

## Putinism Under Siege

# CAN THERE BE A COLOR REVOLUTION?

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The December 2011 protests in Russia, the largest since the demise of the USSR, raised the question of whether the Vladimir Putin regime could fall to a “color” or electoral revolution like those that have ousted other autocratic regimes in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia over the past decade and a half. Demonstrations against fraudulent State Duma elections took place in 96 cities across the country and in some cases brought as many as a hundred-thousand people into the streets. A few months later, crowds of just 10,000 to 25,000—the figures come, respectively, from the police and from protest leaders—came out to demonstrate against Vladimir Putin’s 4 March 2012 election as president following a stint in the premiership.<sup>1</sup> The sharp drop-off in numbers from December to March seemed to dash expectations that the regime was on the verge of collapse.<sup>2</sup> Such disappointment, however, may be premature.

Before weighing the likelihood of a Russian color revolution, we need to lay out the central elements of this phenomenon as experienced elsewhere, and then ask which factors determined whether attempts to mobilize citizens around elections either sparked or failed to spark a democratic breakthrough.

Between 1998 and 2005, political oppositions, civil society activists, ordinary citizens, and external democracy supporters used elections in six postcommunist European or Eurasian countries to create democratic openings by ousting semi-authoritarian leaders. The first to fall was Slovakia’s strongman Vladimir Mečiar, who lost the premiership as a result of the OK 98 campaign in 1998. The electoral model then diffused to Croatia, where democratically oriented leaders defeated the late Franjo Tudjman’s successors in 2000. Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević was ousted

later in the same year. In Georgia, the Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Saakashvili spurred the ouster of President Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution of November 2004 denied the presidency to Viktor Yanukovich, the handpicked successor of outgoing president Leonid Kuchma, and led instead to Viktor Yushchenko being acknowledged as the winner. In 2005 in Kyrgyzstan, demonstration effects coupled with election-related grievances in the south of the country sparked the ambiguous Tulip Revolution.

There were outright failures, too. Attempts to decisively mobilize popular discontent over electoral fraud flopped in Armenia in 2003 and 2008, in Azerbaijan in 2003 and 2005, and in Belarus in 2008. In these cases, incumbents retained power and, in fact, became more authoritarian. Based on our analyses of these attempts, Valerie Bunce and I concluded that the main factor distinguishing successful from failed attempts was the extent to which an “electoral model” of regime change was implemented.<sup>3</sup> Structural factors, particularly a vulnerable incumbent, played some role in the success of electoral breakthroughs, but the main explanation, we found, lay in the implementation of the electoral model.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, is the electoral model? Simply put, this model of regime change refers to an innovative set of coordinated strategies and tactics that used elections to mobilize citizens against semi-authoritarian incumbents. The development, implementation, and diffusion of this model involved transnational networks of both domestic actors (the political opposition and civil society activists) and international democracy supporters (the governments of the United States and several European countries, the EU, and numerous private foundations).

The basic elements of the model included 1) a more united political opposition committed to supporting a common candidate; 2) energetic campaigns by civil society groups to register voters, get out the vote, and inform citizens about issues and their rights; 3) the development of some form of independent media or plans to counteract the state’s monopoly on communication; 4) pressure on incumbents to make the electoral playing field more level by increasing opposition representation on electoral commissions and allowing the deployment of domestic and international election observers; 5) the use of exit polls and parallel vote counts; and 6) when incumbents refused to vacate office, mass protests and demonstrations.<sup>5</sup>

Typically, the model also included innovative campaign activities by opposition candidates and parties, such as bus and bicycle tours, marches, meetings with citizens, and door-to-door canvassing in order to reach previously apathetic or alienated voters, especially those outside the capital. Civic campaigns put on rock concerts or created television and radio ads to create a sense of optimism and hope that something could change. Some campaigns were spearheaded by youth groups such as Otpor in Serbia, Kmara in Georgia, and both Black and Yellow Pora in Ukraine. Oth-

ers aimed their appeals at the young in general and first-time voters in particular, as was the case with Slovakia's 1998 Rock the Vote campaign. These campaigns also typically made use of logos on pencils, flyers, T-shirts, and posters to spread the message. Taking a page from earlier efforts by dissidents under communism, activists also made use of humor to discredit the old regime and draw attention to their activities.<sup>6</sup>

As often happens when innovations spread, the electoral model underwent some changes as it was adapted to fit particular countries. Electoral mobilization alone was sufficient in Slovakia, where the model—which drew on experiences in the Philippines in 1986, Chile in 1988, Bulgaria in 1990 and 1996–97, and Romania in 1996—was first fully articulated in the postcommunist world. A similar version of the model worked in Croatia in 2000. Later, in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, mass protests were added to the model when the incumbents, as expected, engaged in widespread fraud and failed to leave office when they lost.

