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The “Color Revolutions” and “Arab Spring” in Russian Official Discourse

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Introduction

The “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space were initially understood to mean the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). The one feature these events share is considered to be the non-violent nature of the regime change resulting from mass protests. The 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan may also be relegated to this group of cases: although the revolution was not entirely peaceful it nonetheless led to a change in the country’s leadership. Somewhat less clear are regime change attempts or mass protests, for example the situation in Andijan (Uzbekistan) in 2005 or the mass protests and riots in Moldova in 2009. It is still unclear whether the power shift in Ukraine in February 2014 should be considered a “color revolution;” there is also no precise definition of the concept of the “Arab spring,” which is usually thought to include the mass upheaval and protests, more often not peaceful, that led (or did not lead) to regime change in a number of countries of the Arab world starting in late 2010. Despite the lack of consensus among political leaders and experts regarding terminology, on the whole the terms “color revolutions” and “Arab spring” have caught on and as a rule are used without further explanation in Russian official discourse in the expert community and in the media.

Russia’s most recent version of its Foreign Policy Concept, dated 18 February 2013, contains no mention of “color revolutions” or “Arab spring” either in the list of threats or in the section on regional priorities. The previous version also did not contain an official position on the problem of revolutions in the post-Soviet space. On the eve of the NATO summit of 4-5 September 2014 in Great Britain, information appeared in the Russian news media that Russia would adopt a new edition of its Military Doctrine by the end of 2014, and that an interagency commission had been created under the Office of the Russian Security Council to draft it. In an interview, the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Mikhail Popov stated that the new version was needed due to the emergence of new challenges and threats to Russia’s security, which, in addition, “were manifested in the events of the “Arab spring,” in the armed conflict in Syria, and in the situation in and around Ukraine.”¹

Why did Russia not include the problem of revolutions in its concept documents on foreign policy and security? This is thought to be connected to the fact that prior to the

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¹ “RF Security Council: Russia Will Update Its Military Doctrine by Late 2014,” *RIA Novosti*, 2 September 2014, <http://ria.ru/interview/20140902/1022334103.html> (in Russian).

2014 crisis in Ukraine Russia considered revolutions to be a purely internal matter and did not deem it necessary to state its position regarding events that did not go beyond the sovereignty of those countries where revolutions took place or mass protests occurred. Despite the absence of revolutions as problems addressed in the foreign policy conceptual documents, Russian presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, as well as Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials—most notably foreign minister Sergey Lavrov—repeatedly stated Russia’s position regarding the “color revolutions,” the events of the “Arab spring,” the Ukrainian events of 2014 and other various mass protests that did not escalate into revolutions or lead to regime change. This article presents an overview of official Russian discourse from the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia to the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, as well as events of the “Arab spring.”

The “Color Revolutions” of 2003–2005 in the Post-Soviet Space

There is an opinion extant among experts that the Russian leadership’s primary fear regarding the “color revolutions” is the spread or deliberate export of revolutions to neighboring countries, including Russia. However, in his 2005 interviews Vladimir Putin identifies other problematic consequences of “color revolutions:”

My greatest concern personally is not that some kind of tumultuous events are occurring there, but that they go beyond current law and the constitution. We all need to understand what democracy means, to include proper, good law and the ability to comply with and live by that law.²

For Russia the problem is not that something will change in neighboring states as a result of the color revolutions and that relations will have to be built anew, because in the final analysis all leaders in the post-Soviet space, both before and after the revolutions, have basically been pragmatic in their relations with Russia. The main concern is that problems are not being resolved within the framework of a constitution and existing laws but rather through revolutions and “street democracy.”³

Following national laws may be considered a major theme in the official Russian discourse on the problem of revolutions. Revolutions are a destabilizing factor because they call into question the legitimate means of settling differences between the government and the civil society. Vladimir Putin believes that the main objective in the post-Soviet space should be to habituate citizens to adhere strictly to the law, because “democracy cannot develop in isolation from democratically adopted laws.”⁴ Non-parliamentary methods of waging the struggle should be interdicted in order to avoid subverting the governmental structures and legal systems of post-Soviet states, keeping in mind how young they are and their internal political and economic situation.⁵

² Interview on ‘Radio Slovensko’ and Slovakian television company STV, Official website of the President of Russia, 22 February 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22837> (in Russian).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview on German television channels ARD and ZDF, Official website of the President of Russia, 5 May 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22948> (in Russian).

⁵ Ibid.

The reason for the opposition's success in the "color revolutions" lies in systematic errors by the government, in particular the authorities' failure to establish "strong democratic institutions" that would have guaranteed democratic procedures and stability. These systemic mistakes resulted in the government being distanced from the society and losing its trust, which allowed the opposition to take its place.⁶

Russian leaders point to external as well as internal causes of the "color revolutions." In 2004 Putin named "attempts to address political problems in an extralegal fashion" and "creation of a system of permanent revolutions" the main problem of the post-Soviet region. In Vladimir Putin's opinion, decisions to start revolutions are made from without, based on a certain political expediency for the countries making the decisions and not for the countries where the revolutions take place. Assistance to democratic development may occur on its own account, but it must not be in the form of revolutions, because the results will only be "endless conflicts." Thus, the Russian president disputes the methods of democratization utilized by Western countries, but not democratization itself. The recipe for development of post-Soviet states according to Putin: get used to living by the law; plus, certain rules and procedures should come to fruition within the society.⁷ Note that the Russian president does not say these rules necessarily have to be democratic. He merely emphasizes that they must be rules and laws worked out in a given specific country with account of its unique features, not rules that are borrowed or brought in from outside.

