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### **Can an Arab Uprising Scenario also Happen in Southern Eurasia? A Cross-cutting Look at Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan**

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#### ABSTRACT

Using Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan as case studies in southern Eurasia, this paper looks into the similarities and differences in political systems and in societal conditions with relevance concerning the potential for unrest, with those of Arab countries that recently experienced some form of uprising. It argues that southern Eurasia will not be subject, in the immediate future, to a 'chain reaction' of unrest and regime change directly emanating from the Arab Uprising. Yet it forecasts political changes that will be much more the outcome of social mobility, changes in popular mindsets and of fault lines within the regimes themselves than they have to do with the much-quoted explanation of 'poverty'.

*Only a few prefer liberty.  
The majority seek nothing more than fair and just rulers.*

*Sallustius, Historiæ, IV.69.18*

Almost two years after the beginning of the Arab Uprising (or Arab Spring), different patterns of rebellion and regime change have appeared in what was initially perceived as a uniform regional movement. These patterns range from the relatively controllable and comparatively peaceful run of events in Tunisia and on Cairo's Tahrir Square, to the international intervention and ultraviolent overthrow and execution of Gaddafi in Libya and the ongoing civil war in Syria. Apart from the open question of what will be the eventual outcomes of these events, there is the issue of the psychological and political impact of the Arab Uprising in countries and societies beyond the region with seemingly similar regimes and social fault lines. For instance, is Eurasia ripe for a similar uprising? The purpose of this paper is to examine this possibility using Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan as case studies.

What is the rationale behind this choice of the above case studies? Azerbaijan is an emerging petro-state that is not part of OPEC, it is increasing its gas production, and it resides in an energy transit corridor that bypasses Russia. Moreover, it is a partner country of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy and has an active role in the EU's longer-term energy security strategy. On the other side of the Caspian Sea, meanwhile, Uzbekistan is also, albeit to a lesser extent than Azerbaijan, an element in the EU's energy and post-2014 security policy. More importantly for the years to come, Uzbekistan, together with neighboring Tajikistan, will remain a key link in military logistics and in a network of post-withdrawal backup bases for NATO's counter-insurgency operations and state-building attempts further south in Afghanistan. Finally, and not least, the contrast between the international democratic reform and human rights discourse on the one hand, and the harsh reality of interests and pragmatism in dealing with these countries' respective regimes on the other, has negatively affected the perceptions of the European Union, the United States, and the international community among opinion leaders and the grassroots in these parts of Eurasia.

### **Not quite the same sphere, yet...**

Even if this sounds commonplace, as history shows, regimes are hardly ever eternal. So how does one assess the possibilities of Arab Uprising scenarios occurring in Eurasia and in the three case countries in particular? Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all became independent in a process that lasted from 1988 to 1991 and which resulted in the demise of the Soviet Union. Even if some are tempted to automatically associate countries and societies with strange-sounding oriental names, sizeable numbers of Muslims, and large swathes of steppe and desert, under which lie large reserves of oil and gas, with the term "Arab," Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are decidedly not Arab, neither linguistically nor socio-politically. Linguistically, the southern Eurasian nations either belong to the wider Turkic or Iranian sphere, with exceptions in minority-dominated regions and cities. Economically speaking, furthermore, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are not highly intertwined with or integrated in the Arab sphere. However, a number of companies and funds from the Gulf states have invested in various sectors, including oil and gas, agriculture, and transportation infrastructure.

Besides this, Arab Gulf states play a vital role in institutions, such as the Islamic Development Bank and the OPEC Fund for International Development, which have given various forms of development aid and loans since the demise of the Soviet Union. There are also regular commercial air links between the southern Eurasian capitals and several hubs and capitals in the Gulf and Egypt. Yet in terms of foreign trade, on the whole, southern Eurasia is much more oriented toward Russia, China, Turkey, and the EU. The largest common denominator between the Arab world and southern Eurasia is that they both belong to the area of distribution of Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. As Table 1 below shows, to one extent or another, large majorities in all three countries consider Islam, which besides a religion is also a system of social organization, as an

element of their sociocultural identity. By itself, however, this says little about the actual role, dynamic, and practice of Islam and religious actors in the respective societies, especially considering that southern Eurasia was once part of the Soviet Socialist sphere.

**Table 1. Population shares in the Eurasian case countries professing or identifying with Islam<sup>1</sup>**

	Overall population share of people professing or being associated with Islam (%)		Sectarian breakdown (% , 2010)	
	1990	2010	Sunni	Shi'ite
Azerbaijan	78.1	93.4	14.1	79.3*
Uzbekistan	88	94.5	82.7-87.1	0.9-5.3*
Tajikistan	77.1	98	91-94.3	3.7-7**

\* Mostly Twelver or Itna'ashari Shi'ites (which is also the predominant denomination in Iran and Iraq).

\*\* Mostly Ismaili Shi'ites.

Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all obtained their current political borders as constituent republics of the Soviet Union. Practically speaking, this means that for roughly three generations, the region's metropolis and main political and cultural center has been Moscow rather than Mecca and Cairo. This did not occur randomly. Before being absorbed into the Soviet Union, the areas that constitute present-day Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were in some form part of the Russian imperial space between 1802 and 1817. The relations between these countries and the Russian-dominated sphere is crucial to any analysis of the region, as being part of the Soviet superstate largely shaped the political systems and societies of these states as they exist today. This is still prevalent in a number of realities in southern Eurasia. First, it consolidated the position of Russian as a lingua franca in the wider region, as well as among the elites, the popular base in urban areas, and as a language for inter-ethnic communication. Second, much of Azerbaijan's, Uzbekistan's, and Tajikistan's present power elites, administrative institutions, and security structures were formed and politically acculturated in the Soviet mold and perpetuate a number of its practices and mindsets.

Third, for several decades, these countries and their respective societies were largely cut off physically from the global Islamic *Ummah* and its religious and intellectual centers in the Arab world, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent by a Soviet superstate which was ideologically hostile to religion. It did not exterminate Islam, but it did dramatically affect religious practice as well as the influence of religious actors and institutions. The collapse of the Soviet system and the opening of its southern border exposed the region to stark social changes and an identity crisis. This, coupled with the negative social effects of neoliberal globalization, created a large space and need for religious re-identification among different segments of society. In turn, it created new opportunities for a whole range of local and extraneous actors and ideological currents to try to steer and influence this process.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Table compiled by the author, May 2012, on the basis of The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Mapping the global Muslim population. A report on the size and distribution of the world's Muslim population* and *The future of the global Muslim population: projections for 2010-2030*, The Pew Research Centre, 2009 and 2011. The differences in the share of people professing or associating with Islam in 2010 compared to 1990 is due to the emigration of non-Muslims from the respective republics during and after the 1988-91 period, the higher birth rates among people of Muslim background, and a general increase in identification with Islam.

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate examination, see Bruno De Cordier, "A Eurasian Islam? A vision on the position and evolution of Islam and Islamism in former Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian," *Central Asia & the Caucasus. Journal for Social and Political Research* 53, no. (2008): 129-138 (148-160 in the Russian version).

**Seen one, seen them all? The similarities...**

Asking whether an “Arab Uprising” could at some point happen in southern Eurasia implies a number of striking structural similarities between the Arab and southern Eurasian regimes and societies. At first glance, there are indeed several. Like so many Arab states, all three countries are ruled by so-called first family regimes, if not outright presidential dynasties. Additionally, like their (late) Arab counterparts, these regimes are characterized by various patterns of patronage and nepotism that co-opt traditionalist authorities like clan elders and Sufi sheikhs as well as the intelligentsia and sometimes ethnic or religious minorities.<sup>3</sup> They perpetuate their power through rigged elections and different degrees of intimidation and repression, with Uzbekistan leaning the closest to a form of totalitarianism. This does not mean that there is no dissidence or opposition. In fact, in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan the margin for opposition is still much wider than in Uzbekistan, yet it is also increasingly under pressure.

As with several of their counterparts in the Arab world who emerged as secular Arab nationalist or Baathist regimes, the power elites of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are also products of a failed political experiment: Soviet Socialism. Nonetheless, they often recycled many of the elements and institutions from the old system. Presidential parties are the centerpiece of de facto single-party states, which took over many assets of the old republican branches of the Communist Party, the different bureaucracies, rubberstamp parliaments with *potemkin* opposition, state security organs, a state-sanctioned Islamic clergy and political rituals, albeit now under a different ideological coat of paint. Another common trait with the deposed or beleaguered Arab regimes is the concentration of economic power and wealth in the hands of members of the presidential families and their cronies. This cabal runs monopolies, mostly through state-connected structures or front companies, involving not only key sectors of the economy like oil, natural gas, cotton, and aluminum, but also a wide variety of activities. These include the import and export of consumer goods, media, banking, agro-industry, transport and telecom, real estate, hotels, restaurants, and holiday resorts.

**While social discontent and organized opposition are important, rebellion is ultimately a matter of overcoming that psychological barrier, whereby the anger, hatred, and readiness to cope with the physical and financial consequences of rebelling override fear.**

