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# International diffusion and postcommunist electoral revolutions

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, a number of elections in postcommunist regimes perched between democracy and dictatorship have led to the triumph of liberal oppositions over illiberal incumbents or their anointed successors. The international diffusion of these electoral revolutions reflects the interaction among five factors: the long term development of civil society, expanded opportunities for democratic political change, the rise of collaborative networks among international democracy promoters, regional exporters of democracy and local oppositions, and, finally, careful application of an electoral approach to regime transition. The cross-national diffusion of the electoral model in this region, however, may have run its course, largely because of less supportive local and international conditions.

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## Democratization and diffusion

From 1996 to 2005, a wave of democratization through electoral revolutions swept through postcommunist east-central Europe, the Balkans and the Soviet

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successor states. The wave began in Bulgaria and Romania and then moved to Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (McFaul, 2005; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006 a,b,c). As a result, according to Freedom House figures, the number of fully free countries in this region reached 12 by 2005—the largest number of full-scale democracies in this part of the world since the transitions from communism began in the late 1980s. While not all of these revolutions succeeded in the overarching goal of creating authentic democratic orders, they did succeed in one respect: removing authoritarian leaders from political power.

In some ways, this recent round of democratization in the postcommunist region conforms to the global wave of democratic change that began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s and that then spread to other parts of the world—what Samuel Huntington (1991) has termed the Third Wave of democratization. Thus, there are a number of other examples around the world of electoral revolutions; that is, attempts by opposition leaders and citizens to use elections, sometimes in combination with political protests, to defeat illiberal incumbents or their anointed successors; to bring liberal oppositions to power; and to shift their regimes in a decidedly more democratic direction. While varying in their success, such revolutions have taken place in a number of competitive authoritarian regimes—most recently in Ethiopia, Togo and Zimbabwe and, over the past decade-and-a-half in Cameroon, Chile, Indonesia, the Ivory Coast, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and the Philippines (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Howard and Roessler, 2006; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006a; Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Anderson and Dodd, 2005; Angell, 2001; Carothers, 2004; Garber and Cowan, 1993; Lowenthal, 1991; Pastor, 1999a,b). In addition, as several recent studies have demonstrated, the number of democracies in the world has increased substantially since the Third Wave began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s. The global spread of democracy, moreover, seems to follow a regional dynamic (Finkel et al., 2005; Brinks and Coppedge, 2005).

From some other perspectives, however, the wave of democratization through electoral revolutions since 1996 in the post-communist region *is* surprising. While electoral revolutions have not been confined to the postcommunist world, as already noted, their frequency and rate of success in this part of the world is in fact unique by global standards. Thus, between 1996 and 2006, such revolutions have occurred in eight countries in the region, or 40% of all postcommunist countries in which such revolutions might have occurred (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006c). What we have witnessed in the postcommunist world, therefore, is an unexpectedly successful diffusion of electoral revolutions—with success indicated not just by the ability of these pivotal elections to produce a liberal political turn, but also by the impact of such elections on subsequent democratic performance. Indeed, the only factor that has boosted Freedom House rankings in a democratic direction in this region are elections where illiberal leaders were replaced by their liberal counterparts—whether the occasion was a founding election or subsequent elections that took place in the context of the recent wave of electoral revolutions (Bunce, 2006).

Second, this region had already experienced a round of democratization from 1988 to 1992. This early wave testified to both the democratic potential of some

states in this region as a result of both precommunist and communist legacies and the remarkable capacity of communism as a strikingly similar and nested domestic and regional system to promote the intra-regional diffusion of political change—whether during its heyday or at its end (Gitelman, 1972; Mlynar, 1980; Bunce, 1999b). By the mid-1990s, however, the “easy” democratic transitions in this region had already taken place, and neighboring states—an easy majority of all the region’s regimes—faced moderate to severe obstacles to democratization (Bunce, 1999a). These were particularly important, one can add, in those states where there were substantial tensions between cultural majorities and minorities—interestingly enough, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro and Georgia, as well as the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Moldova.

At the same time, many of the factors that had once encouraged diffusion in this region were no longer present. The Soviet bloc, three states, and domestic communist political economies had all disintegrated, leaving twenty-seven regimes that then moved in radically different directions in response to the virtuous and vicious circles of postcommunist economic and political transitions (Bunce, 2006). Moreover, the convenience of a common enemy during the communist period—or the combination of Soviet domination and the fusion and centralization of political and economic resources in the hands of the party—had given way to a more complex focus for popular resentments, thereby contributing to a decline in the cohesion of the opposition—a state of affairs more typical of dictatorships outside this region and hybrid regimes in general and debilitating insofar as democratic transitions are concerned (on opposition fragmentation, see Lust-Okar, 2004, 2005; Van de Walle, 2005; Howard and Roessler, 2006).

Put simply, then, the region had become far less regional, having lost the “cookie cutter” character of the communist experience, the discipline on liberal oppositions imposed by the invasive agenda of communism, and the close ties that came from political-economic integration through the Soviet bloc or, for Yugoslavia, trade integration with the Soviet Union (Bunce, 1999b; and for the importance and meaning of regions in democratization, Mainwaring and Perez-Linan, 2005). The region, therefore, was logically far less supportive of diffusion dynamics, particularly those (as with the electoral revolutions) that cross commonly accepted divides within the region; that is, east-central Europe, the Balkans, and the core group of 12 Soviet successor states.

The electoral revolutions that have swept across the postcommunist region since 1996, therefore, are puzzling developments. Why did these revolutions begin? Why were they so successful, particularly in the early part of the wave, and why did they move from country to country? Will the wave of electoral revolutions continue in this region in the future?