In the West, Russia's position on "color revolutions" is perceived as a determination to maintain authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet states and unwillingness to allow outside players into the region of its priority interests. However, in 2005, when the issue of "color revolutions" was still being actively discussed in political circles and academia, Russia's deputy minister of foreign affairs Grigory Karasin stated that due to globalization, eschewing competitiveness in the post-Soviet space would hardly be an option at this juncture. As a result, Russia needs to boost its ability to compete and try to find balance with its Western colleagues in the framework of well-understood rules of competition. Given its own vital interests in the post-Soviet region, Russia does not believe that other international players cannot have their own interests in the region. And the only means of interaction among the various players and the post-Soviet states themselves should be honest competition and contention of ideas and concepts rather than power politics.⁸ The deputy minister considers not only the "color revolutions" but information

⁶ Interview of I.S. Ivanov, secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, in the journal *Strategiya Rossii* (Strategy of Russia) 4:16, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 May 2005, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/258F32B8F33C9BF2C3256FF80021BDD0?OpenDocument (in Russian).

⁷ Press conference for Russian and foreign journalists, Official website of the President of Russia, 23 December 2004, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22757> (in Russian).

⁸ Full text of interview of deputy minister G.B. Karasin of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 August 2005, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/2DF9AF16C578661CC325705F0029B036?OpenDocument (in Russian).

campaigns and political pressure on existing governments to be methods of forcible “democratization” (in his article Karasin uses the term in quotation marks to emphasize the problematic nature of these processes). The results of such “democratization” are destabilization of the situation in the region with a potential increase in extremism.⁹

The growth of extremism as a consequence of revolution or widespread unrest presents a problem mostly for Central Asia, which may be considered a separate case in terms of “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space. Vladimir Putin attributed the first Kyrgyz revolution of 2005 to the weakness of the government and accumulated social and economic problems, and lamented that political issues were being resolved extralegally.¹⁰ President Medvedev was in power in Russia during the second Kyrgyz revolution of 2010; he also provided his assessment of both revolutions – 2005 and 2010. Medvedev also names the population’s discontent with the social and economic situation in the country as the main cause of the revolutions. In the opinion of the Russian president, the second revolution occurred because the country’s new leadership essentially recreated the previous ineffective system of government based on clan ties and unfettered business and as a result was unable to address existing social and economic problems.¹¹

The External Factor

It is important to note that the description of the Kyrgyz revolutions in president Medvedev’s speech does not mention the external factor as a destructive phenomenon, which differentiates Medvedev’s position from Putin’s. Dmitry Medvedev acknowledges that he had to enter into consultations with the president of Kazakhstan and the president of the United States in order to agree on the peaceful resignation of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. This is because without it the situation would evidently have developed toward bloodshed and destabilization, going as far as threatening to split the country in two and start a civil war: “Not because we wanted to intervene—it is, after all, a sovereign matter of another country—but because it was necessary in order to prevent bloodshed.”¹² Medvedev took pains to emphasize that after a provisional government emerges its task would be to secure the legitimacy of the people and see to the fate of its own state.

Before the Kyrgyz revolution of 2010 Russia played a similar role of mediator in the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003. Let us recall that as the Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov acted as a mediator in Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze’s negotiations with the opposition, which resulted in Shevardnadze’s announcing his resignation in order to avoid bloodshed. That said, Ivanov believes that if the change of leadership

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Press conference on results of U.S.-Russian talks, Official website of the President of Russia, 25 March 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22883> (in Russian).

¹¹ Dmitry Medvedev answers Russian journalists’ questions, Official website of the President of Russia, 16 April 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/news/7479> (in Russian).

¹² Ibid.

in Georgia had occurred under the Constitution it would have been more “civilized” and better for the stability of the region as a whole. The biggest plus in the regime change that took place in 2003-2004 was its peaceful nature, without violence or bloodshed.¹³

A repetition of the revolutions in other post-Soviet countries is possible, Medvedev believes, if the government loses touch with the people. To avoid this it is necessary to “competently deal with governing one’s own country.”¹⁴ Central Asia’s path of development is not revolution, but evolution.¹⁵