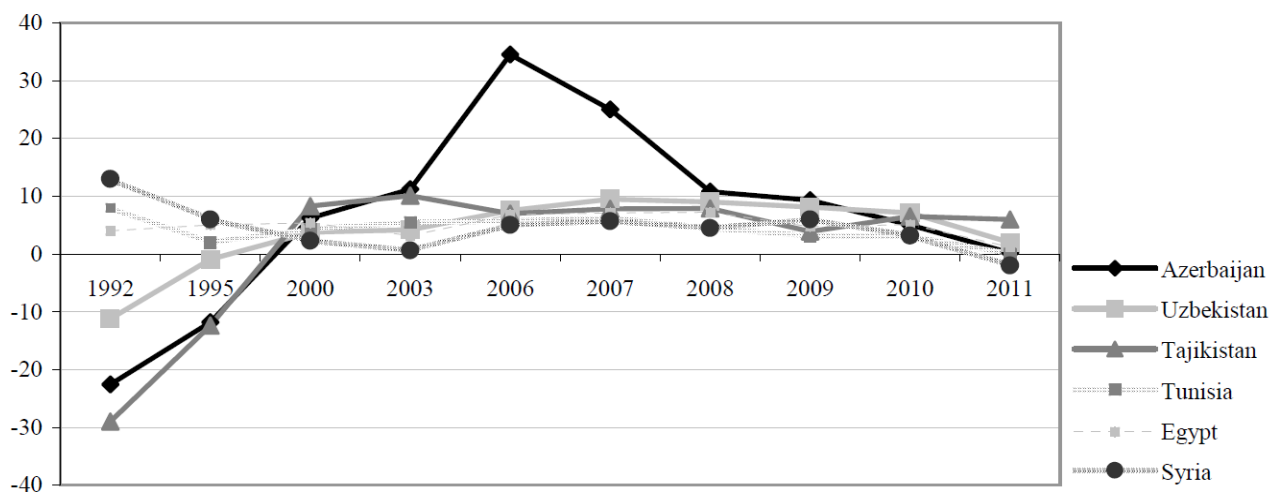
In Azerbaijan, for example, the top echelon of this system of monopolists is believed to directly involve a caste of roughly 8,000 people—less than one-thousandth of the population. Similar situations exist in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan where the control over a key resource, like cotton, is organized into a system involving a handful of state-connected trade companies and a province-level production quota arrangement in the manner of a neo-feudal state. In all cases, the elite groups use their political power, state institutions, and the judiciary to consolidate their monopolies and interests, aggressively eliminating or marginalizing anyone and anything that may question them or form an economic counter-power. Similar to Tunisia’s and Egypt’s old regimes and Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, first ladies and presidential daughters play increasingly important roles—most strikingly so in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan—in this realm of clientelism, economic monopolization, and conspicuous consumption. They actively attempt to give their husband’s or father’s regime a veneer of international and internal respectability through involvement in jetset philanthropy, yet the at times grotesque “posh face” of the regime that they represent is felt as an insult and a humiliation by many in wider society.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the formation of Soviet elites in southern Eurasia and their interaction with older solidarity groups before and after independence, see Olivier Roy, *La nouvelle Asie centrale, ou la fabrication des nations* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

Furthermore, like in pre-revolution Tunisia and Egypt, the current regimes in southern Eurasia actively portray themselves and their policies as the secular alternative and guarantor of stability against a real or perceived threat of “Islamic extremism.” The audience of these overtures tends to be the United States, European Union, and the United Nations. This strategy as being considered the least worst option is nothing new. It long served as political life insurance, both domestically and internationally, for several Arab regimes, and also pre-1979 Iran, until their populations rejected the status quo. In southern Eurasia, where these tactics are alive and well, the state achieves legitimacy by savvy use of real and, as often, fabricated threats. This has also created an economic dynamic in its own right. The rent-seeking of transit rights for NATO’s occupation force in Afghanistan is the best example. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, regime-connected companies and members or cronies of the “first families” benefited considerably from transit rights and the practical facilitation of transporting supplies over their territory for the international occupation forces in Afghanistan. The policies of achieving international legitimacy are often paired with the promotion of a “Europeanized” image of the countries, or at least of their capital cities. Often, the elites are psychologically closer, or aspire to be closer, to their counterparts in Western capitals or Moscow, than to their own subjects, which they often despise or fear.<sup>4</sup> This results in visible social gaps between those who benefit from the status quo and those who are exploited or otherwise disadvantaged by it.

**Graph 1. Evolution of real GDP growth in the Eurasian case countries as compared to a number of Arab Uprising contexts (in %, 1992–2011)<sup>5</sup>**



Graph 1 above shows the evolution of the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan between 1992 and 2011. One immediate observation is that officially at least, over the last decade, these economies have effectively been growth economies. This has not always been the case, however. The stark contraction of all three economies right before 1992 was the result of the disintegration of the Soviet economic structure with its guaranteed markets, subsidies, and social services, and the emigration of skilled labor and technical cadres which often belonged to ethno-confessional

