

GEORGIA AND UKRAINE: SIMILAR REVOLUTIONS, DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES

By Taras Kuzio

The ongoing political crisis in Georgia shares similar roots with the September 2005 crisis in Ukraine (see EDM, September 8, 14, 16, 2005). The Georgian crisis began when former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili accused President Mikheil Saakashvili of money laundering, misuse of power, and instigating violence against his opponents. Arrested on corruption charges, Okruashvili retracted his accusations and then fled abroad.

In Ukraine two years ago, the head of the presidential secretariat and former head of President Viktor Yushchenko's 2004 election campaign, Oleksandr Zinchenko, also accused the president's entourage of corruption, although not of violence.

Both insiders made their accusations without producing evidence. This is a frequent tactic in former Soviet states; that is, using accusations of corruption to discredit opponents. It is difficult to see how the opposition's accusations against Saakashvili can be taken seriously, when the Georgian opposition is headed by Badri Patarkatsishvili. One of the wealthiest oligarchs in Georgia, Patarkatsishvili made his fortune through rather murky means in the 1990s by working for the now-exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

Both Okruashvili and Zinchenko used the accusations to launch opposition political parties that have failed to attract voters. With 0.04% of the vote, Zinchenko's Patriots bloc placed 44th out of 45 parties in the 2006 parliamentary elections, and it did not contest the September 2007 vote. Okruashvili's Movement for a United Georgia may share a similar fate if he does not return.

The Georgian and Ukrainian presidents have been close friends and allies since 2004, supporting regional organizations and joint efforts toward trans-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, Yushchenko is closer in personality to the soft-spoken parliamentary speaker Nina Burjanadze than to the firebrand

Saakashvili.

For all their similarities, they have responded to challenges differently. Opposition protestors have not been attacked in Kyiv, unlike the police over-reaction in Tbilisi last week. Yushchenko has sought good relations with Russia and cannot play the "Russian card" to win domestic support. Using the "Russian card" brings political dividends in Georgia and the opposition (the Justice Party and Maia Topuria in 2006, the National Council today) is routinely accused of working for Russia.

Georgia and Ukraine have taken different post-revolutionary paths. Georgia's Rose Revolution was a much narrower margin of victory, with estimates ranging from as low as 30,000 votes to as high as 100,000. Similar numbers attended Georgian opposition rallies in the last month. The ability to change regimes and governments with such low numbers of protestors belies a sense of societal instability and fragility of voter allegiances in Georgia. Ukraine's Orange Revolution generated a much larger turnout and managed to keep protests going for 17 days.

The Rose Revolution destroyed the regime of incumbent president Eduard Shevardnadze, meaning it will never return to power. The Orange Revolution failed to defeat the representatives of the Leonid Kuchma era, as its candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, ultimately won a respectable 44% of the vote. Yushchenko won the presidency with a slim 8% majority, while Saakashvili won an astounding 96% of the vote.

In Georgia the two wings of the Rose Revolution (Burjanadze-Democrats and United National Movement [UNM]) merged into an enlarged UNM. In Ukraine the three wings of the Orange Revolution (Our Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc [BYuT], Socialists) have feuded since fall 2005 and Our Ukraine-BYuT only re-forged an alliance in February.

Ukraine's regional diversity has traditionally been treated as a source of its internal weakness. However, unlike Georgia, regionalism in Ukraine has never evolved into separatism and violent inter-ethnic conflict. In fact, regionalism is actually an asset in Ukraine, both preventing the monopoly of power (that exists in Georgia) and encouraging political pluralism.

Ukraine's regional divisions ensured that the opposition would be never marginalized, unlike in Georgia. Yanukovich's Party of Regions won 44% of

the vote in 2004, 32% in 2006, and 34% in 2007. Its continued strong representation in parliament has been facilitated by Ukraine's low threshold (3%) for full proportional elections. Georgia's high 7% threshold -- the same as Russia's -- serves to further marginalize opposition parties by making it difficult for them to enter parliament.

Ukraine's orange parties have never monopolized power, unlike the UNM has in Georgia. The 10 parties in the Georgian opposition National Council are not represented in parliament. In contrast, the Party of Regions has over one-third of the seats in the outgoing and newly elected Ukrainian parliaments.

The Orange Revolution was both a popular uprising and a pacted elite compromise. One component of the compromise was constitutional reforms to transform a semi-presidential into a parliamentary-presidential system. Parliament increased its power under Yushchenko, moving it closer to Europe where parliamentary systems predominate, while parliament's powers declined under Saakashvili after reforms moved Georgia closer to the super-presidential systems common among other former Soviet republics.

Free media has been an important positive outcome of both the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions. In both countries oligarchs control the media, but in Ukraine there is greater diversity of control. Viktor Pinchuk, who owns the greatest number of Ukrainian television stations (ICTV, STB, New Channel), separated himself from politics after the Orange Revolution. Patarkatsishvili, owner of Imedi TV, is emerging as the main opposition leader since Okruashvili's voluntary exile. The Party of Regions is weakly represented in Ukraine's electronic media.

Georgia's Rose and Ukraine's Orange Revolutions had similar undertones but have produced divergent domestic and foreign policy trajectories. These are a product of different post-Soviet transitions and political cultures.

(Glavred, November 12; Pravda.com.ua, November 8, 9; Zerkalo nedeli, November 11-18)