Not all post-Soviet leaders share the approaches of the Russian leadership that despite the existence of outside influence internal causes are still the main factors in the occurrence of mass protests. For example, it was this very outside factor that Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov used to explain the tragic events in Andijan in May 2005, in a meeting with Vladimir Putin one month later. Mr. Karimov characterized the “color revolutions” as specially arranged “operations” carried out within the CIS. In Karimov’s view, in Andijan “the scriptwriters and directors of the operation relied on and utilized those religious, extremist and radical forces that had at one time been called terrorists and extremists by those same directors and scriptwriters, and with whom they had so successfully fought in Afghanistan and are fighting today in Iraq.”¹⁶ Commenting on this pronouncement by Karimov about Andijan, Vladimir Putin only stated that prior to the events in question Russia had indeed had information that fighters from bases in Afghanistan had penetrated into territory adjoining Uzbekistan, and that this information was relayed to the leaders of the countries where the fighters from Afghanistan were concentrated. However, Vladimir Putin did not directly agree with Karimov’s version of the events in Andijan, calling them “complex and tragic.”¹⁷

Ukraine 2014

The causes of the revolutionary situation in Ukraine, in Vladimir Putin’s opinion, are corruption and stratification, and moreover this state of affairs began building “from the first days of Ukraine’s independence.”

¹³ Transcript of address by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs I.S. Ivanov at the concluding press conference of the third meeting of the Committee on a strategy for Russian-Polish cooperation, 2737-27-11-2003, 26 November 2003, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/073E7199C30DC77B43256DEB002AED86?OpenDocument.

¹⁴ Dmitry Medvedev answers Russian journalists’ questions, 16 April 2010.

¹⁵ Transcript of press conference for Russian and foreign journalists (31 January 2006), Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/23412> (in Russian).

¹⁶ Beginning of meeting with Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov, Official website of the President of Russia, 28 June 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/23063> (in Russian).

¹⁷ Ibid.

To our great regret, over all the years of its independence Ukraine has never been able to really overcome its ongoing political and governmental crisis. Its most recent exacerbation has led to an armed takeover in Kiev.¹⁸

In March 2014 the Russian permanent representative to the OSCE, A. Kelin, set forth a detailed understanding of the situation: the basis for the protest movement in Ukraine was accumulated discontent with corruption, ineffective governance and poverty.¹⁹ However, this situation was exploited by radical forces – “nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophiles and anti-Semites” who had set the stage for a coup d’etat. The West actually helped these radical forces when it supported “Maidan.” Now, Western countries are “very nervous, since their latest geopolitical experiment has led to such unexpected consequences” and because they “do not want to admit that the cause of the crisis is not Russia, but their own irresponsible actions.”²⁰

The “Arab Spring”

Lavrov calls the Arab spring “an expected surprise” – predictable because of the accumulated social and economic problems in the countries of the region and unpredictable because of it encompassing several countries and due to the speed with which events developed. The problems that provoked the “Arab spring” were the low standard of living and income and unemployment among educated young people as well as a loss of connection with reality by ruling regimes that had been in power for decades.²¹

In the assessment of the Russian leadership the causes of the “Arab spring” were peoples’ craving for social and economic modernization, the important factor here being the independent nature of these processes, “without outside pressure and based on strict adherence to state sovereignty.”²² In a meeting with Russia’s clergymen Dmitry Medvedev described the official Russian position on the “Arab spring” thusly: the striving for democracy by peoples of all countries where revolutions have taken place. This is un-

¹⁸ “Vladimir Putin answers journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine,” Official website of the President of Russia, 4 March 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20366> (in Russian).

¹⁹ “Speech by Russian Federation Permanent Representative A.V. Kelin at a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna 624-21-03-2014,” Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 March 2014, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newline/DB7DECF7467D64F044257CA2003EB675 (in Russian).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by moderator of the program ‘Aktual’nyj razgovor’ V. Solovyov, 3 Kanal television company, 323-13-03-2011,” Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 March 2011, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/E35AC8110082ABCBC3257852004AF20E?OpenDocument (in Russian).

²² “Message to King Muhammed VI of Morocco, Official website of the President of Russia 9 March 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/news/14735> (in Russian).

derstandable and normal, because some overthrown regimes could indeed be called “old and rotten.”²³

It’s also important to analyze the “Arab spring” position of Vladimir Putin, who occupied the post of prime minister during this period of events in the Arab world. He directly states in his pre-election article of 2012 that the toppled regimes were authoritarian, and he stresses that at first Russia’s reaction was positive because there were expectations of positive democratic changes. This assessment tells us that Russia was not interested in maintaining authoritarian regimes. Russia’s negative reaction was not to the revolutions themselves, although we will reiterate that analysts often pointed to Russia’s concerns that the revolutionary wave might spill over into the post-Soviet region, and primarily to the countries of Central Asia. The negative reaction had to do with how the West reacted to the “Arab spring” processes, particularly intervention in support of one party in the conflict, which Vladimir Putin characterized as “itching for a fight.”²⁴

In the Russian leadership’s view, outside intervention by the international community is necessary only to “put the situation on a political track” by supporting a national dialog and national cohesion between the interested parties and to bring an end to violence without outside intervention in internal processes.²⁵ On the issue of Syria, for example, it is acknowledged that the president of Syria was unable to fully satisfy the demands of the protestors; he reacted with belated and insufficient measures. However, in order to execute reforms amenable to all and bring them to a conclusion the Syrians themselves must come to the negotiating table to determine their own future.²⁶