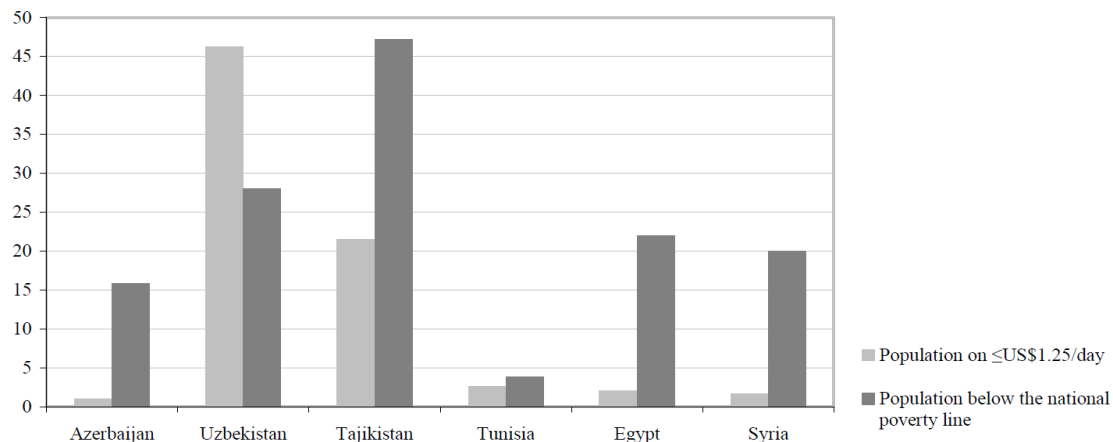
<sup>4</sup> This explains the eagerness to develop international tourism, organize cultural festivals that privilege a sanitized version of the countries’ pre-Islamic heritage, and to host large international events like the Eurovision song contest in Baku in 2012 and the annual meeting of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Tashkent in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Graph created by the author, May 2012, on the basis of data from the Islamic Development Bank, *Key socio-economic statistics on IDB member countries*, Statistical Monograph No. 32, IDB Data Resources and Statistics Department, table 2.3. Growth of real GDP, p. 31, and data from The World Bank – Development Indicators Database, [data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org).

minorities like Russians, Armenians, and Jews. In the case of Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, which over the span of a few years experienced, respectively, a devastating war with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh and a civil war between different micro-regional groups, the deterioration in economic conditions was heavily exacerbated by armed conflict and internal displacement, the loss of human capital, and the destruction of social and economic infrastructure.

The economic recovery and growth from 1999 onward was the result of political stabilization and especially of high global market prices for oil, gas, cotton, aluminum, and other commodities. The integration of southern Eurasia into the global market place with upgraded infrastructures also played an important role. Azerbaijan's impressive GDP growth in 2005 and 2006, for instance, was the result of both the opening and operation of oil and gas pipelines between the Caspian and Mediterranean seas and the high price of oil due to increased global demand. The slowing down of GDP growth after 2008 is a consequence of the global financial crisis and decreasing oil prices. Despite the reflex among some to associate macro-economic growth with social peace and political stability, GDP statistics by themselves say little about the way control is exercised over the national income, the distribution of wealth, and its effects on social development in society. In peripheral raw material-based economies like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, to one extent or another, these are most often inversely proportional to each other. As Graph 2 below suggests, poverty incidence is, if not considerably high, then at least a reality to be reckoned with in all three societies.

**Graph 2. Poverty incidence in the Eurasian case countries as compared to a number of Arab Uprising contexts (in % of the population, 2000–2010)<sup>6</sup>**



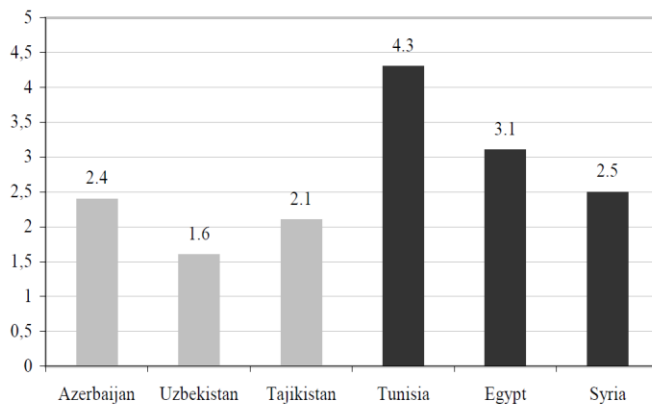
One immediate observation from Graph 2 is that upheaval and regime change in the Arab world occurred in countries where poverty incidence was comparatively low (for example, Tunisia) as well as in countries and societies where it was rather high (for example, Egypt). One factor therefore does not exclude the other. While poverty definitely creates a social base for unrest, by itself it is not a sufficient explanation for social upheaval of the kind that overthrows regimes. The criteria and indicators of formal poverty vary depending on the source and institutions that carry out the surveys. They do not say much about a situation that is ultimately much more a matter of one's *subjective perception* of the financial and social situation as compared to that of neighbors, relatives, or certain social categories, than it is a matter of income per se. Moreover, the official income that is reflected in the statistics is not revealing of everything about societies

<sup>6</sup> Graph created by the author, May 2012, on the basis of Islamic Development Bank, *Key socio-economic statistics on IDB member countries*, Statistical Monograph No. 32, IDB Data Resources and Statistics Department, table 1.7. Poverty indicators, p. 11; Fayeza Sara, *Poverty in Syria. Towards a serious policy shift in combating poverty*, Strategic Research and Communication Centre, 2011, p. 16; and Uzbekistan OPHI Country Briefing, 2010, p. 2.

which exhibit large informal economies—so helping to fuel social mobility—such as most Arab and southern Eurasian countries. In the three Eurasian countries, for example, the influx of remittances from labor migration abroad has lifted sizeable parts of the population above the mere survival level—much more than international aid has ever done—which has led to renewed confidence among certain strata of society.

