

Analysis

Who Doesn't Love Stability? Containing the Russian Public after the Orange Revolution

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Abstract

Drawing on an original analysis of the Russian media discourse about the Orange Revolution, this essay examines the impact of the revolutionary events on Russian elite strategies and the framing of the public discourse. It argues that the revolution was a key event both for the political elite and for public discourse. The discourse bifurcated between, primarily, a geopolitical frame that served to attract public support for the elite's goals in Ukraine, and to a lesser extent a liberal-democratic frame, that could provide the Russian public a chance to reflect on Russia's political system. However, since the elite could successfully redesign its system of rule, it removed the Orange Revolution as a possible moment of integration from the public.

Perfecting the Power Vertical: The Russian Elite Response to the Orange Revolution

It is well known that the Orange Revolution in Ukraine came as a shock for the Russian political elite, both due to the fact that public mass mobilization was a factor they had not reckoned with and because of the organizational and financial assistance provided to Yanukovich's campaign was to an extent unprecedented in the post-Soviet space. The Russian political elite thought of the struggle as merely being about which of the candidates would come to power. But then, in the aftermath of rigged elections, the contest turned out to be about something else.

The Orange movement that emerged was not only about bringing Yushchenko to power. It was concerned about the rules of the game, even though it did not seek to change formal representations of these rules, such as the constitution. Hence, more than just a transfer of power brought about by public mobilization was intended: The aim was to change the mode of governance from an authoritarian regime to democracy—to achieve a real revolution.

The Russian elite perceived this situation as a disaster. The problem went beyond the fact that their own strategy had failed and the money they had invested was lost. In light of the Russian domestic political context, the events in Ukraine could be perceived as undermining several vital pillars of the Russian elite's authority. First of all, the mobilization in Ukraine was a real political mass mobilization that relied on spontaneous processes. The revolutionary movement was supported by activists from the "Pora" movement, who had been trained by Serbian and Western NGOs. New information technologies like mobile phones and the Internet were used for coordination, as were personal contacts. These networks could hardly be controlled by admin-

istrative means. Secondly, in the claims and portrayals of the Orange movement, corruption and fraud were framed as being both systemic and undesirable. Thus, they were seen as a topic for mass mobilization against the Ukrainian political and economic elite and the system they had built. This endangered the regime-stabilizing concept of corruption in Russia. Here, the dominant concept sees corruption as an evil emanating from the administrative apparatus, against which both population and political elite are fighting an uphill battle.

Thirdly, Yushchenko was advocating a pro-Western and EU-integrationist course. As a consequence, the Russian elite saw him as supported by "the West" and thus endangering the further economic and political integration of Ukraine with their Russian "brothers". In addition, he promised to strengthen Ukrainian nationhood by emphasizing cultural roots distinct from Russia and supporting the Ukrainian language. In sum, the Orange movement not only threatened to jeopardize Russian aims for regional reintegration, it amounted to a credible threat to the entire development model of the Russian elite, which was built on privileging stability over freedom and democratic procedures, and favoring authoritarian modernization over spontaneous processes.

The reaction of the Russian elite was as decisive and clear as this threat had been: To create preemptive, Soviet-style "counter-revolutionary" youth organizations like Nashi and Molodaya Gvardiya. These groups were founded in order to generate a "patriotic" (regime-loyal) focal point for the teenage population which are easiest to influence in their political outlook. As a complementary measure, new legislation restricting the foreign financing of non-governmental organizations was passed. In addition, funding for internal security agencies was increased. As a measure to better

control informational flows, monitoring of the Internet and control of media outlets was enhanced. This way the domestic opposition, which had gained some momentum after the success of their Ukrainian colleagues, was marginalized in the 2008 elections.

The Russian elite also learned from its failed attempt to secure Yanukovich's victory: In 2009 they did not try to directly influence elections, but used external means as well as existing tensions within the Ukrainian elite to prevent Yushchenko from even coming close to re-election. With Yanukovich, they finally seem to have gained an open admirer of the Russian development model: "The Russian people do not fully understand the real worth of the stability they enjoy" was the statement he made when he first met with Prime Minister Putin as the newly elected Ukrainian president. So the Russian political elite learned from the Orange Revolution and successfully used the experience to adjust Russia's political system in order to contain the perceived threats to its rule. But how did the Orange Revolution affect the Russian population? Did it open up some new space for reflection and autonomous political articulation or did the elite successfully frame the discussion? This is a question that we will now try to answer with the help of media discourse analysis.

The Bifurcation of Public Discourse

The media analysis tries to uncover the "frames" that are used by journalists and commentators in order to give particular meaning to the Orange Revolution. The underlying assumption—standard in social constructivism on which discourse analysis rests—is that reality cannot be represented as such. Instead it has to be enacted upon by the producer of a text. That person relies on certain assumptions about reality and about causal chains that connect observed factors and outcomes and explain the processes between them. These assumptions are unique to the text producer only in part. They are in fact mainly derived from public discourse—indeed they have to be in order to produce texts that are comprehensible for the public. Frames are then coherent sets of assumptions about reality that are rooted in public discourse and that structure a given text.