Analyzing the situation in Egypt connected with President Hosni Mubarak transferring power to his vice president and then to the Supreme Council of the Armed Force, Sergey Lavrov stressed that this transfer was done under the existing constitution of Egypt, that is, these events were lawful. The case of Libya is regarded in Russian official discourse as an unconstitutional shift in power. According to Lavrov, after Muammar Gaddafi’s regime was overthrown Russia’s Western colleagues regard the event in Libya as a model of revolution for the future. This is not to Russia’s liking, as there was intervention in internal affairs and a violation of international rights, while initially the countries of NATO, in Lavrov’s interpretation, were declaring that revolution and regime

²³ “Meeting with Muslim clerics,” Official website of the President of Russia, 19 November 2011, <http://kremlin.ru/news/13592> (in Russian).

²⁴ Vladimir V. Putin, “Russia and a Changing World,” *Moskovkiye novosti*, 27 February 2012, <http://mn.ru/politics/20120227/312306749.html> (in Russian).

²⁵ “Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by moderator of the program ‘Aktual’nyj razgovor’ V. Solovyov, 3 Kanal television company, 323-13-03-2011.”

²⁶ “Interview of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov on “Sky News Arabia” television channel, 1547-18-08-2012,” Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 August 2012, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/A5A5CC43241A074544257A5E0036546E?OpenDocument (in Russian).

change should be accomplished by the Libyan people themselves, without help from outside forces.²⁷

Some contradiction can be seen between the Russian understanding of the “color” revolutions and the “Arab spring” as being controlled and instigated from without and the simultaneous acknowledgement that real problems existed in the countries where such revolutions took place. And Vladimir Putin believes those real problems in Arab countries to be quite serious – tyranny, poverty and lack of future prospects. In 2014 the Russian president’s explanation is that the feelings of popular discontent “were simply used cynically.”²⁸ That is, following this logic, without outside interference a discontented populace would have chosen a different—more legitimate and constitutional—means of expressing its discontent.

We shall note, however, that in Sergey Lavrov’s view, comparing the “color revolutions” and the “Arab spring” is likely to be counterproductive: he sees more differences between the two phenomena than common features. The main difference is in the causes. In the Middle East internal social and economic problems are the source of the people’s discontent. In post-Soviet states the internal factor played a less substantial role than the external.²⁹

In the opinion of the Russian leadership the “Arab spring” resulted in violence and civil war rather than development. There was no upturn in the population’s well-being, but only chaos, unrest, and an exchange of some political groups for others. The main concern for Russia is that the “Arab spring” might result in a rise to power by radicals or extremists with whom it will be much more difficult to work.³⁰ The specific feature of the region where the “Arab spring” took place is its strategic significance for many great powers due to its energy resources and problems related to international terrorism and extremism.³¹ There is a threat of Islamization when extremists are trained and sectarian and interreligious discord aroused under the banners of religion.³² That said, Lavrov opines that Islam and democracy are fully compatible, which one can see from the ex-

²⁷ “From answers by Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov to listeners’ questions on live radio broadcasts on *Golos Rossii*, *Radio Rossii*, and *Ekho Moskvy*,” 1604-22-10-2011, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 October 2011, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/7180386FFEE0DFB4C325793100329482?OpenDocument (in Russian).

²⁸ “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” Official website of the President of Russia, 18 March 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603> (in Russian).

²⁹ “Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by moderator of the program ‘Aktual’nyj razgovor’ V. Solovyov, 3 Kanal television company, 323-13-03-2011.”

³⁰ “Interview with Russian television channels,” Official website of the President of Russia, 26 April 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/news/15149> (in Russian).

³¹ “Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by moderator of the program ‘Aktual’nyj razgovor’ V. Solovyov, 3 Kanal television company, 323-13-03-2011.”

³² Interview of State Secretary-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia G.B. Karasin in *Rossijskaya gazeta*, 269-13-02-2013, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 February 2013, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/73B1A52BB4EA19FA44257B110053048C?OpenDocument (in Russian).

ample of Turkey, and to a certain extent, Iran.³³ Then again, democratization of the region and revolution will not solve regional problems, in particular the problem of Middle Eastern reconciliation.³⁴

The Problem of Terminology: Revolutions or Coups?

The problem of qualifying mass protests and power shifts arises in official Russian discourse: the choice is between the terms “revolution” and “coup d’etat.” The main points at issue come up in the cases of Syria and Ukraine.