As important, the visible effects that macro-economic growth has in certain physical spaces, in social niches and in the media, inevitably lead to increasing expectations in wider society, confronted as the latter is with social change and the impact of globalization. The contempt, conspicuous consumption, and libertine decadence displayed by some parts of the elite groups, including the appearance of gated communities, grandiose developments, and the abuse and arbitrariness of power as well as the corruption that often goes with it, all leave a lasting imprint among the wider population that ranges from resignation to frustration and hatred. Significant numbers of people are also aware that the social disparities and the regular price hikes for food, petrol, and real estate are caused by monopolies or quasi-monopolies that the powerful and the connected enjoy over a wide variety of economic activities. If we look at Graph 3 below, it appears that the perception of corruption is even stronger in southern Eurasia than it is in several Arab Uprising contexts.

**Graph 3. The perception of corruption in the Eurasian case countries as compared to a number of Arab Uprising contexts (2010)<sup>7</sup>**



Anyone who has spent a certain amount of time in southern Eurasia and ventured beyond the privileged enclaves and the official window-dressing knows that awareness and anger on the part of the local population regarding corruption is high. Whether it is the petty bribing of traffic police or gaining access to a social or administrative service, corruption (or cronyism) in the distribution of positions in public administration and in the country offices of international organizations, or in the economic monopolies that members of the power elite control, is a facet of everyday life for the populations in these countries, and as such, is commonly talked about on the street. Equally resented is the suppression and obstruction of economic initiative outside elite control, as well as the destructive impact of neo-liberalism including the squandering of the Soviet Union's social achievements and human capital.

<sup>7</sup> Graph created by the author, May 2012, on the basis of Andrea Schmitz and Alexander Wolters, "Revolutionen in Zentralasien? Der 'Arabische Frühling' als Herausforderung für die Region," *Länderanalysen Zentralasien*, No. 43-44, 2011, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde, p. 11, and the UN Public Administration Network. The index range goes from 10 (hardly or not corrupt) to 0 (extremely corrupt), so the lower the score, the worse corruption is perceived to be by the respondents and sources that were consulted.

Lastly, both southern Eurasian and the various Arab Uprising countries have a social and demographic reality that is, at first glance, susceptible to revolt in some form or intensity as shown in the data in Table 2 below. Besides the visible social disparities, societies in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are characterized by a so-called youth bulge that is very similar to several of the Arab Uprising countries.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, despite the authoritarian nature of their regimes, the southern Eurasian societies are not hermetically closed or completely isolated from the outside world and have been confronted by the social impact of globalization. The lack of employment and entrepreneurial prospects in the three countries examined here has pushed their active populations to migrate internationally for work, to Russia in particular. This predominantly seasonal migration has exposed people to other ways of life and alternative sources of information and opinions that contradict official local discourse. It has also spurred a demand for and widespread use of modern information and communications technology, especially mobile phones and satellite dishes, which are far more relevant in everyday life than the internet and other much-hyped social media.

**Table 2. Selected social indicators with relevance concerning the potential for unrest<sup>9</sup>**

	Total population (millions)	The “youth bulge”		Population share in labor migration (% of the population)	Access to Information and Communications Technology (% of the population)	
		Population share ≤14 yrs. old (%)	Share of adolescents (10-19 yrs. old, %)		Internet penetration	Mobile phones
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

### Not quite along the same lines? The differences ...

The possibility of protests turning into upheaval and the removal of regimes, however, depends on more than structural and social similarities. There are also a number of realities and factors that make southern Eurasia and the Arab Uprising contexts different to the extent that they affect the possibility of the repetition of Arab Uprising scenarios. In general, given the three countries’ (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) common identity as former Soviet republics, their social and political dynamics are anchored much more in what is often still called “the former Eastern bloc” in colloquial parlance rather than in the Arab, or in the rest of the “classical” Islamic, world. How, then, do these differences manifest themselves?

<sup>8</sup> The youth bulge theory states that a population share of youths between 15 and 24 years old that exceeds 20 percent increases the chances of social unrest, as those who find no satisfactory positions in their existing societies rationalize their impetus to compete by political ideology. For an in-depth examination, see Gunnar Heinsohn, *Söhne und Weltmacht. Terror im Aufstieg und Fall der Nationen* (Bern: Orell Füssli, 2003).

