, particularly seducing for elites seeking to maintain power and stability. The adoption of these laws prevented the organisations of free elections and thus the formation of civil society movements and opposition parties that could challenge the incumbent regimes. Interestingly, from Bader's (2014) account it appears that the countries which were more susceptible to OSCE recommendations or held at least one competitive election, such as Georgia and Ukraine, were also swept by popular uprisings at the beginning of the 2000s, a factor underlining the importance of electoral laws and normative diffusion.

This normative tendency of authoritarian diffusion is also reflected in the debate with the US about the idea of democracy itself, and ultimately produced the concept of "sovereign democracy". This theory has been proposed by Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Chief of Staff in the presidential administration, who argued that Russia does not have to follow the Western ideal of democracy, but needs to create its own model that reflects its historical specificities, balancing democratic methods with the concern on the respect of sovereignty (March 2012). This theoretical framework appears consistent with what Ambrosio (2010) defined "appropriateness", i.e. the attempt to normatively legitimise a particular form of government. In this case, Russia has developed the theory of "sovereign democracy" as a response to US democracy promotion and as a discursive strategy to counter the colour revolutions (Deymond 2015).

## **The limits of authoritarian diffusion**

Authoritarian diffusion had a profound impact in the context of resistance to the colour revolutions. Both the process of normative diffusion and the active involvement of external actors in the domestic politics of weaker autocratic states help explain the failure of such revolutions to propagate. However, as useful as this concept can be, an

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exclusive focus on the international propagation of autocracy risks neglecting and obscuring the importance of other elements.

Firstly, external forms of influence must be understood not as isolated variables, but in conjunction with internal structures of illiberal states. Part of the literature on the topic fails to acknowledge the interplay between internal and external factors and focuses exclusively on international mechanisms of influence (Tolstrup 2015; Von Soest 2015). However, international contacts between states cannot account for regime adaption and survival by themselves. As Jackson has rightly asserted, "[t]he effectiveness of external factors in this regard is largely dependent on the domestic context" (Jackson 2010: 102). External influences *per se* cannot change radically the politics of an autonomous state, since too strong an acquiescence to the will of, or dependence on a more powerful state would entail a loss of legitimacy and endanger the stability of the regime itself.

Internal structures of the post-Soviet states were in fact central factors in halting attempts at democratisation in the region. Elites obviously constitute the main actors in this respect, since these states are highly autocratic. However, it would be simplistic to assume that elites merely absorb norms and policy programmes from the more powerful states, which act as "gravity centres of authoritarian rule" (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016). Elites have to be receptive to the export of authoritarianism (Ikenberry and Kuchan 1990) in order for external influence to produce concrete results. That was the case with Belarus in 2006: both the fact that Luchashenko's regime seriously risked being overthrown by a popular mobilisation, and that Belarus is generally close to Moscow were crucial elements that allowed Russia to help the regime. On the contrary, Russia decided not to interfere in the Moldovan elections of 2005 precisely due to a general embitterment of the relations between the two states (Tolstrup 2015). The Moldovan regime was not in danger of collapsing, so the ruling elites were opposed to aids from Moscow that would have subjected the country to an even stronger dependency on its great power neighbour.

Furthermore, the majority of the new states borne out of the collapse of the Soviet Union had never experienced democratic governance, and regime stability has mainly been preferred to popular participation in the management of the government. Thus, democracy could not easily take roots in societies that had historically witnessed a high degree of state control. The absence of an active civil society and of effective opposition groups resulted in the lack of a real political alternative to the incumbent regime. The fall of Shevardnadze in Georgia and Akaev in Kyrgyzstan were arguably determined more by the lack of adequate support within the regime itself at the time of the crises than by successful efforts of opposition parties or civil society (Lewis 2008; Ó Beacháin 2010).

Secondly, the efficacy of authoritarian diffusion is contingent on the domestic society of the recipient state. In the case of Russia, any direct interventions to support a friendly government in a country where large sectors of the population are suspicious of Russian influence and see it as merely an instance of post-Soviet imperialism can backfire and result in an increase in anti-Russian sentiments (Way 2015). In the electoral campaign in Ukraine in 2004, Yanukovich's overt links with Putin and strict dependency on Russian aids and political technologists damaged its reputation among the Ukrainians and constituted a factor that led people to protest in the streets against frauds and Russian meddling in the elections (Wilson 2005).

Authoritarian diffusion must be understood not as a one-way process whereby a more powerful actor exerts influence over a recipient state, but rather as a complex, multi-directional mechanism of norm diffusion. As Roberts (2015) outlines, the relationship between Russia and the near abroad has to be interpreted as "a more complex picture, suggesting two-way norm diffusion" (Roberts 2015: 154). In his analysis of Central Asian states, he shows that they do not merely imitate Russian policies, but they have sometimes preceded them. For instance, they strengthened their repressive and illiberal regimes in the 1990s, while Russia was undergoing a period of democratic reform. Thus, Russia may have been inspired by its neighbours as well as inspiring them. Weaker autocracies appear to follow particular dynamics that allow them to reinforce authoritarianism through local practices or regional organisations (Lankina et al. 2016). Authoritarian diffusion is thus a multi-layered process in which recipient states and great powers, internal and external structures overlap.

## Conclusion

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This essay has tried to demonstrate the role of authoritarian diffusion in preventing the spread of democracy in the FSU states after the colour revolutions broke out. Even though Russia has not embarked in an ideological mission of "promoting authoritarianism abroad" (Vanderhill 2013), it appears quite clear that it has played a pivotal role in sustaining and helping other fellow autocracies against attempts at democratisation. Acting as a "black knight" (Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2015), Russia has directly interfered in the domestic politics of its neighbours driven by the fear that a spill-over effect would have destabilised the country. Authoritarian diffusion also entails a normative element, since it is ultimately concerned with creating an international environment which is more receptive towards autocracy. This normative strategy is evident in the creation or sharing of similar electoral laws, and in the concept of "sovereign democracy". The concept of authoritarian diffusion therefore includes both practical and discursive elements employed by Russia in the conduct of its foreign policy.

However, the essay has also outlined the limits of an account of authoritarian diffusion that is focused exclusively on international factors. Diffusion alone cannot, for instance, account for the role of domestic structures and actors, such as the lack of democratic tradition within the states of the FSU or the receptivity of the elites, which can help explain why authoritarian diffusion has been successful in some instances but not in others. Therefore, future research should be concerned on how all these factors interact and influence each other, and recognise that authoritarian diffusion is a multi-layered, two-way process of influence among different actors.

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