As for Syria, when asked by a journalist in a 2012 interview to qualify the situation in that country (the choices being: revolution, civil war or global plot against the regime), Sergey Lavrov replied that under the International Committee of the Red Cross definition it was an armed conflict. He does not believe that one can talk about an outside plot in this case; there is some outside influence, but not a plot.³⁵ Another Russian foreign ministry representative, in turn, rejected a journalist’s proposed definition of “pre-revolutionary situation” and described the situation in Syria as a “complex and difficult domestic conflict that certainly could escalate into civil war.”³⁶ Syrian opposition members who came to Moscow in 2012 tried to represent the conflict with the ruling authority as a revolution against the regime. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in turn, argued that it would not be possible to appeal to the UN Security Council with that qualification of the events, because revolutions are outside the Council’s frame of reference.³⁷

Events in the post-Soviet region may also have various interpretations. In 2005, former minister of foreign affairs and Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Igor Ivanov offered his assessment of events in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, calling them regime change by nondemocratic and unconstitutional means.³⁸ In the opinion of Sergey Lavrov, the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine

³³ “Interview of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov on *Sky News Arabia* television channel,” 1547-18-08-2012, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 August 2012, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/A5A5CC43241A074544257A5E0036546E?OpenDocument (in Russian).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Briefing by Russian MFA official spokesman A.K. Lukashevich, 9 February 2012, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/D7608E8B38C01A864425799F00457374?OpenDocument (in Russian).

³⁷ Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov answers questions from media, Moscow, 1461-29-07-2012, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 July 2012, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/FA48DE4DD410067544257A4A0022112C?OpenDocument (in Russian).

³⁸ Interview of I.S. Ivanov, secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, in the magazine *Strategiya Rossii* (Strategy of Russia).

were essentially the same sort of coups d'état as the 1917 October Revolution.³⁹ Putin characterizes the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 as a “coup d'état with the use of force.”⁴⁰

The reasoning of the Russian leadership is this: if what occurred in Ukraine in February 2014 is a revolution and not an unconstitutional shift in power, then a new state appears with which Russia has signed no treaties,⁴¹ and thus any references to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum make no sense, because it was signed with a different Ukraine. Another dilemma is that if the West recognizes the coup after 21 February 2014 as being a lawful expression of the will of the people, in spite of the obvious violations in procedures for the transfer of power, then the events in Crimea and the referendum to join Russia should all the more so be acknowledged as the will of the people. One cannot accept one and deny the other. Either these events are qualified as a coup d'état and unlawful annexation, respectively, or both events are lawful.⁴² However, it bears noting that this logic has an embedded contradiction: Russia recognized the legality of the referendum in Crimea and did not recognize the legality of the power shift in Kiev.

Misapprehension of Western Logic

For the Russian leadership the logic of western countries' actions to advance democracy through various forms of support for revolutions elicits a host of conceptual issues.

Can Revolution Be Considered a Democratic Phenomenon?

For example, in 2005 Vladimir Putin asked a question about western countries' approaches to introducing democracy in the post-Soviet space: “...if democracy doesn't work in post-Soviet countries—as some believe—then why introduce it there? And if we implement it there—these principles of democracy—then why revolutions?”⁴³

The main error in judgment by those who attempt to intervene from outside is to impose standards not appropriate to the way of life, culture and traditions of these peoples,

³⁹ Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov's answers to questions during meeting with members of the Council on Foreign Relations,” 1531-06-10-2008, New York, 24 September 2008, Official Website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/22D0E42DE56D4830C32574DA003217E2?OpenDocument.

⁴⁰ St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (23 May 2014), Official Website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/21080>.

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin answers journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine (4 March 2014), Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20366>.

⁴² Interview of Foreign Minister of Russia S.V. Lavrov on *Voskresnoye vremya* (Sunday Times), Moscow, 697-30-03-2014 (30 March 2014), Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/04E1EF8C06E4409044257CAB0031A789?OpenDocument.

⁴³ Interview on *Radio Slovensko* and Slovakian STV television, Official website of the President of Russia, 22 February 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22837>.

which leads not to the expected result in the form of democracy, but to chaos, violence and further overthrows of government.⁴⁴

The opinion that the “color revolutions” led to the triumph of democratic forces has gained a foothold among western experts and politicians. The Russian side disputes this logic. In an interview on the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, Secretary of the Russian Security Council Ivanov asks a fair question: “How can the victory of democracy be possible if key democratic principles are violated in the process of achieving that victory?”⁴⁵ Lavrov points out that a rollback of democracy has occurred in post-revolutionary countries, a fact recorded even by western research centers, Freedom House, for example.⁴⁶

Why Overthrow Leaders and Change the Regime?

Yet another important aspect that causes misapprehension by the Russian side is the West’s attitude to national leaders deposed in the course of the Rose Revolution. For example, regarding the Georgian revolution and the West’s support Vladimir Putin expressed the opinion that Eduard Shevardnadze was also not a pro-Russian president of Georgia. Western countries actively supported him and thus the question arises: “If he had to be removed via revolution one might ask: who were you supporting?”⁴⁷

A similar position by the West may be observed regarding the Syrian conflict. In Russia’s opinion, in contrast to the Syrian opposition President Assad agreed to accept all the initiatives proposed by the international community (the League of Arab States peace initiative, the Kofi Annan plan, the UN Observers Mission and the Geneva Communiqué).⁴⁸ That is, here one sees that same logic, incomprehensible to Russia: the president makes concessions but the pressure on him and support of the opposition continues.

Russia has the very same perception of the change of regime in Ukraine after Yanukovich signed the agreement with the opposition on 21 February 2014 in the presence of representatives of the European Union. In Vladimir Putin’s opinion the opposition could have easily come to power in a legal manner, without a coup, because Viktor

⁴⁴ Address by President of the Russian Federation, 18 March 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603>.