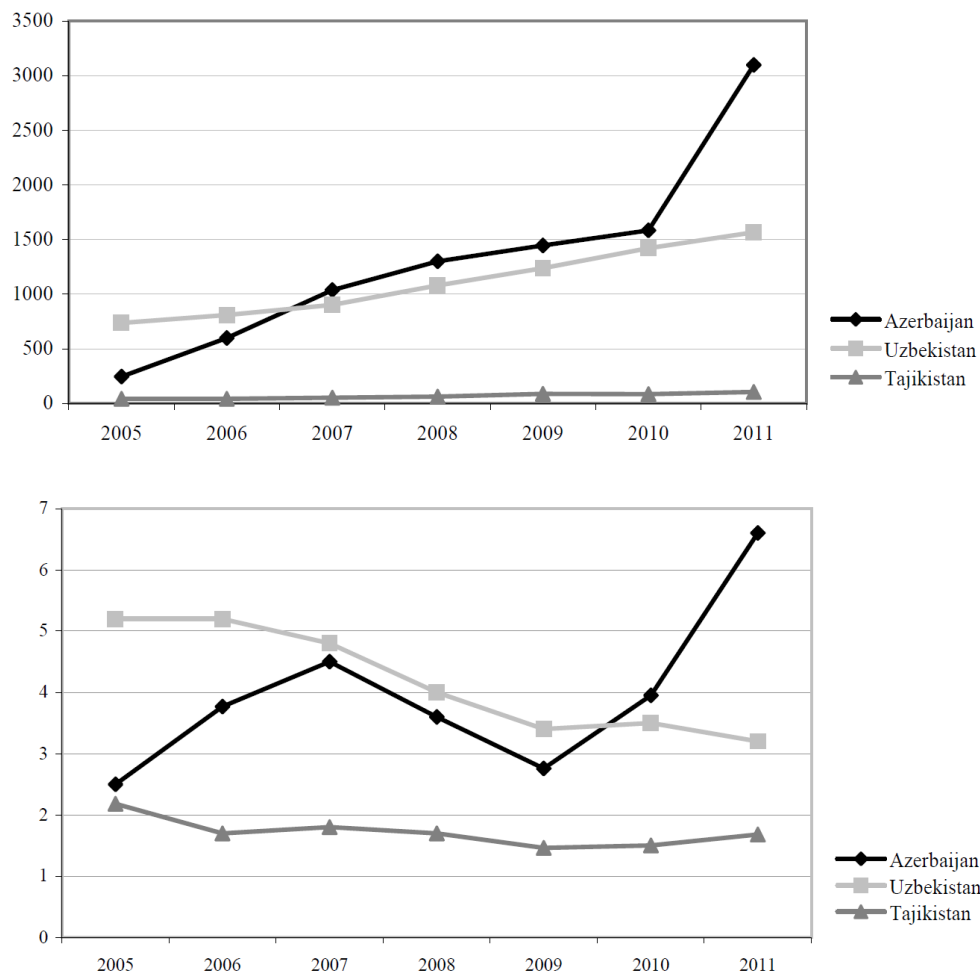
<sup>9</sup> Table compiled by the author, October 2011, on the basis of UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Population Division, 2007, International Labour Organisation, 2009, Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, European University Institute, 2009 and 2010, and International Telecommunication Union–ICT Statistics Database, 2010.



First, since they have been part of some form of Russian-dominated space, whether imperial or Soviet, for between 110 and 180 years, the strongest structural and psychological ties that these countries have remain with Russia. This translates, amongst other things, into a media landscape that has no Eurasian equivalent to al-Jazeera or other non-state news channels that played an active role in reporting the events in Tunisia that set off the Arab Uprising in a common regional language as well as facilitated the popular and emotional identification with what was and is going on. By contrast, after realizing that they could not simply ignore the uprising, the government-controlled or regime-associated media in southern Eurasia spared no effort to discredit the events and the forces perceived to be behind them.

Second, despite a clear increase in defense spending both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP (see Graph 4), the armed forces of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan do not have the same position in society as they did, for instance, in Mubarak’s Egypt.

**Graph 4. Defense and securitization spending in the case countries in absolute terms (in million US\$ – *supra*) and as part of their GDP (in % – *infra*)<sup>10</sup>**



<sup>10</sup> Graph created by the author, October 2011, on the basis of data from *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 6, 2006, March 17, 2010, and February 22, 2011, *Voenna-promyshlennyi kuryer*, No. 47 (163), December 6–12 2006, and No. 104 (320), February 3, 2010, and the SIPRI Military Expenditures Database, [milexdata.sipri.org](http://milexdata.sipri.org). By comparison, defense spending in 2009 as a part of GDP in Egypt was 2.1, Tunisia 1.3, and Syria 4 percent, respectively.

Whereas the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have both been actively upgraded and modernized in the last decade, they have not yet developed into a “state within a state” which would see them play the role as power broker and key actor in various sectors of the economy. Instead, the pivotal and privileged security agencies that do have a lot of political and economic power in southern Eurasia are the respective national intelligence services. In effect recycled republican branches of the Soviet Union’s KGB, they are often still called by their old acronyms despite the adoption of new names in the national languages. Contrary to Mubarak and Gaddafi, to name but two examples, none of the current heads of state of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have a military background, yet the founder of the current presidential dynasty in Azerbaijan was a high-ranking Soviet KGB officer. It is also not clear to what extent the intelligence structures and associated units benefit from the increase in defence spending in both Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan compared to the regular armed forces.

