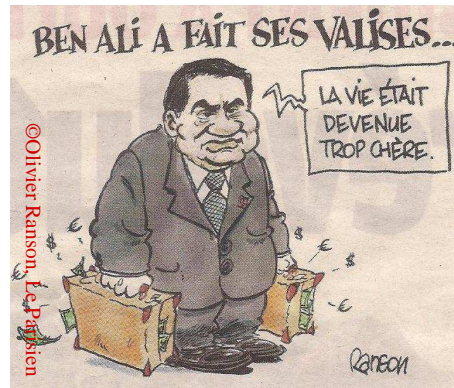




Can an 'Arab Spring' happen in Eurasia as well?

A look at Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

Bruno De Cordier





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The similarities ...

- 'first family regimes' if not 'presidential dynasties', built and functioning on similar patterns of: patronage and nepotism; the co-optation of traditional(ist) authorities (e.g. clan elders, Sufi sheikhs, ...), intelligentsia and minorities; rigged elections; intimidation and repression (despite a certain opposition margin in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan);
- the power elites and the regimes are products of failed political concepts (Soviet Socialism, secular Arab nationalism) of which they 'recycled'/still use certain elements (party structures, bureaucracies, state security structures, a political culture and -rituals, ...);
- monopolisation by the regimes, elite groups, and wider networks connected to both, of key sectors of the economy (emergence of 'rentier states'): oil and gas, cotton and 'niche resources', but also import-export, media, transport and telecom, real estate, hotels and restaurants... ;
- strategic positions and importance as the regimes' 'life insurance':
 - emerging petro-state(s) and transit countries (energy and defence);
 - instrumentalisation of real, potential and imagined 'insecurity' ('Islamic fundamentalism');






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The similarities ...

- the 'youth bulge';  table I
- wide and often visible sociaal-geographic and psychological gap;
- price rises (land and general cost of life in and around Baku, petrol in Tajikistan, ...);
- social change, social mobility and the impact of globalisation:
 - labour migration and remittances;  table I
 - large informal economy;
 - increasing penetration and use of ICT;  table I
 - frustration of the potential (suppression/stunting of economic initiative outside that of the power elites), the destructive impact of neo-liberalism (destruction/squandering of the USSR's social sector and social achievements).



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Table I

	Total population (millions)	'Youth bulge'		Population share in labour migration (%)	Access to 'new ICT' (%)	
		Population share ≤14 yrs. old (%)	Share of adolescents (10-19 yrs. old, %)		Internet	Mobile phone
Azerbaijan	8.411	25.8	18	15.9	35.99	99.4
Uzbekistan	26.593	33.2	22	8.1	20	76.34
Tajikistan	7.53	39	24	11,8	11.55	86.37
Tunisia	10.102	25.9	18	10.2	35.99	106.04
Syria	19.043	36.9	21	15	20.7	57.3
Egypt	74.033	33.6	20	3.7-5	26.74	87.11

Source: Bruno De Cordier, 2011, on the bases of UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Population Division, 2007, International Labour Organisation, 2009, Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, European University Institute, 2009 en 2010, and International Telecommunication Union–ICT Statistics Database, 2010.



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The differences ...

- the political and economic position and role of the state security agencies ('the KGB') vis-à-vis those of the armed forces (cf. increasing military expenditures, but which parts of the security apparatus benefit?);
- social and political dynamics anchored much more in those of 'the former Eastern bloc' than in those of the Arab world:
 - much stronger structural ties with Russia than with the West (legacy of USSR and Russian Empire, 110-180 years);
 - the regimes are far less dependent on Western military and (except Tajikistan) Western and international economic-financial aid;
 - Eurasia had its wave of 'regime change', or attempts thereto, during the so-called 'Colour Revolutions' (first half of the '00s), with spin-off in Kyrgyzstan in 2010;
 - clearly different linguistic and media landscapes (cf. no so-called 'Al-Jazeera effect', which Russian(-language) media won't have);