The purpose of this paper is to address these questions by analyzing the recent wave of electoral revolutions in the postcommunist region as a process of international diffusion. We begin by defining diffusion and identifying some of its key properties and causes. We then analyze the invention of the electoral model and isolate the key factors that encouraged its movement from Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia to other parts of the region. In the conclusion to this paper, we explore two

related issues that are central to debates about both diffusion and the future of democratization in the postcommunist world. How has the electoral model and its impact changed over the course of its regional journey, and what do these changes suggest about its capacity in the future to transform regimes in this part of the world?

### **Defining diffusion**

Diffusion can be defined as a process wherein new ideas, institutions, policies, models or repertoires of behavior spread geographically from a core site to other sites, whether within a given state (as when the movement of new policies invented in one political subunit spreads to other subunits within a federal polity) or across states (as the spread, for example, of public sector downsizing or non-governmental organizations) (Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Aksartova, 2005; Lee and Strang, *in press*; Beissinger, 2002; Brinks and Coppedge, 2005; Markoff, 1996; Tarrow, 1998, 2005; Tarrow and della Porta, 2005). When translated to the case of interest here, diffusion refers to an electoral model of democratization that was developed and applied in a cluster of states—Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia from 1996 to 1998—and then embraced and implemented thereafter by opposition groups and everyday citizens when elections were held in other states in the region. Here, the successful cases of emulation, where elections led to the defeat of illiberal candidates, incumbent or coalitional, include Croatia and Serbia-Montenegro in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. By contrast, such revolutions failed to unseat illiberal leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan (twice), Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Does this definition mean that diffusion dynamics are at work whenever similar innovative developments take place in lagged fashion across a number of states? The answer is no. Diffusion requires knowledge of a new development in one state by actors outside the state and a commitment by these individuals and groups, because of their values and/or interests, to emulate that development in their own locality. Thus, diffusion implies that outsiders make a conscious decision to copy what happens in another state, rather than, say, remaining ignorant or waiting for a similar development to happen in their own state. Where similar changes take place in a number of states, therefore, diffusion can be an illusion, to borrow from a recent title (Brinks and Coppedge, 2005).

International diffusion does not occur when similar developments are responses, simply, to similar local conditions—for example, the rise of communism in Yugoslavia and China after World War II in response to their common experiences with foreign occupation and the destruction of the old order; or when a powerful international actor orchestrates changes in weaker states—for example, the institution of communism throughout much of Central and Eastern Europe during and after World War II in response to Soviet concerns about postwar security and economic recovery. Although in both sets of examples, there was an earlier diffusion of the communist idea, supported in some instances by the International, the actual

spread of communism, it is fair to say, was largely a product of the presence of both remarkably similar domestic and international circumstances and, especially in the case of the spread of communism throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the ambitions of an emerging regional hegemon and superpower.

Diffusion can occur in several ways. Ideas, models and the like can spread across boundaries, simply because they provide precedents that are unusually appealing to actors in other states and that influence their thinking, goals and behavior. Such demonstration effects are likely to be persuasive for actors outside the state where there are significant constituencies that stand to gain from similar changes; when the precedent itself suggests far less resistance to change than many had assumed; and when domestic conditions are perceived, either rightly or wrongly, to be similar in the “sending” and “receiving” states. In this dynamic, diffusion is largely informal and takes the form of attractive precedents that lower the costs of action elsewhere. However, diffusion dynamics can also occur through more purposive and planned actions that are the result of collaborations between local and international actors. In this case, diffusion rests on detailed emulation that involves close attention to how the changes occurred and the conditions and strategies that contribute to their successful adoption. Here, a key factor is the existence of networks, wherein actors in other states confer with innovators about goals and strategies; innovators take on the responsibility for peddling their ideas outside their state; or “rooted cosmopolitans” based in one country travel to other countries promoting their pet idea, model, or policy (Tarrow, 2005). Although cross-national networks are critical to most processes of diffusion, these networks can be formal or informal, long-in-place or new. They depend on trust and shared perceptions of similar situations and similar opportunities and capacities for change (Tarrow, 2005).

No matter how deliberate and planned the international transfer, however, the local conditions supporting diffusion vary, and the object being diffused necessarily changes—in its core components and its consequences—over the course of its international journey (Jacoby, 2004; Beissinger, 2002). This process reflects in part differences in the sources of innovation. As Mark Beissinger (2002) has argued in his study of the diffusion of nationalist protest in the Soviet Union, early innovators—or what he calls “early risers”—had the disadvantage of limited precedents for their behavior, but the considerable advantage of structural conditions that supported their behavior—which is precisely why activists were able to re-frame their identities and forms of participation, which then combined to form the innovation that was available for subsequent diffusion to other geographical locales. They also benefited from what can be termed “mini-innovations,” which in other contexts and other times had contributed elements of the final package.

However, as that package begins to spread outside its founding core, the weightings of the two factors shift. The cross-national impact of precedent increases, but it is joined with weaker and weaker local structural support for change. Put simply, ideas seem to out-race capabilities and, for that matter, preparation. Thus, it becomes easier and easier as precedents mount for emulators to underestimate the requirements of the change in question, and easier and easier for local actors committed to the status quo to be forewarned and forearmed. Moreover, the temporal lag

in adoption is indicative of less supportive local conditions. Indeed, it is precisely this dynamic characteristic of the diffusion cycle that describes the changing character and impact of the protests that brought down communism in Central and Eastern Europe from the fall of 1988 to early 1990. The process began in Poland in 1988, where mass protests against communism had a long history. However, by the time these protests had diffused to Romania, the numbers of participants and their political cohesion declined; the regime responded with violence, rather than more conciliatory actions; and the protests did not produce, as in the earlier cases of Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, either a full collapse of communism or a rapid transition to democratic politics. Looking ahead in our analysis, it is precisely this pattern that we also find in the electoral revolutions—for example, declining mass participation, more violence and less powerful democratic consequences.