The analysis on which this article is based was carried out from October 2004 to the end of January 2005 and covered the mainstream newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* as well as the liberal *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. The elections and subsequent demonstrations were clearly at the heart of media attention in this period. In both cases these events accounted for about four percent of overall reporting. When the protest activity reached its peak at

the end of November-beginning of December, the number of publications rose sharply. Frequently more than 10 articles were published on the topic in each edition of the newspapers, amounting to one quarter of overall reporting on some days.

The analysis showed that there were two dominant framings of the Orange Revolution: One that is compatible with the Russian elite's discourse and intentions, viewing Ukraine as an object torn away from Russia by the West, and a second one that frames the demonstrations as a democratic manifestation. Strikingly, there were no big differences between the newspapers with regard to the content. The first frame was represented in slightly less than half of the articles analyzed; the second one was discovered in less than one third. We will discuss the content and implications of each frame in turn.

The dominant "geopolitical" frame emphasized the conflicting interests of Russia and "the West". Both actors were presented as having incompatible goals, leading to a zero-sum conflict about the future alignment of Ukraine. The country and its population were represented as objects manipulated from the outside. Articles that applied this frame often employed military vocabulary and represented the choice as being once and forever. In short, articles adhering to this frame saw the Orange Revolution as being not about domestic rules for pursuing politics, but as a tool in the hands of "the West", which wants to extend its sphere of influence. At the same time, Russian attempts at influencing events in Ukraine were often presented as legitimate counteractions in order to prevent Ukraine from falling prey to "the West". In this case, Ukraine was presented as being "lost" for Russia. It is clear that this discourse fits the needs of Russia's political elite: First of all, it deflected attention from the political goals of the revolution that took place, thus pre-empting potential self-reflection by the public and disqualifying the revolution as a model for Russia. Secondly, it served to unify the Russian public and its elite by stressing the geopolitical nature of the confrontation and portraying its outcome as absolute and irreversible. This both legitimized the Russian elite's actions in Ukraine and directed attention away from Russia's internal conflicts. Thirdly, by suggesting that "the West" was about to remove Ukraine from Russia forever, the perception of a gap between Russia and "the West" was widened and the possibility of identification with the latter actor was destroyed.

But there was also another important frame. This frame emphasized the political nature of the Orange Revolution. It was framed as being about the means and ends of domestic political contestation. In that frame

politics was not understood as being a top-down administered process, but as negotiated by societal actors. Consequently, the protests were seen as an emancipation of society and a way to realize political preferences against authoritarian rulers. Some articles discussed several possible ordering principles of society, including democracy. “The West” was then not conceptualized as an actor taking Ukraine away from Russia, but as a model of development that Ukraine had chosen freely. Russian media articles within that frame of reference often connected these developments back to the Russian context and discussed their implications for further Russian development, including a readjustment of Russia to new Ukrainian realities. In that context “the West” was not rejected as an adversary, but examined as a valid and genuine object of positive identification. Likewise, Western-style democracy was discussed as a potentially acceptable ordering principle for society and politics. Consequently, many actions of the Russian authorities were seen as counterproductive: their blunt meddling into the electoral process was perceived as a nondemocratic method and therefore as exacerbating the alienation of the Ukrainian public from Russia.

Conclusion

Thus, fundamentally differing representations of the Orange Revolution were given in the Russian media

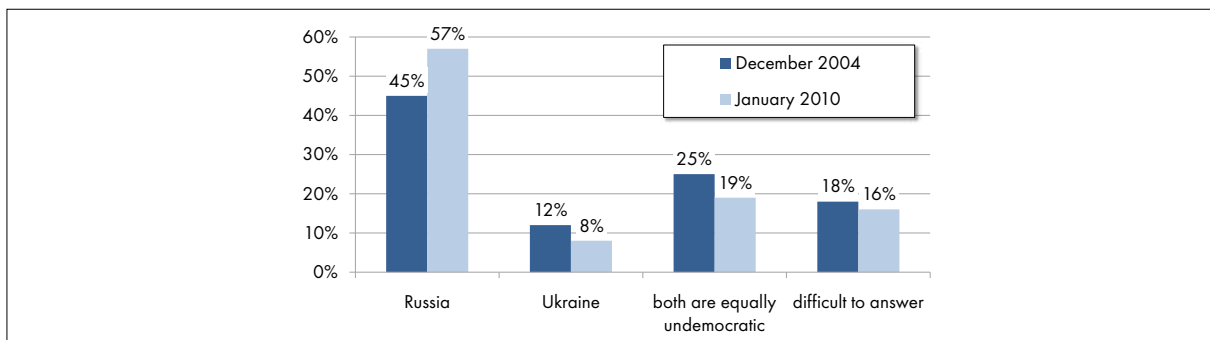
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Opinion Poll of the Russian Population: What is Your Position, Which of the Countries is More Democratic: Russia or Ukraine?



Source: representative opinion poll of the Russian population by Levada-Centr, 26 February 2010, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2010022605.html>