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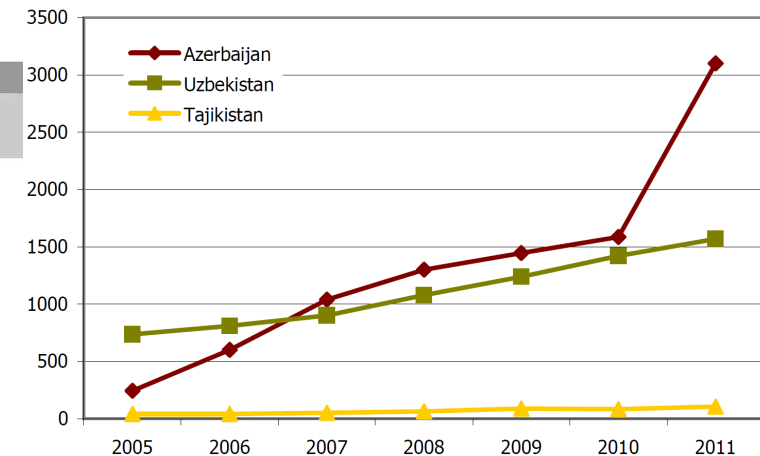
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Table II

	2005		2006		2007	
	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*
Azerbaijan	245	2.5	600	3.77	1,039	4.5
Uzbekistan	736	5.2	809.2	5.2	902.4	4.8
Tajikistan	42	2.18	43.02	1.7	52.2	1.8

	2008		2009		2010	
	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*
Azerbaijan	1,300	3.6	1,446	2.76	1,585	3.95
Uzbekistan	1,080	4	1,238	3.4	1,422	3.5
Tajikistan	63	1.7	88.2	1.46	84	1.5

	2011	
	Expenses (mln. US\$)	% of GDP*
Azerbaijan	3,100	6.2
Uzbekistan	1,568	3.2
Tajikistan	105	1.68



*By comparison (% of GDP, 2009): Egypt 2,1, Tunisia 1,3, and Syria 4 (2009).

Source: Bruno De Cordier, 2011, on the bases of data from Nyezavisimaya Gazeta, 6 February 2006, 17 March 2010 and 22 February 2011, Voenno-Promyshlennii Kuryer, №47 (163), 6-12 December 2006 en №104 (320), 3 February 2010, and the SIPRI Military Expenditures Database, milexdata.sipri.org.



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So, now what?

- spill-over of 'Arab Spring' in Eurasia: no, not in this immediate phase and not as part of a chain reaction;
- as said, not so long ago (first half of the '00s) the region had its own (largely externally-driven) momentum of (potential) regime change, with mixed effects;
- popular frustration, as well as discontent in some segments of the elites, do exist, but the psychological reversal not yet:
 - effective culture of intimidation (often subtle) if not fear;
 - the 'president-patriarch' syndrome (or father cult, cf. Azerbaijan);
 - 'будет ЕЩЁ хуже!!': sincere belief among sizeable parts of opinion and society that fast or radical change makes things worse...
 - memories (among ≥35-40 yrs. olds) of the dire '90s (unraveling/ collapse of the social safety of the USSR) and of armed conflict (Tajik civil war, Nagorno-Karabakh);
 - 'the new elites will be no different';
 - with varying success: attempts by the regimes to instrumentalise the confusion and bloodshed during the 'Arab Spring' (Tahrir Square, Libya) and the upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.



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So, now what?

- the state of the historical or organised opposition:
 - either marginalised or reorganising;
 - no equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood, different socio-religious dynamic than that in the Arab world;
 - yet existence of informal mobilisation channels (micro-regional and personal networks);
- and still... something's coming up:
 - along with the upheaval in Kyrgyzstan, the 'Arab Spring' did have a far-reaching psychological impact in Eurasia, among power elites as well as grassroots (shocking, a certain tacit fascination, increasing vigilance by the state security organs);
 - regime change in Kyrgyzstan in 2010: proof that stability under (semi-)authoritarianism is artificial and not static;



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So, now what?

- and still... something's coming up:
 - the 'catch 22' of the social mobility that comes with labour migration... ;
 - the existence of faultlines (inter-personal, institutional, and micro-regional) within the regimes themselves, natural death of the president is theoretically only an option within the next 5 years in Uzbekistan (age 73, 51 in Azerbaijan, 59 in Tajikistan);
 - alternative scenarios:
 - a 'tacit widening of the movement margin';
 - an internal succession arrangement;
 - 'Ceașescu 2.0': unorganised local unrest and an internal coup.