This pattern leads to a final issue that is central to diffusion in general and the movement of the electoral model of democratization in particular. What factors seem to be critical in encouraging international diffusion? Three sets of factors stand out once a new model becomes available for possible export. One is the nature of the innovation itself. Is it viewed by those outside the state as attractive, successful, and transferable? If so, individuals and groups in other states have strong incentives to follow the lead of actors in the innovating state. Another set of factors focuses on similarities between the “sending” and the “receiving” country. The more similar they are, especially with respect to both the demand for change and the conditions supporting and necessitating such change, the more likely the innovation will travel. This is particularly the case, when there is the *perception* of common needs, capacities and benefits—put succinctly, common contexts and common identities. It is hardly accidental, therefore, that diffusion tends to be a regional process. Finally, international diffusion is more likely when there are collaborative networks that cross national boundaries; that promote diffusion of the particular model in question; and that provide incentives for actors on both sides of the diffusion process to embrace transplantation.

With these theoretical insights in mind, let us now trace the diffusion of the electoral model of democratization in the postcommunist region. We begin with the invention of the model itself and then address the question of why it diffused.

### **Inventing electoral revolutions**

There is considerable evidence that the electoral model that was deployed in the postcommunist region was itself the product of international diffusion—not just of specific components, such as elections as the core definition of democracy, the role of civil society in democratization, and the rise of international election-monitoring as an international norm, but also the electoral model as a composite of these and other elements (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006a,b,c). The electoral model of regime change first appeared in the Presidential election in the Philippines in 1986 and in the Presidential plebiscite held in Chile in 1988 (Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Garber

and Cowan, 1993; Schock, 2003). In both cases, it was assumed by those ensconced in power that these “rigged rituals” would deliver an easy victory—especially since the elections in both cases were announced suddenly, with the assumption that the opposition would not have time to prepare (which was precisely the logic, and just as flawed, of the communists in Poland when they suddenly called for semi-competitive elections in June, 1989).

However, local opponents of the Marcos and Pinochet dictatorships, respectively, assisted by the international democratization community, were able to capitalize on their earlier experiences with opposition organization, popular protests, and strategies of non-violent confrontations with the regime and combined these resources with ambitious campaigns to register voters and get out the vote (for example, through the Crusade for Citizen Participation in Chile); monitor the quality of the elections; and educate voters about regime abuses and the importance of seizing the political moment to reject the regime in the Chilean case (the plebiscite offered no alternative candidate) and to support the Aquino-Laurel ticket in the Philippines (Santa-Cruz, 2005). Also critical in this process (as it was to be in others) was the willingness of the US, albeit rather late in the game in these cases, to take a stand rejecting the validity of the announced election results and, in the case of the Philippines, to go a step further in encouraging Marcos to accept the real election results and vacate office. While both Marcos and Pinochet lost, the transitions to democracy were neither immediate nor trouble-free. However, by most accounts, a corner was turned—a corner that was the result, it must be recognized, of hard work not just during the election, but also years before that. Another remarkable aspect of these two elections is the fact that publics were willing and able, like the opposition, to take the election seriously, rather than ignore or boycott it, and to register their political preferences, despite the demobilizing effects of both harassment and hopelessness.

This model of regime change—that is, transforming elections in authoritarian settings into genuinely competitive and fair processes with substantial popular involvement—then moved to other parts of the world, such as Nicaragua, Indonesia, and eventually Mexico, as well as the postcommunist region. One of the most interesting cases was the Nicaraguan elections of 1990, when the Sandinistas, fearing fraud, but supremely confident of their public support, welcomed international election monitors—who then ended up certifying the victory of the opposition. Just as interesting is the fact that the Sandinistas accepted this judgment, as did, for example, the losers many years later in pivotal elections in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia between 1997 and 2000. However, in Serbia in 2000 (as in the Philippines and Indonesia before it), the election was immediately followed by popular protests to support a transfer of political power mandated by elections in the face of attempts by the incumbents to falsify the election results—a dynamic that also materialized in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005.

The model then moved to the postcommunist region—though hardly in mechanical fashion or in the absence of the hard work and creative ideas of opposition groups that confronted the similar situation of wanting to use elections to defeat illiberal incumbents or their anointed successors. The story begins with four

inter-connected political struggles that took place in Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia from 1996 to 1998. The first were the massive 3-month-long protests in Serbia from 1996 to 1997—protests that were motivated by Milosevic’s attempt to deny the opposition its significant victories in many of the local elections that took place in 1996 (Lazic, 1999; Pavlovic, 2005; Thomas, 1999). These protests, as in the other cases as well, built on previous rounds of political protest—in the Serbian case going back to the early 1980s and in Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia to 1989. Although the Serbian protests failed in the short-term, they contributed in important ways to a subsequent round of election-based protests in the fall of 2000 that succeeded in bringing down Milosevic (Saint Protich, 2005; Bieber, 2003; Pribicevic, 2004). Also helpful in producing a new generation of protesters and expanding the geography of anti-Milosevic sentiment were Milosevic’s decisions, following these protests, to crack down on the autonomy of universities, local governments and the media (Pavlovic, 2005; Goati, 2001).

