POST SOVIET BLUES: PART I

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Category: Opinions

By Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Kingston ON, 10 December 2025

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, led to the emergence of a number of new, but vulnerable states. Russia, Belarus and Georgia are three examples of cautionary tales.

A decade and half ago in 2011, led by the charismatic opposition leader Alexei Navalny, tens of thousands of Russians gathered together in the capital city of Moscow to protest the continuing erosion of democratic safeguards and election fraud in the increasingly autocratic regime of Vladimir Putin. Tragically, Navalny's fate proved to be poisoning, imprisonment and a suspicious death in a remote, gulag-like prison camp. Meanwhile, over the last several decades, Russia under Putin went from being an autocratic state to becoming exceedingly oppressive in a more totalitarian regime. It has become once again a form of government rule where one dictator, one party and one official doctrine prevail, all the while Putin accumulates increasing centralized state control of the economy, mass media and internal security police.

During 2020-2021, tens of thousands of Belarusians, led by opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, filled the streets of the capital city of Minsk decrying the election fraud by the decades-long Alexander Lukashenko dictatorship. Sadly, Tsikhanouskaya became a political exile, while the Lukashenko dictatorship increasingly became a puppet regime of Vladimir Putin's Russian imperial reach. Moscow's growing de facto control over Belarus is now part of the Russian dictator's overarching ruthless ambition to try to re-establish dominance over Ukraine and elsewhere in East Europe.

Mass democratic protests in 2003 amidst the Rose Revolution in the South Caucasus country of Georgia were led by Mikheil Saakashvili and resulted in the resignation of then president Eduard Shevardnadze. While Saakashvili successfully served two terms in office as president, he was subsequently arrested in 2021 by the Georgian Dream government which has been in power for over a decade and is led by the pro-Kremlin billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Following a Putin-like blueprint, Ivanishvili has imposed more and more restrictions on political freedom and increasingly banned political opposition parties. Over the past year, tens of thousands of Georgian citizens have once again bravely taken to the streets in protest. Their prospects of success, however have diminished by the week. The hopes of the democratic Rose Revolution seemingly fading into the history books. Meanwhile, Saakashvili remains imprisoned and in ill-health.

In each case, the peaceful protesters have been confronted by heavily armed and increasingly militarized police and state militia. Young and old civilians seeking freedom have faced off against brutal state security personnel who have been equipped in full armoured riot gear. These were apparently unequal fights.

While the Georgian Rose Revolution initially succeeded, how is it possible that the wishes of tens of thousands of civilians in each of these recent post-soviet country cases have been thwarted and their hopes of restoring the new, fragile democracies apparently so firmly crushed?

What do international observers and political scientists advise? Peaceful protest and open, free elections too often seem more difficult to achieve. What are the sober implications for modern democratic theory? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new age of autocracy? Are the coercive forces of authoritarianism significantly stronger today than previous years? If so, how and why? Is it the presence of more pervasive oppressive technology and weaponry? Or perhaps are there now more ruthlessly skilled dictators who increasingly control the most influential media outlets? Is the pubic too afraid to speak out and protest due to growing fear of reprisals and violent attacks upon them or their families? Or is it a civic public and citizenry distracted and lulled into complacency until it is too late? What is the democratic world's response to the widespread growth of authoritarianism, both overseas and closer to home? As we approach a new year, I urgently want to know.

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The forthcoming Part II of Post Soviet Blues will analyze recent Ukrainian and Armenian historic events and will explore the themes of domestic revolution, inter-state war and ongoing challenges to democracy.

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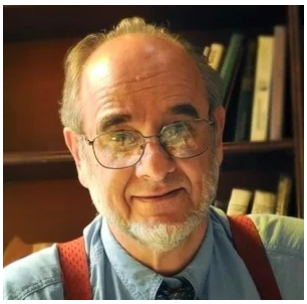

Reflections on Vladimir Putin & Russia's Foreign & Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors & Explanations (Kingston, Queen's University, Center for International & Defence Policy, Occasional Papers 69, 2022).

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Comments

Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-02-12 18:12:01

Dear Professor Whitehorn, Your article does not simply narrate the political trajectories of three countries. It places before the reader one of the most unsettling questions of modern politics: Is a society silent because it is afraid, or because it has become numb? In my view, this question lies at the heart of the contemporary crisis of democracy. Fear is one of the most visible mechanisms of authoritarian rule. The fate of Alexei Navalny, the exile of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the imprisonment and deteriorating health of Mikheil Saakashvili illustrate regimes that establish power through control over bodies. Police violence, imprisonment, and intimidation send a clear message to society: resistance carries severe personal costs. Under such conditions, survival can appear more rational than protest. However, fear alone does not explain democratic erosion. Your article also indirectly points to a quieter and perhaps more dangerous process: political numbness. In some post-Soviet contexts, freedoms have not disappeared abruptly but have instead eroded gradually. Media institutions were first placed under control and later silenced. Political opposition was first marginalized and then restricted. When economic uncertainty and everyday survival concerns dominate social life, political participation can begin to appear meaningless. In such environments, silence emerges not only from fear but also from the loss of meaning and a sense of political agency. What is particularly striking today is how modern authoritarian systems use both mechanisms simultaneously. Surveillance technologies personalize fear, while algorithm-driven media environments fragment public reality and deepen political disengagement. The combination of these processes weakens collective political consciousness and democratic participation. While reading your article, I could not help but reflect on parallels with Turkey's recent history. The Gezi protests of 2013 represented a moment when fear was collectively overcome. Broad segments of society mobilized around democratic demands, civic participation, and public dialogue. However, in the years that followed, legal prosecutions, the restructuring of media institutions, political polarization, and economic instability gradually narrowed the political space that Gezi briefly opened. The long-term outcome suggests that democratic energy can be weakened not only through repression but also through the erosion of society's belief that change is possible. This discussion also carries a personal dimension for me. During a period in which I was politically active within Turkey's political processes, I faced legal pressures and spent time in prison. This experience allowed me to observe more closely how authoritarian systems function not only to punish individuals but also to produce broader social deterrence. Your article reminded me that despite these challenges, democratic resilience continues to exist in more subtle forms. Even in highly restrictive environments, individuals and communities continue to seek avenues for expression, justice, and participation. This suggests that while fear and numbness may weaken democratic engagement, they cannot completely eliminate it. Your work raises an extremely important question for scholars studying contemporary politics: how can democratic societies respond effectively to pressures of repression and political disengagement? In my view, strengthening independent legal institutions, protecting free media, and supporting civic education are essential components in addressing both fear and political numbness. Thank you for writing such a thought-provoking and timely article. Your work makes an important contribution to understanding the evolving nature of authoritarian resilience and democratic vulnerability. With warm regards, Nurnisa