⁴⁵ Interview of I.S. Ivanov, secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, in the magazine *Strategiya Rossii* (Strategy of Russia).

⁴⁶ Article by S.V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia: “International Relations in a New System of Coordinates,” *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 8 September 2009, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/FEEF22A8FCA033A7C325762B0021D9AF?OpenDocument.

⁴⁷ Interview on German television stations ARD and ZDF, 5 May 2005, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/22948> (in Russian).

⁴⁸ Interview of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov on *Sky News Arabia* television channel, 1547-18-08-2012, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 August 2012, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/A5A5CC43241A074544257A5E0036546E?OpenDocument.

Yanukovich had accepted all their terms. The question arises: what is the point of a coup?⁴⁹

Similar actions by the West lead the Russian leadership to conclude that for the West there is essentially no such concept as loyalty, since even leaders who make concessions are overthrown as a result of revolutions. That is, supporting the West's position does not provide a given leader any guarantee against revolution or regime change.

Is It Even Possible to Reach Agreement with the West?

A phrase that Vladimir Putin uttered at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in 2014 is very telling. It had to do with Russia's desire to come to agreement with the West on the Agreement on Association of Ukraine: "I haven't seen such snobbism for a long time. They simply stopped talking to us and said: 'It's none of your business.'" ⁵⁰

At the same time that it refuses to discuss Russia's interests, the West, in Vladimir Putin's understanding of the matter, imposes sanctions against Russia with the objective, among others, of exacerbating Russia's internal problems. The Russian leadership remains unclear on the mechanisms western countries are relying upon to achieve this exacerbation of Russia's internal problems. The most obvious variant is a worsening of Russia's social and economic position due to the sanctions, which might provoke discontent among the population. A second variant that Putin is considering involves "actions by a fifth column – various traitors to the nation."⁵¹

Vladimir Putin set forth his overall understanding of western countries' strategy at a meeting of the Security Council devoted to the issue of national sovereignty that took place on 22 July 2014:

...more and more often in the world today one hears the language of ultimatums and sanctions. The very concept of national sovereignty is becoming eroded. Undesirable regimes, countries that pursue their own policy or simply stand in the way of someone's interests, are being destabilized. For that purpose the so-called color revolutions are set in motion; if one were to call things by their real names they are simply coups, provoked and financed from outside.

Of course, the focus is on problems within the country. There are always enough problems, especially in unstable states, failed states, and states with difficult regimes. Of course there are always problems; we just don't understand why those problems should be exploited for the total destabilization and breakdown of countries, which we often see lately in various regions of the world.⁵²

⁴⁹ St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, 23 May 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/21080>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Address by President of the Russian Federation, 18 March 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603> (in Russian).

⁵² Meeting of the Security Council, 22 June 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/46305>.

The West's way of acting is through the financing of radical, nationalist, neo-fascist and fundamentalist forces, at least that is just how it happens in the post-Soviet region, in the opinion of Vladimir Putin. Elections that take place after a coup are merely a cover for those who financed the overthrow.

Thus, the West's actions seem to the Russian leadership to be a combination of unwillingness to seek agreement with Russia, despite its readiness for discussion and concessions, and destabilization in the form of sanctions or support of the Russian opposition. Strictly speaking, it was this very anxiety about outside influence on internal Russian political processes—which formed after the first wave of “color revolutions”—that led to passage of the so-called Foreign Agents Law of 2012, which stipulates special registration of non-profit organizations that engage in political activities and receive monetary resources and other property from foreign sources. Does such a position by the Russian leadership mean it is unwilling to engage with the opposition honestly? No, it means it is unwilling only to engage in dialog with a Western-sponsored opposition.

Revolution as a Phenomenon

“Color revolutions” fit into the overall context of globalization when the boundary between domestic and foreign is gradually blurred. Such revolutions, although they take place within a country, are “actively fueled” from outside.⁵³ And without this external “heating,” according to Lavrov, it's possible there would not have been any revolutions at all. In general, revolutions result in a power shift. And the destabilizing effect extends both to domestic policy and to international relations.⁵⁴ An ambipolar system of international relations used to lend stability to those relations. After this bipolarity disappeared, the law of the strong replaced international law. This is exactly how the countries of the West, led by the United States, operate, based on faith in their own exceptionalism and sense of being chosen.⁵⁵

The Russian understanding of the West's position leads to the conclusion that no one touches countries with established sovereignty and the threat of “color revolutions” initiated from without exists only for “young” states: “The national institutions of fledgling states should be treated with an exceptional degree of care, otherwise there is chaos, and that is what we are observing in Ukraine.”⁵⁶ One should act solely in a constitutional

⁵³ Address and Q&A by S.V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, during discussions at the Youth Education Forum, Seliger, 27 August 2014, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1988-27-08-2014, http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/7CF0446902F9584544257D410064D1C8.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 18 March 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603> (in Russian).