The second set of struggles took place in Romania, where the liberal opposition finally came together and ran a sophisticated political campaign that succeeded in replacing the former communist incumbent president (who came back to power in 2000), with a candidate with far stronger liberal credentials and commitments (Romanian Coalition for a Clean Parliament, 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006).<sup>1</sup> The third set of struggles took place in Bulgaria at roughly the same time. In Bulgaria, Serbian protests next door had been very influential in motivating publics, intellectuals and leaders of the opposition—motivation that was strikingly similar to how the Czechs and Slovaks reacted to the outbreak of large-scale protests in East Germany in the fall of 1989. In Bulgaria, there were large-scale public protests against the communist-led government in 1997 that led to the fall of the government and its replacement through an election with a government led by a united liberal opposition. Although their cohesion proved temporary and their effectiveness limited (as in Romania), their victory, again as in Romania, proved to be a decisive political turning point—as indicated, for example, by the improvement in Freedom House scores following these pivotal elections in both countries. This improvement, moreover, remained in place in the years to come, aided in part by continuing international support for democratization by the European Union and the United States.

The same generalization applies to the fourth participant in the development of the electoral model in the postcommunist region: Slovakia. In a pivotal meeting taking place in the Vienna airport at the end of 1997, leaders of the Slovak opposition, the American ambassadors to Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and representatives of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy came together to devise a strategy for unseating Vladimir Meciar, the illiberal Slovak Prime Minister, in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The success of the Bulgarian and Romanian oppositions were crucial lessons of the value of unity. This meeting led to the OK98

<sup>1</sup> On the advantages for democratization of authoritarian forces losing, then winning power see Bunce (2002).



campaign, where all the components of the electoral model came together—for example, the formation of a cohesive opposition (bringing together no less than 18 parties); ambitious campaigns to register voters, advertise the costs of the Meciar regime, and get out the vote; and the deployment of both domestic and international election-monitoring, as well as exit polls. In this case, the willingness of the opposition to unite behind this campaign reflected the disastrous results of their failure to cooperate in the 1994 elections after a brief period of governing the country in a broad coalition (Meciar won and became Prime Minister again). They could build upon the previous development of a vibrant civil society which already had a very high degree of organization and coordination, reflecting longterm international support and the creativity and hard work of local activists. As a result, Meciar lost the election, and as leaders in both Bulgaria and Romania had, accepted the verdict of the voters.

It was through these four interactive cases that the electoral model was in effect invented, applied and made available for export to other countries in the region that also had regular elections; authoritarian leaders in power; and fragmented oppositions (though more repressive domestic politics). Its first stop in the diffusion process was in Croatia in 2000, where the death of the long-serving dictator, Franjo Tudjman, in 1999 had weakened the governing party and provided an opportunity for the opposition to win power. In this case, as in Bulgaria and Romania, the election was for the Presidency, and as in these cases as well as Slovakia, the electoral outcome produced a smooth transition. As in Slovakia, and in contrast to the situation in Bulgaria and Romania after these pivotal elections, the electoral revolution had dramatic effects on democratization in Croatia. The Croatian election of 2000 was in fact a revolution, and one that was enhanced by the return to power 3 years later of the Croatian Democratic Union. This turnover cemented democracy in Croatia—in part because of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader's strong commitment to leading Croatia into the European Union.

Later in 2000, the electoral revolution moved to Serbia. Here, there were several key differences. One was that the struggle against Milosevic was severely constrained by the heavy authoritarian hand of the Milosevic regime. Thus, for example, there were no external election monitors in Serbia in the fall 2000 elections; the media were closely controlled by Milosevic; and the assistance provided by the international community was important, but necessarily on the geographical margins, given the impossibility of a domestic presence. Moreover, a student group, *Otpor*, played the central role in the struggle against Milosevic, and the size, dedication and geographical spread of this movement are what, arguably, proved to be politically decisive. Finally, the victory of the opposition (which was composed of 18 parties that came together around the candidacy of a moderate nationalist, Vojislav Kostunica—thanks in part to the willingness of the far more charismatic Zoran Djindjic to play a secondary role) was delayed by Milosevic's refusal to cede power. In contrast to the previous cases discussed, where authoritarian leaders or movements ceded power after losing elections, Milosevic finally stepped down only after the opposition mounted massive Serbia-wide protests. Like its Croatian counterpart, the Serbian presidential election produced a change in regime, as well as government.

However, in contrast to the situation in Croatia, the Serbian opposition continued to be plagued by severe divisions that were exacerbated by the continuing border problems represented by Kosovo and Montenegro (and growing pressures for autonomy in Vojvodina as well) and by pressures on the part of the international community to move quickly in cooperating with the demands of the Hague War Crimes Tribunal (Bieber, 2003). The assassination of Djindjic in 2003—the most effective leader of the Serbian opposition—did not help matters (Miller, 2004).

The Georgian opposition then followed suit in the 2003 parliamentary elections—though this produced, it is important to recognize, a *coup d'état* by the opposition, since Shevardnadze resigned, but was not in fact up for reelection (Papava, 2005; Wheatley, 2005). In Georgia, the political context was less constraining than in Serbia, especially given the lackluster campaign by Shevardnadze's allies, the defection of so many key players from the ruling group to the opposition (such as Mikheil Saakashvili, the current president), the relative openness of the Georgian media, the formation of a youth group in support of political change, *Kmara* that worked closely with the Georgian opposition around Saakashvili, and the presence of a significant number of local and international election monitors (Karumidze and Wertsch, 2005).