Third, none of the examined Eurasian countries and their regimes are heavily dependent on Western economic and military aid for their survival (with the exception of Tajikistan, which is a large recipient of development aid from the U.S., EU, and other OECD economies). They all maintain their grip on power by shrewdly playing Russia, the U.S., China, the EU, international financial institutions, and multinational corporations against one another.

Fourth, relatively recently Eurasia had its own regime change momentum during the so-called color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), a more fragmented version in Kyrgyzstan (2005), and an aborted attempt in Azerbaijan (2005).<sup>11</sup> Even if

**The ‘color revolutions’ in Eurasia were anticipated as part of a process to promote a neoliberal and anti-Russian societal project, whereas, at least in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Uprising was rather directed *against* neoliberalism and its socially dislocating effects.**

the incumbent Eurasian regimes and their supporters believe that there is a direct correlation between these events and the Arab Uprising, they are, in the author’s opinion, two separate movements.

Although they both stemmed from popular discontent, the “color revolutions” were much more externally steered, conducted by a whole range of civil society organizations, political groups, the media, and influential personalities that had been organized with, or benefited from, foreign grants and civil society support programs. However, these groups and people did not necessarily represent the wider society.

The color revolutions were, in other words, anticipated as part of a process to promote U.S. and other foreign interests and/or to strengthen a neoliberal and anti-Russian societal project. By contrast, the Arab Uprising caught the US, the EU, and the wider international community largely unprepared. As a result, it initially yielded totally different, more uncomfortable if not outright unsympathetic Western reactions. At least in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Uprising was rather directed *against* neoliberalism and its socially dislocating effects than aimed at further entrenching a neoliberal agenda.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Kyrgyzstan experienced two popular uprisings that led to the overthrow of the incumbent presidential regime: one in the spring of 2005, the pattern of which fit more into that of the “color revolutions,” and another in the summer of 2010, which was much more violent and in which the liberal opposition actors, who were prominent in the first uprising, were largely marginalized.

<sup>12</sup> Quite characteristic of both the color revolutions and the Arab Uprising was the disproportionate attention paid by not a few Western reporters, including also left-wing and liberal parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations, to the segment of protesters who reflected their own values and ideals (liberal and secular intellectuals, feminists, left-wing activists, artists, and young urban professionals), but who represent only a very small part of society. Similarly, relatively attention was paid in both cases to how the uprisings were experienced beyond the major urban centers. For an account from the Egyptian uprising away from Tahrir Square, see Raphaël Kempf, “Les

Finally, the predicament and the nature of the opposition should be considered. To varying extents and forms, opposition, whether open, underground, or operating within a “grey” zone, does exist in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. However, organized opposition movements and political parties had relatively more room for maneuver during the later years of the Soviet Union and the early independence years than they do today. The historical secular opposition is now either fragmented or marginalized as a result of a mixture of state repression, a limited social base, and internal splits. The process of reorganization and participation in these organizations has mostly occurred from exile. Opposition is therefore much more individual—those expressing dissent often find more resonance in foreign media and international human rights circles than in their home societies—or is confined to regional and clan solidarity groups and personal networks, as well as various non-state Islamic currents. Southern Eurasia has various legal and (semi-)underground Islamist organizations and opinion leaders, ranging from individual preachers and pietist groups to a legal yet increasingly pressurized Islamic party in Tajikistan. Because of the different religious dynamic at play in the former Soviet space, there is no Eurasian equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood; a possible exception is the Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party, which was once the republican section of a Soviet-wide party. Although it is in the process of forming, southern Eurasia has also not yet developed to the same extent a faith-based Islamic civil society, providing a wide range of social services, as which exists in many Arab and other “classical” Islamic societies.

### **So, what now?**

Despite clear similarities in the nature and structure of the Arab and southern Eurasian regimes and in the state of their respective societies, if one asks whether a wave of regime change in southern Eurasia will occur as a direct consequence or as some sort of chain reaction from the Arab Uprising, the answer lies in the negative. However, this is not to say that the regimes in southern Eurasia are eternal. They, too, will come to an end one way or another, either after the natural death of the head of state or as a result of the fault lines in both society and government. It would be a complete fallacy to pretend that southern Eurasia’s populations are culturally conditioned to oppression and humiliation and thus not capable of changing. This is exactly the same discourse that was, until recently, prevalent in Orientalist opinion in regard to the Arabs. For all the official denial and bold spin, the Arab Uprising has a far-reaching psychological impact among southern Eurasia’s power elites as well as its grassroots. The revolts proved that stability under authoritarian rule is artificial and not static. There has been a clear increase in vigilance from state security organs against dissidents and religious opinion leaders since the Arab Uprisings. Accordingly, precautionary counter-insurgency exercises have intensified, such as those recently conducted by the internal security troops in Uzbekistan.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the downplaying and diabolizing of the events in the Arab world in the official and regime-supportive media, the grassroots in southern Eurasia are quite aware of what happened, and what continues to happen, in the Arab world through various formal and informal information channels. These means include satellite dishes, the Russian media, and information conveyed through labor migration. The reactions among the population range from indifference—partly due to the remoteness of events from daily environments and concerns—to tacit fascination and expectations that something similar might and will happen one day to their “own” Gaddafis and Mubaraks. While social discontent and organized opposition are important, rebellion is ultimately a matter of overcoming that psychological barrier, whereby the anger, hatred, and readiness to cope with the physical and financial consequences of rebelling

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paysans dans la révolution égyptienne: espoirs et embûches des révoltes arabes,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 2011, [www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2011/03/kempf/20192](http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2011/03/kempf/20192).

