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Russia's "militarization" of colour revolutions

Since Ukraine's EuroMaidan, Russia sees mass anti-regime protests at home and abroad as a military threat.

by Nicolas Bouchet¹

The new National Security Strategy that President Vladimir Putin signed at the end of 2015 goes further than previous Russian official documents in identifying foreign-sponsored regime change as a security threat. This has been reinforced by the recent experience of Ukraine where Russia accused the United States and the EU of inciting and supporting an anti-constitutional coup. The Russian authorities have voiced concern about "colour revolutions" – i.e. toppling governments by mass protests – for at least a decade, accompanied by talk of preventing them abroad as well as at home. In the last couple of years, however, there has been a move towards formalizing this in Russia's strategic documents and military doctrines, and in public statements by senior officials about perhaps having to intervene to defend other governments against foreign-sponsored protests. At the same time, there are signs that Russia is looking into military capabilities and tactics to carry this out. In other words, the Russian authorities are moving from securitizing the issue of anti-regime protests to militarizing it.

The tendency of foreign actors to overstate their role in colour revolutions has declined but Western governments are still tempted to express support for ostensibly pro-democracy protesters, as

happened in Ukraine in 2014. Western reactions to the anti-government protests in Armenia, Macedonia and Moldova last year were more low-key, partly because these were smaller and the countries less important, yet Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, again warned about the West inciting colour revolutions there. In case of mass demonstrations against the less democratic governments in post-Soviet countries during the coming years, the

KEY POINTS

- In the last two years, Russia has formalized its official view of "foreign-sponsored" anti-regime protests as non-military warfare by the West.
- Russia's view that military means can be used against colour revolutions has primarily a domestic focus but it can also apply in its neighbourhood.
- Conflating opposition protests with warfare, extremism and terrorism can be used by Russia to justify military intervention abroad in what others would see as non-military crises.
- In deciding whether to support anti-regime protests, Western governments will have to consider if this risks triggering a Russian military intervention.

United States and the EU will again be tempted to show some support. However, their decision-making on how to react to such protests will now have to factor in the risk of triggering a Russian military reaction.

The Russian regime's phobia about colour revolutions that topple its allies abroad and provide a model to its own population was fed particularly by the uprisings in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004–05. It has deep historical roots, though, and is tied to the Russian discourse since the breakup of the Soviet Union about maintaining a sphere of influence. The Arab revolutions of 2011 reinforced this phobia by producing not just regime change but also much more chaos and conflict than earlier ones in the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin's fears appeared to be confirmed when the largest protests in Russia for many years took place around the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011–12. These were blamed on the United States after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other US officials expressed support for the protesters. About to return to the presidency at the time, Putin wrote that it was unacceptable to Russia that the United States promoted regime change by using what he called "soft power" methods to destabilize countries and stoke extremist or separatist sentiments.²

Russia's rhetoric and reaction over colour revolutions has increased and taken a turn in content since Ukraine's EuroMaidan. In part this reflects the centrality of events in that country in shaping Russian thinking. In the earlier Orange Revolution, Russia failed to secure the election of its favoured candidate to Ukraine's presidency, and saw the authorities unwilling to use force against protesters. Following this and similar developments in Geor-

gia, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, Russia's emerging take on countering colour revolutions focused on neutralizing their "soft power" channels, such as in information and communications, civil society and elections, rather than on "hard power" prevention or suppression. The EuroMaidan showed, however, that Russia's policy since the Orange Revolution still did not achieve its desired political outcome and again failed to ensure the survival of its preferred ruler. This time the regime in Kyiv was more willing to use force, but not enough to save itself. Russia may not be faced a third time with such a situation in Ukraine, but the EuroMaidan experience has increased the likelihood of it intervening more directly and forcefully in similar scenarios.

Protests as warfare

Since the EuroMaidan, Putin and senior Russian officials have adopted a stronger line in depicting colour revolutions as a form of warfare used by the United States and its allies. This complements their claims that the West conducts a form of "hybrid warfare" against Russia in the post-Soviet space. In 2013, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov wrote that the Arab revolutions were examples of a modern type of non-military warfare in which foreign special forces would link up with domestic opponents and protesters.³ In May 2014, the Ministry of Defence's Moscow Conference on International Security focused more on colour revolutions, and saw Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also calling them a new form of warfare.⁴ Shoigu and Gerasimov further argued that where protests failed to topple a government the United States moved on to more military means of destabilization, as in Libya. The following month at the

Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Deputy Minister of Defence Anatoly Antonov said that the Asia-Pacific countries needed to find ways to prevent colour revolutions. Discussing the draft Strategy for Countering Extremism with his Security Council in November 2014, Putin linked colour revolutions with the threat of extremism. The Military Doctrine released at the end of 2014 places a new emphasis on countering political subversion and regime change by foreign and domestic forces that would exploit protests. In March 2015, at a meeting of the Interior Ministry Board, Putin called for developing preventive measures against colour revolutions. Shortly afterwards, Shoigu said the Ministry of Defence would commission research to that effect, while also raising the question of what part the military should play in protecting the political process. At last year's Moscow Conference on International Security, Shoigu, Lavrov and Gerasimov

FURTHER READING

The Color Revolutions

Lincoln Mitchell, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012

Comprehensive analysis of the successful and unsuccessful post-Soviet colour revolutions in the 2000s, including the role of US democracy promotion and Russia's reactions.

Russia, the West, and Military Intervention

Roy Allison, Oxford University Press, 2013

An authoritative study of Russia's approach to military interventions in its neighbourhood and further afield since the end of the Cold War.