It was clear that the Georgian opposition, as in the other cases, modeled its campaign on the previous electoral revolutions in the region. Thanks in part to the Open Society Foundation, for example, there was close collaboration between Georgians and graduates of the Serbian and Slovak experiences. Moreover, the American democracy promotion community also played a role, as they had in Slovakia and Serbia. What was critical was their longterm investment in Georgian civil society (as in Bulgaria, Romania and especially Slovakia), the pressures they placed on Shevardnadze prior to the election to improve the quality of the elections, and their contributions to campaign strategies and opposition development. These benefits recognized, however, in the Georgian context as elsewhere, their influence was not just limited; it was at times counter-productive (Devdariani, 2003; Cooley and Ron, 2002; Grodeland, 2006; Mendelson, 2004; Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Mendelson and Gerber, 2005). Indeed, in the view of most participants and local analysts, the key international contributions were, first, the precedent set by successful electoral revolutions in Serbia and Slovakia, and, second, the strategic insights offered by “graduates” of these earlier electoral revolutions (Kandelaki, 2005; Meladze, 2005).

The next successful electoral revolution occurred in Ukraine a year later (Kuzio, 2005; Kubicek, 2005; Way, 2005a,b). As in the Georgian case, a single charismatic politician—in this case, Viktor Yushchenko—played a critical role. As in both the Georgian and Serbian cases, the successful political breakthrough exploited a record of a leadership that had grown increasingly corrupt, careless and violent; benefited from defections from the ruling circles; built upon earlier rounds of protests and recent successes in local elections; and reached out to diverse groups, with young people playing nearly as important a role as one saw in Serbia with Otpor. Moreover, as in Serbia and Georgia, political protests after the election (which were as large and as persistent as those in Serbia) were again necessary to force the authoritarian challenger to admit defeat. More distinctive to the Ukrainian case, however, was the

breakdown of central control over the media during the campaign and especially during the protests, and the remarkable role of the Supreme Court, which came down in support of the opposition's argument that the elections had been fraudulent and had to be repeated. As in Serbia, moreover, the unity of the opposition was short-lived, a factor that complicated consistent movement to create democratic polities.

The electoral model then moved to a number of new locales—Kyrgyzstan, where it succeeded, as in Georgia, in deposing the long-serving leader, despite the fact that these elections were also parliamentary, not presidential, and to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, where repressive regimes, divided oppositions, and sporadic protests allow incumbents to maintain power. These dynamics were similar to earlier, failed attempts to carry out electoral revolutions in Armenia and Belarus. Given the political chaos that has ensued in Kyrgyzstan since the spring 2005 elections, it is fair to say that the electoral model has had mixed results in that country (Weyerman, 2005; Huskey, 2005a,b, *in press*). Efforts of opposition and civic activists to use mass protests to unseat the Lukashenka regime after the manipulated elections of 2006 failed once again to bring about a change of regime. However, although the government was able to contain the protests by arresting opposition leaders and dispersing protesters, the number of citizens who participated in these demonstrations was substantially higher than in earlier attempts.

There are several generalizations we can draw from this brief overview of the origins and the diffusion of the electoral model in the postcommunist region. First, as with so many innovations, the invention of the model itself testifies to the importance of diffusion dynamics. The model that was deployed in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, in short, was the culmination of a number of developments within and outside the region, including, for example, the declining international constraint on violations of state sovereignty (Finnemore, 2003) and the growing consensus around international democracy promotion through encouragement of civil society on the part of the World Bank, USAID and European foundations and governments (Van Wersch and de Zeeuw, 2005; Hermann, 2005; USAID, 2005; Finkel et al., 2005). Put simply, the “diffusers” were themselves influenced by diffusion. Second, while precedent played a powerful role, especially in communicating that such change was possible, so did deliberate and careful emulation. The latter was facilitated by networks of local, regional and Western political activists who came together to defeat illiberal leaders and shift the political trajectories of these countries in a more democratic direction. Third, the hard work of local activists was, in the final analysis, the key factor—which helps explain, for example, the contrast between the positive and ongoing consequences of the OK98 campaign in Slovakia and the far more chaotic dynamics of the electoral revolution in the Kyrgyz parliamentary elections. Finally, as the diffusion literature suggests, the model changed with respect to the weight of precedent versus supportive local conditions. Local capacity to produce powerful democratic consequences declined as the model moved from its original site in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Croatia to Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

These insights, however, do not answer a key question: why did the electoral model move so successfully from country to country in the postcommunist region? Why did it become the model of choice, and why did it succeed at the very least

in bringing down dictators and improving the prospects for subsequent democratic development? It is to these questions that we now turn.

### The electoral model

As noted above, specialists in diffusion argue that a key factor affecting the likelihood of successful diffusion is whether the object being diffused is amenable to international transplantation. In one respect, the electoral model is not as easy to diffuse as, for example, some minor change in public policy. This is because the electoral model threatens to unseat those in power. The political threats involved, moreover, were substantial in countries where dictatorships were long in place—as in Croatia during the Tudjman era, Serbia-Montenegro under Milosevic (especially beginning in 1997) and Kyrgyzstan under Akayev who, like Milosevic, had grown more authoritarian during his time in office. However, even in the more democratic settings, authoritarian incumbents had significant political and economic resources at their disposal to block political change—for example, control over the media (which was extremely important in Ukraine) and the use of policies that helped keep the opposition divided and dispirited (as in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia).