⁵⁶ St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, 23 May 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/21080> (in Russian).

manner, since the post-Soviet space has still fragile political structures and a very weak economy.⁵⁷

From the sidelines the condemnation of revolutions may be perceived as a hindrance to historical development and progress. Vladimir Putin expressed the opinion that progress is inevitable and cannot be stopped artificially. However, it cannot be pushed artificially either, because otherwise the result is “chaos and disintegration,” as in Iraq and Libya, for instance. The recipe is “a careful attitude toward history and toward the traditions and culture of a people.”⁵⁸ What the West calls democratic transformation in countries where operations were conducted and a power shift occurred, are in Putin’s opinion “lifeless, dead schemes,” that “do not work outside of historical and cultural context,”⁵⁹ because “democratic transformation must occur in a civilized manner, without outside intervention.”⁶⁰

Sergey Lavrov expresses Russia’s approaches in a similar fashion: democratic countries should not change revolution into a means of promoting democracy,⁶¹ and imposing “its own recipes for internal change” on other countries leads to the creation of hot spots and destabilization of international relations in general.⁶²

Revolutions in a Historical Perspective

Revolutions find a place in official Russian discourse both in international and historical contexts. The Russian leadership refers to Russia’s own experience in the 20th century as well as the experience of western countries.

To substantiate the thesis that it is undesirable to intervene in the process of contemporary revolutions, Sergey Lavrov draws a parallel with revolutions that have occurred in developed western countries:

...after 1789 in France, as after the American War of Independence, the people of these countries themselves—both in France and in the United States—addressed their problems and sought common ground after bloody wars and clashes, but they did reach agreement

⁵⁷ Vladimir Putin answers journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine, 4 March 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20366> (in Russian).

⁵⁸ Meeting of the Council on International Relations, 3 July 2014, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/46144> (in Russian).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 25 June 2012, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/15728> (in Russian).

⁶¹ “Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov’s answers to questions during meeting with members of the Council on Foreign Relations,” 1531-06-10-2008.

⁶² Speech by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov at the IIIrd Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, 23 May 2014, 1256-23-05-2014, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/EA36B450E08027D744257CE10031D9B8?OpenDocument (in Russian).

and found a political order that to this day at least provides them with normal and even good development in the modern world.⁶³

Thus, the historical experience of the West, in Russia's view, should have brought western political leaders to the idea of non-intervention, because the developed countries of the West have had the opportunity to independently tread the path of national reform. In turn, the countries of the West, apparently based on that same historical experience, are making the opposite conclusion: they know for themselves that the processes of change move very slowly, so they are endeavoring to accelerate historic changes by offering ready-made recipes for democratization.

In official Russian discourse, however, revolutions are depicted not as the road to emancipation and prosperity, but as tragedies:

At the root of all tragedies of the 19th and 20th centuries lay a crisis of European society, whose traditional foundations were destroyed as a result of endless revolutions, when the entire world fell victim to what Zbigniew Brzezinski called the "civil war within the West." A sustainable model of economic and social development—socially oriented, with universal suffrage and anchored on a substantial middle class—could be established only amid the dead end of a "cold war" and its geopolitical imperatives and upon a new technological footing.⁶⁴

In Russia's understanding the result of the Great French Revolution and the October Revolution was intolerance among the newly ruling revolutionaries, who rid themselves of their comrades in the name of "purity of the faith."⁶⁵ Lavrov stresses that the experience of Russia, whose history has "enough revolutions," can hardly be regarded as an example to follow because it always involves bloodshed and as a result the country always ends up being left behind in its development.⁶⁶

For Russia, revolutions are a rupture in history. In order to discover meaning in the Russia's development as a nation, Putin believes, one must forget about these breaks of 1917 and 1991 and perceive the history of Russia as an unbroken thousand-year his-

⁶³ Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by moderator of the program 'Aktual'nyj razgovor' V. Solovyov, 3 Kanal television company, 13 March 2011, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 323-13-03-2011, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/E35AC8110082ABCBC3257852004AF20E?OpenDocument (in Russian).

⁶⁴ Lecture by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov: "On the subject and method of modern diplomacy" as part of the "Golden Collection" of the journal *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn* (International Life), 12:11 (17 September 2009), Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/1169CB7A7B8A6228C325766C0046E102?OpenDocument (in Russian).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interview of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov on 'Russia Today' television channel ("Spotlight" program), Moscow, 3 February 2011, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 125-05-02-2011, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/D3E2DF348EBE84FEC325782E005EA6CF?OpenDocument (in Russian).

tory.⁶⁷ In another speech Putin calls the events of 1917 and 1991 “national catastrophes of the 20th century, when we twice experienced the breakdown of our nationhood.”⁶⁸ The Russian president describes the consequences of these events as follows:

As a result we have suffered a devastating blow to the nation’s cultural and spiritual code and have been confronted with a breakdown of traditions and historical unity, with demoralization of the society, and with a deficit of mutual trust and responsibility. Many of the serious problems we face have their roots in this. Responsibility to ourselves, the society and the law is, after all, a foundational matter both in the law and in daily life.⁶⁹