### Conditions for Success

The model met with its greatest success when it was fully implemented against significantly vulnerable incumbents. The vulnerability of the autocrats did not vary consistently with the repressiveness of their respective regimes. Furthermore, the type of vulnerability differed from case to case. In Slovakia, Mečiar suffered from disgust over his dirty tricks and manipulations as well as a popular perception that Slovakia would not be admitted to NATO and the EU as long as he was in power. In Croatia and Serbia, citizens were tired of suffering from years of war and economic sanctions. In the latter, the Milošević regime outraged many citizens by increasingly desperate acts of repression such as jailing Otpor members as young as thirteen. In Georgia, the regime was weak, and Shevardnadze himself was tired and removed from day-to-day politics. In Ukraine, the Kuchma regime's beheading of an opposition journalist, poisoning of opposition candidate Yushchenko, and other abuses of power led many citizens to say "Enough!"

In situations in which the incumbent was less vulnerable and important aspects of the model were not fully implemented, it failed to create a democratic breakthrough, and incumbents typically became more authoritarian. During this period countries such as Russia, where there was no attempt to bring the electoral model to bear, also became more authoritarian. A point worth emphasizing, particularly as we ask whether the electoral model can work in Russia today, is that every successful case featured at least one failed "dress rehearsal" in which aspects of the model were tested. Similarly, in every successful case, the opposition won at the local level before winning at the national level.

As has been the case regarding other paths to democratization, the outcomes of the successful democratic breakthroughs discussed above var-

ied. In Slovakia and Croatia, the ouster of semi-authoritarian leaders led in swift and fairly linear fashion to the crafting of fully democratic systems. Serbia too saw rapid progress, although this progress waned over time. In Ukraine, there was at first a great deal of movement toward democracy, followed by backsliding. There was less positive change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan—in each, the removal of the incumbent had elements of a coup.<sup>7</sup> This varied pattern is similar to developments that have occurred after democratic breakthroughs begun by elite pacts or mass protests unrelated to elections. In other words, ousting an authoritarian ruler creates conditions favoring progress toward democracy but cannot guarantee it, no matter how the breakthrough comes about.

Given the charges made by authoritarian leaders in the countries that we studied as well as others, the role of international actors merits attention. It is clear that the successful removal of semi-authoritarian leaders in the region was not, as Putin and others argued repeatedly, engineered by outside actors, chiefly the United States. On the contrary, domestic actors played the most important roles. It was they who did the tedious, difficult, and at times dangerous work of implementing this model.

At the same time, external supporters of democratic development played an important role in facilitating the model's diffusion. They did this by arranging meetings with "graduates" of successful cases; giving short- or long-term funding to civil society groups; encouraging opposition politicians to unify; providing training in proven Western campaign techniques that were novel in the region; lending expert help for exit polling and parallel vote counting; supporting some independent media; and pressing authorities to improve electoral procedures.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, outside actors also used conditionality or the promise of eventual membership in crucial organizations such as NATO and the EU to support electoral change.<sup>9</sup> In no case did external actors work alone—they always acted as part of transnational coalitions that included domestic oppositionists and civil society organizations as well as veterans of earlier successes.

### **Will Russia Fit the Mold?**

At first glance, the large demonstrations in Russia after the fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011 and the smaller protests after the presidential elections in March 2012 do not seem to fit the pattern discussed above. Despite popular anger, the fraudulent parliamentary election results stood, and Putin won the presidency in March 2012. In addition, the late-2011 protests, though large by the standards of the last decade in Russia and more widespread than previous protests, still included only a tiny slice of the country's 140-million people. Even in Moscow, scene of the biggest protests, the crowds came nowhere near approximating the one-million Ukrainians who are thought to have thronged to Kyiv at the height of the Orange Revolution in 2004.