However, in most other respects, the electoral model is unusually amenable to diffusion. First, as Mark Beissinger (in press) has argued, drawing upon the work of Sidney Tarrow (2003, 2005), the electoral model has the decided advantage of being modular. It is a compact package of detailed and inter-related tasks, such as forging cooperation among opposition groups, registering voters and getting out the vote, pressuring the government for reforms in electoral commissions, using the media (where possible) to counter the biases of the official media, running campaigns that provide voters with the information and hope they need to take the election seriously and vote their consciences, monitoring elections, and preparing for protests in the event that illiberal leaders lose, but refuse to vacate their offices. We recognize, of course, that these tasks require an extraordinary amount of work, coordination and, in the politically dangerous situations in Serbia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, bravery. For example, approximately 700 members of *Otpor*, the Serbian youth organization that arose in response to the hard-line policies of the Milosevic government, is a case in point (Goati, 2001). The poisoning of Yushchenko in the course of the campaign in Ukraine illustrates the risks involved. Hence, the electoral model must be adapted to local conditions and circumstances, including both the nature of the authoritarian regime and the unity and size of the opposition. The electoral model is nonetheless an unusually well-defined set of activities and strategies (Tucker, 2005). As the failure of the attempt to create an electoral revolution in Belarus in 2006 illustrates, some of the techniques that have come to be associated with the electoral model do not travel as well as others, and not all attempts lead to success. But the model clearly has inspired democratic activists among both the partisan political opposition and the non-governmental sector in a number of countries.

Some characteristics of elections have also been beneficial to the diffusion of the electoral model. As a number of scholars have observed, competitive

authoritarianism—or regimes in which democratic forms are combined with politics that favors authoritarian incumbents—opens up a contradiction between the claim of legitimation through political choice and the reality of regular elections that are rigged in various ways to favor illiberal candidates (Schedler, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2002). Moreover, elections have the advantage of occurring at fixed intervals, thereby featuring, as a result, well-defined beginnings and especially endings. They allow for preparation—though it is interesting to note that illiberal leaders often recognize this problem and change the electoral calendar in order to weaken the opposition. It is even more interesting how often this strategy backfires—as it did, for example, with Pinochet in Chile in 1988, Jaruzelski in Poland in 1989, Milosevic in Serbia in 2000, and Akayev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The limited temporal parameters of elections have the benefits of energizing activists and citizens by providing a period of time in which they are being asked to think hard, participate a great deal, and take risks. Because elections also have an endpoint, moreover, they provide an immediate measure of success and failure while also highlighting in the process an issue that matters to both publics and oppositions: the contrast between playing by the rules of the political game (and dictators are fond of elaborating such rules) and violating them.

Indeed, elections are distinctive, because of their close association with democratic politics. Publics cannot hope to stop oligarchs from stealing money, but politicians who steal votes are another matter. While many analysts have criticized the simple equation of democracy with elections, the fact is that, in the public mind, elections are *the* indicator of democracy—a form of government that has become a global norm. Moreover, it is easy for all to recognize that democracy cannot take root if illiberal leaders stay in office. This is a necessary condition—and one that publics recognize as such.

Finally, the diffusion of the electoral model is encouraged for a simple reason. It is in the interest of the opposition, because they are out of power, to grab hold of models of political change that enhance their prospects for winning power. There is nothing abstract and sacrificial about emulating a model that promises, if successful, to give oppositions a chance to rule. The impact of this factor is particularly important in the political calculations of partisan political leaders, including some who have played key roles in electoral revolutions, who had been involved in political life at very high levels but lost their positions or had fallings out with the authoritarian leader. Although electoral revolutions are often depicted as examples of “people power,” with some justification given the high level of popular involvement typical of such events, and although activists from the non-governmental sector have often played key roles as well, “standard issue” politicians, or those who have already held high political office, have been key actors in all the electoral revolutions in this region to date.

Both the goals and the components of the electoral model, therefore, attract an international following, especially in regimes where there are regular elections and where authoritarians are ruling and have become over time more corrupt, more careless and less popular. However, this does not explain the popularity of this model in the postcommunist world in particular. Here, we would emphasize several factors

(Bunce and Wolchik, 2006a,b). First, there is, simply, the persuasive power of success. The fact is that the first electoral revolutions in this area were successful—not only in bringing down dictators, but also in moving Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia in particular in a decidedly more democratic direction. Just as appealing was another consequence. As Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004, so Bulgaria and Romania are both slated for membership.

Moreover, the postcommunist region features a long legacy of rigged elections—far longer, for example, than, say, Sub-Saharan Africa, where transitions to democracy took place at roughly the same time. The populations in the former countries are extremely well educated, which is important, among other things, for running sophisticated campaigns. Finally, this region features both a number of democratic success stories, all of which were cemented by elections where the liberal opposition came to power, and a large number of countries that are hybrid democracies where authoritarians have managed to stay in power. In the latter cases, however, in contexts where there are political opportunities for change—not just regular elections, but also, for example, rapidly expanding civil societies, though starting with deficiencies in this regard (Howard, 2002), vibrant parliaments (which was critical in Ukraine, for example), and longstanding traditions of public protests (as in every case where electoral revolutions have taken place).

The electoral model, however, is not the entire story of why these revolutions moved from country to country. Two other sets of factors played a critical role—factors that, it is fair to say, are distinctive to this region and that work in the similar direction of encouraging political emulation. These include the assumption of similar circumstances by the main actors involved and collaborative networks.

### **Similar conditions**

As noted above, there were many reasons to assume that the collapse of communism, communist states and the Soviet bloc, coupled with the remarkable divergence in the political and economic trajectories of the postcommunist regimes following these changes, would have had the effect of weakening the regional impulse for cross-national diffusion of political change. However, this line of argument ignores, first, the existence of an extremely attractive model of simultaneous and rapid transitions to democracy and capitalism provided by the experiences of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia in particular (Bunce, 2006).