It is interesting to note that the Russian leadership perceives the process of the breakup of the Soviet Union as a revolution. Shortly after his election to his first term as president, Vladimir Putin gave an interview to the French newspaper *Figaro* in October 2000. In that interview Putin explained to French journalists that beginning in the mid-80s what was occurring in the USSR was perestroika, which in the early 90s essentially became a revolution. Putin understands revolution to be a dismantling of existing state institutions, after which there begins a creative process, a consolidation of institutions on a new and democratic basis.⁷⁰ In another interview to the French press Putin called the events of the 1990s a “bloodless revolution.”⁷¹ Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov also describes the events of the 1990s as a “truly democratic revolution without any shades of color (a hint at the “color revolutions” not being truly democratic) after which Russia was considered “one of the best countries with a democratic regime.”⁷² Then again, in the West’s understanding Russia lost the title of “leading democracy” when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000.

Conclusions for Russia’s Domestic Policy

The lessons Russia learned from the “color revolutions” of 2003–2005, according to Igor Ivanov, Secretary of the National Security Council of Russia, are that more intensive dialog is needed between Russian government and society.⁷³ Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin draws a similar conclusion from the events of the “Arab

⁶⁷ Message from the President to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2012, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/17118> (in Russian).

⁶⁸ Meeting of the Valday International Discussion Club, 19 September 2013, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/19243> (in Russian).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Interview in French newspaper *Figaro*, 26 October 2000, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/21634> (in Russian).

⁷¹ Interview on French television channels *TF-1* and *France-3*, 23 October 2000, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/21643> (in Russian).

⁷² Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov’s answers to questions during meeting with members of the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 24 September 2008, Official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1531-06-10-2008, http://mid.ru/BDOMP/Brp_4.nsf/arh/22D0E42DE56D4830C32574DA003217E2?OpenDocument (in Russian).

⁷³ Interview of I.S. Ivanov, secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, in the journal *Strategiya Rossii* (Strategy of Russia).

spring.”⁷⁴ Karasin believes that society is changing and becoming more demanding; it can no longer be engaged “using the templates of the 70s, 80s and 90s.” Young people need a social path upward, otherwise they become susceptible to provocation.⁷⁵

How was the Russian leadership’s position on “color revolutions” and “Arab spring” reflected in the attitude toward the mass protests of late 2011 and early 2012? In Putin’s opinion, the majority of the protesters were patriotically inclined people for whom the president, in his words, has “profound respect,” because they are interested in changing Russia for the better. Putin has a negative attitude toward the views of those protesters who could be classified either as “anarchists” or as wishing for the defeat of their own country (in 2014 Putin referred to them with the term “traitors to the nation”). The president stressed that he was offended by seeing the protesters wearing symbols (white ribbons) that, as he said, were developed abroad,⁷⁶ which demonstrates his certainty of the existence of an external factor in the mass protests. In a live television call-in show on 15 December 2011 during the protests themselves, Vladimir Putin even expressed the opinion that some protesters were paid to participate, commenting that the color revolutions were “tried and tested schemes for destabilizing a society.”⁷⁷

What conclusions relevant to internal Russian policy can be drawn from the unfolding of events in Ukraine in 2014? In Vladimir Putin’s opinion, the misconduct of ultra-radical and terrorist elements must be curbed on the one hand, and on the other, this must be done without creating restrictions for civil society, which as in the past must have a range of lawful means of presenting grievances to the authorities. In doing so, Putin called for avoiding political solutions that would constrain civil liberties, so that the authorities would not create an “ivory tower” for themselves by using the Ukrainian events as a pretext.⁷⁸

Conclusion

On the one hand, Russia’s official approach to revolution as a phenomenon is driven by its experience with nationhood and revolutions in the 20th century; on the other hand it is a reaction to the approaches of the West to supporting opposition forces in the course of revolutionary changes. Russian leaders believe that every young state has a right to its own path of trial and error without intervention from outside. Only then will citizens of young states learn responsibility and parliamentary forms of politics and acquire the

⁷⁴ Interview of State Secretary-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia G.B. Karasin in *Rossijskaya gazeta*, 13 February 2013.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Meeting with participants of the “Seliger-2012” forum, 31 July 2012, Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/16106> (in Russian).

⁷⁷ A special program: “A conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continued” was broadcast live on television channels *Russia 1*, *Russia 24* and *RTR-Planeta* and on radio stations *Mayak*, *Vesti FM* and *Radio Rossiya*, 15 December 2011, Official website of the Prime Minister of Russia, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/17409> (in Russian).

⁷⁸ Meeting with members of the Council of the Chamber of the Federation Council (27 March 2014), Official website of the President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20645> (in Russian).

skills of interacting with authority in the framework of constitutionally established rules rather than by the laws of “street democracy.” Third party intervention in revolutionary processes does not lead to accelerated democratization but only destabilizes the situation and leads to internal conflicts, because the exported version of democracy does not take into account the internal conditions, traditions and history of the country in which attempts are made to institute the principles of western democracy. The Russian official formula is not revolution, but evolution, under which the government and civil society conduct dialog to resolve social and economic problems that inevitably arise in any recently formed state.

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