Although the protests in late 2011 and early 2012 failed to spark a color revolution, there are several reasons why it may be too early to rule out the possibility that this model of regime change could be used—and might succeed—in the future. First, events have now shown as never before that Putin is vulnerable. His party's loss of seats in the December 2011 Duma election despite massive fraud suggests that Russians no longer see his dominance as inevitable. In the Moscow area in March 2012, despite more fraud, Putin could not win a majority of the vote for president.

If forecasts of hard times ahead for the Russian economy are borne out, a second source of vulnerability may be added to the feeling that it is time to be done with a corrupt, embarrassing regime. Many of those who took part in the December protests were newcomers to dissent and seemed largely to belong to the new middle class that has done well under Putin. In other words, even people who seemingly should be the president's natural supporters have been denouncing him, and thus one may wonder what will happen if the economy turns sour.

Moreover, although the March protests were by most accounts smaller and quieter than the December demonstrations,<sup>10</sup> the fact that they persisted after the election signals that a core group of activists is committed to sustaining opposition. It is a good sign that several protest leaders, including Alexei Navalny, have been stressing the need to create a stronger civil society and to work for change at the local level. Civil society organizations and coalitions proved critical to successful applications of the electoral model elsewhere, and the strength of civil society in a given country is an indicator of the prospects for continued progress toward democracy after a breakthrough achieved by use of this model. A decade of external democracy assistance preceded the electoral breakthroughs in Slovakia and Ukraine, where highly organized NGOs made it easier to mobilize citizens for voting and demonstrating. Similarly, in both Croatia and Serbia, civil society activists, though operating in less favorable conditions, gained a great deal of experience prior to participating in the breakthrough elections. The willingness of thousands of Russians to act as election monitors for both the parliamentary and presidential elections is another sign that certain citizens have awakened and now take their civic roles seriously.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is interesting that, even after the "Arab Spring" and its impact on the opposition in other parts of the old Soviet space such as Azerbaijan,<sup>12</sup> the upsurge of protest activity in Russia to date has remained focused on elections. As many have noted, there are numerous reasons why elections provide good focal points for protest, particularly when they are fraudulent.<sup>13</sup> As Graeme Robertson has documented, there have been numerous other types of protest in Russia under Putin, including labor unrest and protests focused on ecological, economic, and other issues.<sup>14</sup> Yet in none of these cases have the numbers of pro-

testers approached what was seen in December 2011, nor have protests occurred simultaneously in so many locales. In the wake of the presidential election, there are signs that Russian activists are ready to stage sporadic protests, including new forms such as flash mobs, without reference to election cycles. In view of this development and of the impact that the nonelectoral Arab protests have had on opposition tactics in other ex-communist countries, it is possible that Russian protesters' focus on elections could be replaced by a style of opposition not keyed to the electoral calendar. On the other hand, such acts could provide a group of experienced activists for the next round of electoral protests.

### **Barriers to Change**

Although it may be too early to rule out an eventual electoral breakthrough in Russia, there are clearly a number of barriers to such an outcome. First, the regime is well aware of the threat that the electoral model has posed to authoritarian regimes elsewhere. Denunciations of the Orange Revolution have been a staple of Putin's speeches since 2004, and the regime has acted forcefully (in a number of ways that others have detailed in discussions of authoritarian learning<sup>15</sup>) to avert a similar upheaval in Russia. As the arrest, detention, and occasional beating of protesters in the recent past illustrate, Putin has not forsworn these tactics. Similarly, he continues to use manufactured rallies filled with paid "supporters" to preempt the use of public spaces by anti-Putin activists. Regulation of the NGO sector and restrictions on outside democracy assistance are additional tools that the regime uses to prevent civil society from developing independently and challenging the status quo. And of course, Putin will attempt to prevent defections among his elite supporters.

Equally important for the regime is its ability to prevent the opposition from coalescing to mount an effective electoral challenge. A more united political opposition that could serve as a rallying point for citizens has been a central element of the electoral model. Putin has made use of many of the tactics employed by other authoritarian leaders to discredit the opposition and keep it from uniting, including the creation of Kremlin-backed "opposition" parties designed to appeal to certain segments of the population but not to challenge the regime's power.