In addition, to downplay diffusion is also to ignore the many similarities among the large subset of countries in the region that share the characteristics of not just a communist past and, thus, both similar obstacles to transition and a similar political and economic agenda, but also a number of postcommunist characteristics, all of which would encourage the logic of emulating successful electoral revolutions in their neighborhood. These include: (1) recent statehood or recently regained sovereignty; (2) earlier rounds of political protests, both accompanying state disintegration and more recently focusing on the issue of corruption; (3) heterogeneous populations which often provide a pretext for struggles for political power that

accentuate cultural differences; (4) hybrid forms of democracy that include regular elections, limited opportunities for political competition and some civil liberties and political rights, but also fragmented liberal oppositions and corrupt authoritarian incumbents, and (5) generally poor economic performance (with the best performing economies in the region those where either no reforms had been introduced or where reforms were substantial and sustainable) or a growing degree of inequality in the face of relatively good economic performance. By our estimate, this profile describes virtually every country in the region where successful electoral revolutions have taken place (with Slovakia and Ukraine, however, stronger on the economic side, and Bulgaria and Romania, together with Slovakia, more democratic than the rest). In addition to the eight countries where there have been successful electoral revolutions, we would add to this list Albania and Armenia (which are far more homogeneous than the rest), Azerbaijan, Macedonia, Moldova, Kazakhstan (though Nazarbayev is relatively popular and less accommodating than in the past of opposition political activity), and Russia (Fish, 2005). Put simply, this is a remarkably large group of similar countries that because of their commonalities can be considerable prime candidates for electoral revolutions.

These similarities, however, are objective. Perhaps even more important is the assumption of similarity on the part of both those who carried out electoral revolutions and those who would like to follow suit. In part this assumption reflects a long-ingrained pattern of thinking. In the minds of many opposition leaders and intellectuals, just as communism produced similar contexts, so leaving communism successfully has a similar list of preconditions. Only some of these are situational; the rest are the product of specific goals and strategies. Moreover, for local democracy promoters who have succeeded in carrying out their own electoral revolutions, a number of factors influence their commitment to sharing their experiences with other activists in the region who want to copy them—the belief that their experiences are necessarily instructive for other countries that have gone through communism and democratic detours after communism (though recognizing that each context has distinctive qualities) and the belief as well that the spread of democracy through the region will help guarantee their democratic experiment. Self-interest arising from the availability of outside funding for such work also plays a role here. The recent decision by the European Union to focus assistance on the countries that neighbor the expanded EU has, of course, facilitated this process—and the Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians in particular have taken advantage of this fact (Fisher, 2005).

However, just as important is a long tradition in this region that the fruits of local struggle should be shared with others in the region—a belief that dates back to the work of dissidents during communism, as Solidarity's commitment to regional outreach after 1980 illustrates (Kenney, 2002). At the same time, the “receivers” in this process also assume relevance—though this seems to depend on local dissident culture, which in the Russian case, for example, seems to be less supportive of this argument (Mendelson and Gerber, 2005). They assume that the issues are the same and that the strategies used elsewhere in the region are helpful. No one doubts, of course, that contexts vary, but many seem to feel that the variance can “tolerate” similar goals and strategies.

Put simply, then, postcommunist structural similarities, the self-interest of both senders and receivers, and communist-era habits and networks all work together to facilitate the geographical spread of electoral revolutions. While these factors hardly guarantee that the model will remain the same or will always produce the desired set of results, they nonetheless render this region, as during the communist era, a remarkable antechamber for the diffusion of political change. Like the electoral model itself, so similarities among these countries—in structure and in perception—created opportunities, incentives and capacity for the successful diffusion of electoral revolutions.

### Collaborative networks

The third set of enabling factors is the existence of collaborative networks. The electoral revolutions have generated a spirited discussion of the role of the United States in particular in exporting democracy to the postcommunist region. At its most extreme, the argument has been put forth that these revolutions were engineered by the United States—for example, by providing funding for opposition groups that would support the United States after taking power (Herd, 2005; Nygren, 2005a,b). This argument is one reason, for example, why Vladimir Putin has recently pushed through a reform in Russia that facilitates the monitoring of foreign support of non-governmental organizations—which has provided the foundation, for example, for allegations of British political interference in Russian non-governmental organizations.

There is substantial evidence that the United States has played an important role in democracy promotion abroad; that it has targeted in particular support of civil society, fair elections, and rule of law; and that the postcommunist region stands out as the area where American support has been the most consistent over time and the most generous, especially on a per capita and per-state basis (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006c; Finkel et al., 2005). However, to reduce these electoral revolutions to US engineering is to ignore the facts that: (1) the US has focused far less on opposition support than on free and fair elections and a wide range of civil society organizations (though the US did play a role in helping fragmented oppositions become more cohesive in Slovakia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania); (2) other outside groups also played a role, as in the substantial support Russia provided to Yanukovich in the Ukrainian elections in 2004—support that by Russian accounts far outstripped direct campaign support by the United States); (3) American support lacks the consistency and the coordination that is in keeping with the idea of an American “plot,” and (4) participants in these revolutions consistently state that American support occurred only at the margins (Carothers, 2004) and that it was most helpful with respect to long-term support of civil society, withdrawal of support of illiberal incumbents (which was important in all the successful cases and absent, one can argue, in all of the failed cases), assistance in electoral mechanics, and quick critiques of unfair elections (as in Ukraine, Georgia and Serbia in particular).