<sup>13</sup> Another common feature between the regimes, and the media and opinion leaders who support them, in southern Eurasia and those in the Arab Uprising contexts is the reflex to blame external forces (more specifically the United States and to a lesser extent the EU, foreign media and NGOs, and Salafi Jihadists, but not Israel in the case of Eurasia) for any unrest.

override fear. Protests also require an initial spark, a critical incident such as a highly symbolic suicide, a prison killing, yet another arbitrary expropriation that finally tilts the public mood in favor of open dissent, or sudden price hikes (or even the mere rumor thereof).

In the author's observations, this psychological turn has not yet reached Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan. The culture of fear and various forms of subtle and blatant intimidation and infiltration have so far been effective. More importantly, a sizeable part of the population of an active age still harbors direct memories from witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent unraveling of the social safety net, sudden impoverishment, the uncertainty of the "transition" years and armed conflict (the Tajik civil war and Nagorno-Karabakh). It is questionable whether this psychological barrier will continue to exist among the generations who were not witness to such events and thus have no memory of them. In the meantime, there is a widespread belief among some sectors of society that any fast or radical change would only be for the worse. The incumbent regimes, for their part, have made sure to reinforce the perception that they are the "least worst option" in contrast to the more gruesome episodes of the Arab Uprising (the score settlements in Libya and the Hula massacre in Syria, for instance) and of the 2010 turmoil in Kyrgyzstan (the communal riots in Osh and Bazar-Kurgan). In thus doing, they hope to scare their populations from deviating from the status quo.

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Another factor is what can best be described as the "president-patriarch syndrome": the belief that the president himself is a severe but just father figure who means the best for his subjects, but that he is manipulated by self-serving entourages and, as such, isolated from the everyday reality of corruption and abuses of power by local-level authorities. Even if this mentality is slowly eroding in the three countries examined here, it is still present enough in several layers of society. This is a situation that will not last forever though. As mentioned above, a generation is coming of age that has no recall of the extremely difficult years and armed conflict following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Additionally, labor migration, which is vital in all three societies' economic survival, has a paradoxical effect as it acts, on the one hand, as a safety valve for the regimes—it removes the potentially restive un(der)employed from the country for a sizeable part of the year—while, on the other, creates groups that are socially mobile and which have access to other formal and informal sources of information and opinions outside state-sanctioned channels. As a result of exposure to the wider world, this segment of the population will sooner or later seek and demand a proper place in society that the current order is not willing or able to provide.

As such, parts of the population will start to question and contest the current order in some form. If, when, and how all this will translate into an uprising and overthrow of the rulers is difficult to predict. It should be borne in mind that just a couple of years ago few at the policy level foresaw the Arab Uprising and its different turns. This was quite obvious, for example, from the increasingly pragmatic approach taken by the EU and the U.S. toward Gaddafi's Libya before the start of events. The assumption that Gaddafi would die in power and that his son Saif al-Islam would gradually take over and open the country up to Western investment, foreign tourism, and not least intelligence cooperation (as actually happened during the latter years of Gaddafi's rule) pretty much reflects the line taken by part of the official Western circles toward Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan today. A natural death of the head of state, an event which can ignite or hasten an internal reshuffle in the state, is only a realistic prospect in terms of the next five to seven years in the case of Uzbekistan where the president is 74, being much less likely in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan where the presidents' respective ages are 51 and 59.

Despite lip service and cosmetic reforms, the scenario that gradual democratization initiated by the present rulers will result in a liberal democracy is idealistic, lacking as it does a wide and real social base and

overall credibility. Regime change in southern Eurasia may not necessarily come about through a “spectacular” popular uprising, but rather it could also happen as the result of an internal coup, possibly preceded by manipulated local unrest, and caused by colliding interests and interpersonal, regionalist, or institutional fault lines within the regimes themselves (for instance, a power struggle between the intelligence services and the military). In fact, this author considers this as one of the possibilities in southern Eurasia and more particularly in Uzbekistan. In other instances, hybrid forms of regime change and protest scenarios may arise. Regardless of what exactly does occur, the most critical factor is not so much the direct influence of the Arab Uprising as the countries’ local dynamics and circumstances and, especially, Russia’s interest in keeping these regimes in place. And no matter the eventual turn that events might take, there is, for those still wondering, no guarantee either that whoever replaces the present regimes in southern Eurasia will be pro-Western. Yet this is the price that comes with realpolitik: one also has to be as realistic as regards its consequences.

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