One of the chief impediments to opposition unity has, in theory, been lessened by a new law (passed by the Duma on 23 March 2012 and signed by Medvedev on April 3) that makes it significantly easier for new political parties to register. This step may indeed make it, as critics have charged, too easy to register new parties and thus serve mainly to splinter the opposition. Even if it does not, true opposition parties still must clear the high hurdle of meeting the onerous conditions that determine whether candidates reach the ballot. The impact of these regulations has been such that no one who officially ran against Putin in March

2012 was a genuine opposition candidate. (The anti-Kremlin bonafides of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov are suspect, despite his appearances at opposition protests after the election.) The continued ban on the formation of multiparty campaign coalitions will similarly limit the opposition's ability to coalesce. Among other things, the rules require anyone hoping to appear on the presidential ballot to obtain two-million signatures—each of which must be notarized—from citizens in at least forty regions of Russia (with no more than seventy-thousand signatures allowed from any one region).

If they are to learn from the successful use of the electoral model, opposition politicians in Russia may well want to focus on the local level, where activists in other countries achieved electoral victories prior to succeeding at the national level. Recent mayoral elections in Yaroslavl and Togliatti, where opposition candidates beat Kremlin-sponsored incumbents,<sup>16</sup> indicate that such victories are possible. Such a focus, which several activists have advocated, particularly in Moscow and other large cities, would take advantage of the mobilizing potential of the civil society activists who have been organizing protests against election fraud. The prevalence of Internet usage in this group would allow organizers to make use of Facebook and other new technologies that permit citizens to bypass the tightly controlled broadcast media. It would also help to activate young people, a crucial force behind electoral breakthroughs in other postcommunist countries. In this area, Russian NGOs can take a page from their counterparts in successful electoral-model cases who promoted political participation in a nonpartisan fashion by informing citizens of their rights, providing information on candidates' platforms, and training election observers, as well as helping to get out the vote.

In sum, the recent failure of popular protests to bring about new Duma elections or to deny Putin his planned return to the presidency does *not* mean that the cause of change in Russia is hopeless. The obstacles are formidable, to be sure, but we should keep in mind that they appeared nearly insurmountable in Serbia before Milošević fell in 2000. We should also remember that what appeared to be overnight victories in countries where mobilization around elections brought about the ouster of autocrats were in fact the fruit of longer-term processes and activities that included what turned out to be temporary defeats. The protests around the parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia in 2011 and 2012, then, may one day be seen as dress rehearsals that contributed to the successful use of elections to bring about a democratic breakthrough.

## NOTES

1. Angus Roxburgh, "Letter from Moscow: How the Anti-Putin Movement Missed the Point," *ForeignAffairs.com*, 14 March 2012, [www.foreignaffairs.com/print/134585](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/134585).

2. Joshua Yaffa, "Russia's Activists Regroup: The Opposition's Bourgeois Balancing Act," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 March 2012, [www.foreignaffairs.com/print/134576](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/134576); and Anna Nemtsova, "The Temperature's Dropping for Russia's Opposition," *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2012, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

3. For more detail, see Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators: Electoral Change and Stability in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *World Politics* 62 (January 2010): 43–86. My discussion of the use of the electoral model in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia prior to the Russian elections and protests of 2011 and 2012 draws on the joint work reflected in these and other publications. I alone am responsible for assessing the implications of this work for the current situation in Russia. See Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Joshua A. Tucker, "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (September 2007): 535–51; and Joerg Forbrig et al., *Reclaiming Democracy: Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund, 2007) for some of the voluminous literature on these matters.

4. For a view that puts more stress on structural factors, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Lucan Way, "The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions," *Journal of Democracy* 19 (July 2008): 55–69. For our response, see Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Getting Real About Real Causes," *Journal of Democracy* 20 (January 2009): 69–73.

5. See Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*, ch. 9.

6. See Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

7. See Bunce and Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators."

8. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*.

9. Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

10. See, for example, the reports in Yaffa and Nemtsova.

11. See, for example, [www.golos.org](http://www.golos.org) and <http://russia.usaid.gov/about/partners/GA/?printversion=true>.

12. Karrie Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Sharon Wolchik, "Stopping the Diffusion of Popular Protests Against Authoritarian Rule," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, 1–4 September 2011.

13. Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*, ch. 2.

14. Graeme Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

15. See, for example, Regine A. Spector, "The Anti-Revolutionary Toolkit," *CACI Analyst*, 13 December 2006.

16. "Politics Begins at Home—A New Political Landscape Is Emerging: Local, Energetic, and Mistrustful," *Economist*, 7 April 2012, 61–62.