However, perhaps the most important qualification is that all of the successful electoral revolutions grew out of complex cross-national collaborations that included not just US democracy promoters and often US ambassadors as well, but also



regional democracy promoters and experienced, dedicated local activists willing to take a lot of chances. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, moreover, these collaborations led to significant planning—which, as argued earlier, is required, given, for example, the complex details that must be addressed in order to form effective oppositions that participate in elections, rather than boycott them, and mount effective campaigns; to convince voters to vote, follow their consciences, and demand that their votes count; to win elections; and to prepare for the possibility that the victors will not be allowed to take power. As argued earlier, there were a number of factors in place that laid the groundwork for such planning; that is, not just the many similarities, perceived and objective, among these countries, but also practice runs with earlier elections, prior rounds of political protest, invigoration of dissident networks, and even earlier experiences with both public opinion polling, election monitoring and exit polls (all of which, for example, were already in place in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Georgia). But when all is said and done, there were international coalitions that were particularly vibrant, flexible, persistent, and, it must be said, geographically expansive, if not restless, in the postcommunist region. If electoral revolutions are a moving target, so are the people who promote such revolutions.

These were in fact the major themes in the more than 100 interviews that we have conducted in Croatia, Georgia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Washington, DC, with various international and domestic participants in these electoral revolutions. Perhaps the most common theme, however, was the deeply held belief among local activists that the struggle for democracy in countries that fell short of democratic standards in the postcommunist region was in large measure the *same* struggle (see also Meladze, 2005; Kandelaki, 2005; Devdariani, 2003). Illiberal leaders and their allies, it is widely assumed, use similar strategies, in part because of their experiences under communism (where there were also, we must remember, regular elections) and in part because they commit similar transgressions and provide, as a result, similar opportunities for political change. Moreover, the strategies that can work to defeat them are similar as well. In this sense, the postcommunist context is widely viewed as both specific to the region and similar within the region, especially for the majority of countries in the region that combine illiberal leaders with hybrid regimes.

Thus, for “graduates” of successful electoral revolutions, the assumption is that their experiences are relevant to oppositions in neighboring countries where such revolutions are needed, but have not yet occurred. Just as interesting is a strong belief that they have a responsibility to share their insights about effective strategies for political change through elections and later through other mechanisms, such as assistance in the development of more robust local governments and civil society. The activities of the Pontis Foundation in Bratislava in training democratic activists in Belarus and Ukraine are a case in point. In part, these activities stem from the belief that their democracy is not safe until it is embedded in a larger democratic community; in part they reflect a local version of the EU model of spreading democracy (helped by the Good Neighbor Policy); and in part it is simply a tradition carried on from the communist era, wherein dissidents felt compelled, since they were struggling against the same enemy, to share their ideas and strategies with others in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Kenney, 2002).

Importers of these strategies, moreover, also assumed that they could and should model themselves after the successful local cases—albeit recognizing the importance of modifications based upon local conditions. Again, in the interviews we have conducted, it was frequently observed that, while local conditions and local struggles were important, knowing that it had been done elsewhere successfully and learning from participants in these cases about how it was done—in short, both precedent and emulation—were critical to both the decision to try an electoral revolution and the quality of the implementation. From the vantage point of local activists, therefore, electoral revolutions in other countries contributed to a sense of optimism and, because of sharing information, strategies as well.

### **Conclusion: the future of electoral revolutions**

What we have argued thus far is that electoral revolutions in the postcommunist region succeeded in spreading from state to state because of the success of early efforts; the nature of the electoral model in general and its resonance with communist legacies and postcommunist developments; the similarities among many hybrid democracies in this region and the perception of significant similarities on the part of both graduates of electoral revolutions and those activists who hoped to follow in their footsteps; and, finally, the existence of large and creative networks of local, regional and American democracy promoters who were committed to spreading their ideas and strategies. Together, these factors contributed to a diffusion process that was enhanced by the power of both example and planning.

However, in the process of diffusion, the electoral model changed and in many ways became less effective, especially with respect to producing a major shift in the direction of more authentic and durable democracy. To take the temporal and geographical extremes of this dynamic: both Slovakia and Kyrgyzstan experienced electoral revolutions, but the immediate result in the former was a secure democracy and in the latter precarious democracy. This outcome suggests a typical story of diffusion processes, wherein precedent triumphs over planning as a result of impatience, less supportive local conditions, and clever incumbents (see, for example, Silitsky, 2005a; Silitski, 2005b). For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Kyrgyz and Ukrainian events, Nazarbayev raised student stipends to prevent an in-house replay of *Otpor*, *Kmara* and *Pora* while ensuring that the opposition would have little chance to contest the December 2005 election. Similarly, Putin in Russia has supported the creation of an official youth organization in an attempt to channel youthful activism in a direction that will support his regime. For all these reasons, electoral revolutions will be increasingly difficult to stage successfully in the post-communist world.

There is also an additional consideration. It is far easier for the United States to support democratic change in Georgia, for example, than in Azerbaijan, Russia, Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. Part of the reason is oil and the other part is the geopolitical importance of these countries in the War on Terror—an importance that introduces the complication, so reminiscent of the Cold War, of whether pressures for

democratic political change might be destabilizing and thereby counter to US interests. But just as critical, it can be suggested, is another consideration that is derived less from the arrogance of US foreign policy than from its modesty. Most US democracy promoters recognize that the success of their efforts depends primarily on domestic capacity and commitment for democracy. In the remaining countries in the postcommunist region that fall below the democratic bar and that have not experienced an electoral turning point (Fish, 1998; Bunce, 1994), such commitment and capacity are virtually by definition limited. Put simply, international democracy promotion is important only at the margins, and its success depends in both theory and practice on whether there are domestic partners. In this sense, the success of international diffusion always rests on domestic receptivity.

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