Countering Color Revolutions: Russia's New Security Strategy and its Implications for U.S. Policy

Dmitry Gorenburg, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, September 2014

An early attempt at analyzing the emerging official Russian discourse on a political-military strategy to counter the security threats posed by foreign-sponsored anti-regime protests.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov watch military exercises in Russia's Zabaykalsky region July 17, 2013. Gerasimov is one of the principal Russian officials to have raised the need for a military response to colour revolutions abroad. *REUTERS / Aleksey Nikolskiy / RIA Novosti / Kremlin*

returned to the theme of colour revolutions and the conflicts they were responsible for.

The formalization of the authorities' counter-colour revolution thinking focuses on the joint danger of domestic subversion and the influence of Western actors in Russia, as well as on the militarization of the protest threat. The new National Security Strategy sees the combination of domestic radicals with extremist ideologies and foreign groups as a threat to the stability of the political process and to Russia itself. In the same vein, the 2014 Military Doctrine raises the possibility of a military response to domestic protests that are seen as the work of foreign special forces.⁵ The first test could come if protests follow the parliamentary elections in September 2016. Russia's official thinking also applies to colour revolutions abroad, however – not least because unlike in Russia there are precedents for them and because Russia has long been clear that it sees them as national security threats too. Therefore, this counter-revolutionary agenda poses a challenge for Russia's neighbours and for Western countries that may see an interest in supporting or endorsing anti-regime protests there. The logic of the official conflation of opposition activity and protests with non-military warfare can be used to justify Russia's use of its own non-military means abroad. Importantly, it can also be used to justify using military means abroad in what Western governments would see as non-military crises, such as protests.

Russia's means for doing so have improved in recent years. Since the 2008 Georgia War, military reforms have increased its ability to deploy its modernized forces in neighbouring countries at short notice, and events in Crimea have shown their effectiveness. Furthermore, unlike the ones in Georgia and Syria, an anti-protest intervention could be relatively small and focused on a country's capital to ensure the regime stays in office, rather than aim

for countrywide stabilization or large-scale operations. In his 2013 article, Gerasimov wrote it was necessary for Russia to define better its thinking about when and how to use armed forces abroad, and that the remit of its peacekeeping operations could be expanded to meet wider contingencies. While he did not directly associate this with counter-revolutionary interventions, the peacekeeping justification could easily be extended to such situations. Ministry of Interior paramilitary units trained for dealing with domestic unrest and terrorism could also be dispatched to shore up another government's internal security situation.⁶ In September 2015, in the Slavic Brotherhood joint exercise, airborne and special forces from Russia, Belarus and Serbia rehearsed such an operation for the first time. The exercise envisaged dealing with

a Maidan scenario in a fictional country by using troops to prevent "unrest and agitation", and detecting and destroying "the training center for illegal armed groups."⁷ Commenting on the exercise, Gerasimov is reported as saying that seeing colour revolutions as a form of warfare meant it was necessary to seek ways to use the military in response.⁸

Intervention prospects

Russia would not need a fabricated scenario or disputed pretext – as in Crimea or Georgia – for sending troops to prop up a government against mass protests. Neither would it need to resort to hybrid or covert methods instead of standard military ones. It could act at a government's invitation, bilaterally or under a multilateral agreement. In some neighbouring countries Russia could act under its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) commitments – alone, with other member states or through the organization's rapid reaction force. If Russia now defines protests as a form of warfare, it could claim this fits under the CSTO treaty obligation of mutual defence against aggression. Colour revolutions were discussed at CSTO events in 2011, 2013 and 2014, when its Secretary General called for a collective response. At the 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security, Lavrov spoke of the organization's effort to develop principles of "crisis management" at the same time as criticizing Western democracy promotion. Other members, though, do not want to let Russia use the CSTO as it wishes and would be reluctant to set a precedent in this way. In Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could also legitimate a Russian intervention. This would be problematic because of its core principle of non-interference and because of China's role in that body. But since SCO members are also committed to opposing aggression and fighting extremism and terrorism, Russia could justify intervention

in terms of repelling outside interference and aggression since it defines anti-regime protesters as being foreign-driven terrorists and extremists.

This analysis is not to say that Russia's official counter-colour revolution stance is a promise to intervene militarily in all or any protest crisis in its neighbourhood. But its official documents and statements indicate how its leaders think about this issue, and this will shape how they react to future events. Any decision would be based on the right combination of Russian interests being in play, and the calculation would vary with each country. Russia would not prevent the fall of a leader it sees as troublesome, as when protests forced out Kyrgyzstan's president in 2010. In some cases it would not see a regime being toppled as much of a security loss, especially if this would not change the country's foreign policy in a clear pro-Western direction. Also a regime would have to feel itself on the brink to invite Russia to intervene, since even those with good relations with it are not keen to give it a large security role in their country.

Given the aftermath of the Arab revolutions and the conflict in Ukraine, Western government look like they have lost what enthusiasm they had for people-power revolutions. Nevertheless, as they were with Ukraine's Euro-Maidan, they could still be tempted to react – reflexively or opportunistically – in support of what they would see as pro-democracy protests. And protests remain a possibility across the post-Soviet space, as recent events in Azerbaijan and Moldova show. The key issue here is not whether Russia's leaders believe their rhetoric about colour revolutions or whether they would use this as an excuse when they have other motives for intervening abroad. Either way, Western governments must take seriously the fact that Russia has upgraded its official messaging about colour revolutions and developed justifications for a military response – not least when seen alongside its growing willing-

ness to use force abroad. Therefore scoping where and under which conditions Russia might send troops to protect a regime from protests is a significant exercise that Western governments would do well to undertake if they have not already.

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