

East goes right, South goes left

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The most striking and indeed astonishing feature of this autumn's political landscape in the European neighbourhood is the contradictory trend between East and South. Eastern Europe is reverting back towards authoritarianism, while the Arab world proceeds with its anti-authoritarian revolution. Neither region is homogenous, of course. But the mainstream tendencies are clear.

Vladimir Putin has decided to stand again in 2012 for President, which with two six-year terms ahead in prospect could take him to 2024, in all a 24-year rule, becoming comparable to the records of many of the world's notable dictatorships (23 years for Ben Ali, 30 for Mubarak, 20 for Sukarno and 30 for Suharto in Indonesia, 20 for Marcos in the Philippines, etc.). Medvedev's speeches about democracy, the rule of law and modernisation turned out to be no more than fluff, as many always argued. It is still possible that Medvedev was over the last year testing the waters with the outline of an election campaign that would have been more liberal. Maybe...but in any case it never acquired real traction, and so he gave up.

Meanwhile President Yanukovich has been steadily clamping down on effective civil liberties and democratic practice in Ukraine. But the signature event of his leadership has now become the imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko for seven years for abuse of office despite warnings from the EU that it could put into the freezer the draft Association Agreement and the draft Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. As a result Yanukovich's scheduled visit to Brussels in mid-October, intended to firm up these agreements, was postponed until – according to the diplomatic language of Van Rompuy – more propitious times.

And now Putin has announced his plan for a Eurasian Union, in which he would like to include as many post-Soviet states as possible, from Belarus to Tajikistan. In Eastern Europe both Belarus and Azerbaijan are solidly authoritarian. That just leaves Moldova as passably democratic, while Georgia hardly passes. For Armenia kleptocracy is the first word that still comes to mind, although the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2012 will see a vigorous contest.

The Arab Spring, now surely the Arab Revolution of 2011, has seen the fall of three dictators already (Ben Ali, Mubarak, Gaddafi), with two more in the pipeline (Assad and Saleh). Others are pushed in a more democratic direction, making limited or at least token concessions for greater political participation as in Morocco and Jordan, and even in Saudi Arabia with women now granted the right to vote and stand in local elections.

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But what of the sustainability of these new tendencies, of the reinforced authoritarianism to the East, or the new democratic liberalism to the South? The first warning is sent from East to South. It is only five years since the so-called ‘colour revolutions’ had their day in Ukraine and Georgia, to the point at which Putin had also his moment of concern over whether this would become one of history’s uncontrollable contagious revolutions (as in Europe in 1848 or 1989-91). The Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia witnessed wonderfully happy scenes in the streets of Kiev and Tbilisi, with popular and peaceful regime overthrows. Roughly comparable to Tunisia so far. But the Yushchenko-Timoshenko post-revolutionary regime proved disastrously dysfunctional, while the Saakashvili regime became less and less democratic.

Tunisia is so far at the top of the Arab class. Egypt’s revolution is being managed still by the military, and the debate there is over which of the two Turkish models may come to the fore, the military one of the second half of the 20th century, or the democratic Islamic one of the first decade of the 21st century. Yet more problematic are the cases that have fallen prey to civil wars, as in Libya now just ended, while Syria’s brutal repression of over six months and the fighting in Yemen are both ongoing virtual civil wars. Unfortunately the track record of what follows civil war is ominous, sometimes leading to an outright victor who assumes authoritarian rule, sometimes to deadlock with descent into the realm of the failed state, as is all too clearly seen in nearby Somalia. A further post-revolutionary syndrome is where an initial attempt at liberal democracy fails to work effectively and gives way to violent ideological radicalisation, as in Iran in 1978 and in several other famous revolutions (Robespierre’s Reign of Terror, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, or Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution).

The currently divergence between East and South looks like something of strategic importance for the wider European neighbourhood. Already it turns upside down the prior assumption that Eastern Europe democratises slowly but steadily, whereas the Arab states of the South Mediterranean remain stuck with their long-term authoritarian leaderships. But perhaps one should not extrapolate this too easily. The Russians may come to tire of Putin well before the end of his next two six-year terms, and perhaps much sooner the Ukrainians will tire of Yanukovich, while the potential for counter-revolution in the Arab world should not be discounted.