BEYOND THE COLORED REVOLUTIONS

Keynote Speech

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Introduction:

The Central Eurasia Studies Society's annual conference takes place this year against the background of a series of political upheavals across Eurasia. In these upheavals, a split in the political elite, combined with general popular dissatisfaction with regional governments, has led to mass protests and the toppling of the incumbent president after the alleged manipulation and falsification of nationwide elections.

In the international media, these upheavals have been presented as the "Colored Revolutions"—a new wave of "peaceful, democratic revolutions," reminiscent of the revolutions of the late 1980s in the old Soviet bloc—that are now sweeping across the territory of the former Soviet Union. We had the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in November 2003, the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in December 2004; and the "Tulip Revolution" or the "Yellow" and "Purple" Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005—where the situation was both more colorful and more confused, as well as more violent.

Georgia on its own could have been an aberration—a *sui generis* event rooted in developments in Georgia since the collapse of the USSR. But Ukraine suggested that this might be something bigger—especially given the close political links between the two new presidents in Ukraine and Georgia, and the open acclamation of, and reference to, Georgia's earlier revolution during the events in Kyiv. And since Kyrgyzstan, the question on everyone's minds has been "Who's next?"

Sights have been turned successively to Belarus, Moldova, and states in Central Eurasia, including Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan—where upcoming parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan in November this year, and presidential elections in Kazakhstan in December, are presented as opportunities for the opposition in both countries to overturn the Aliev and Nazarbayev regimes. In Uzbekistan, where there is no real political opposition and presidential elections in 2007 seem likely to be highly orchestrated—the clashes in the city of Andijan in the Fergana Valley, in May 2005, between the government and militant groups, and unarmed protestors were also depicted as part of the pattern—a harbinger of

[*] The Society's area of study covers the Caucasus (North and South) and Central Asia—including Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang (western) region of China.

things to come in the form of a bloody, not just a colored, revolution that will eventually overthrow President Islam Karimov.

Seeing Patterns:

Conventional wisdom and general assumptions in the West seem to suggest that Central Eurasia, and the whole region encompassed by the post-Soviet states of Eurasia, are about to be swept up in this new wave of colored revolutions. And as Central Eurasia has been given particular prominence in U.S. strategic thinking because of the region's role in the war against terrorism—and the fact that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have both hosted U.S. military bases in support of the ongoing military campaign in neighboring Afghanistan—the developments in the region now seem to raise a series of questions for U.S. policy and how it should respond to these upheavals.

Outside the United States, a somewhat different pattern is discerned in events—a pattern of U.S. intervention. The idea goes that because of increased U.S. attention to Central Eurasia since 2001, ongoing strategic competition with Russia in the region, and U.S. military intervention first in Afghanistan, and then in Iraq, to remove regimes that threatened the United States, the colored revolutions have "made in the USA" stamped all over them.

A bizarre combination of the White House, the CIA, USAID, George Soros, and an array of U.S. and international NGOs are purported to have all conspired together to encourage regime change by other means. As it was put to me at a conference in Kazakhstan in March of this year—the U.S. now has two models of regime change: Iraq and Georgia—military or colored, just take your pick. And after March 2005, there was an odd flow of opposition leaders from various regional states through Washington, DC looking for explicit support from the U.S. government for their efforts to unseat their respective governments.

Certainly in Russia, many politicians and analysts in Moscow see every U.S. action in Eurasia as somehow aimed at Russia. Joint U.S. and European support for free and fair elections in Eurasia is perceived in Moscow as part of a determination to pull Russia's allies away from it by installing 'Western' friends and allies as new regional presidents. And the response is for Russia to create its own colored revolutions, or support the rise of its own friends and allies.

Russia's interventions in the electoral process in Ukraine in winter 2004 were certainly driven by perceptions of the U.S. and the West orchestrating events in Georgia, and then of supporting Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. And according to recent discussions I had in Moscow at the beginning of September, with some of Russia's "political technology" "spin doctors," Russia will now be more heavily involved in "political outreach activities" in the Caucasus and Central Asia to promote its own opposition candidates as well as continuing to support the incumbent governments. According to them, the next colored revolution will have the Russian tricolor flying behind it, not the stars & stripes.

In short, everyone is seeing their own patterns in the dynamic of events and responding accordingly, rather than looking at the deeper causes of these political upheavals and what they mean, and thinking before acting.

It is a bit like a group of people sitting on a hill and finding patterns or shapes in clouds, one person thinks they see a dog, another sees a dragon, someone else can see nothing recognizable at all—just water vapor, nothing more—and when everyone stops arguing about what they saw, and looks again, the cloud has moved on …

“Events, my Dear Boy, Events”:

The colored revolutions are like that—everyone sees something different in looking at the events. They see the surface patterns of elections being manipulated and leading to protests; and the shared iconography of the protestors, wrapping themselves in colored scarves, and waving Georgian flags in Kyiv, or sending Georgian and Ukrainian youth groups to Bishkek to train young voters and protestors. But this use of colored symbols and flags, and the rough similarities in the way events played out, are not sufficient to explain what actually happened in Georgia, in Ukraine, or in Kyrgyzstan. Nor can they explain or predict what is likely to happen in other countries in the region.

As British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan pointed out, events are the most difficult thing to deal with. Most of the time we do not know what is happening, but we have to decide whether or not an event means something and improvise a response. People tend to look for patterns to make sense of things. For members of the media, they have to tell their audience if there is a dog or a dragon in the clouds. If there is nothing there at all, it is not news—so they latch onto something to make it news.

In government, policymakers need something a bit more substantial to decide whether or not to react and do something. Policymakers and politicians will usually respond to an evident crisis—when something big and obvious has already happened. But most of the time events do not really add up to something obvious. They may be part of an underlying trend that the media misinterprets or does not even pick up on. And both the media and policymakers rarely go many levels below issues to see what is there. They have neither the time, nor often the opportunity.

A consensus opinion on the outside—in the media, and among the political elite and the informed public—will, however, often force a government to interpret or respond to events in a certain way, even if it may be the wrong way.

This is certainly the case in Russia and elsewhere in Eurasia, where the general consensus opinion among the political elite and the informed public is that the U.S. has promoted the colored revolutions. As a result, governments in the region have concluded that the activities of U.S.-sponsored groups now have to be checked.

And, of course, we have plenty of glaring instances of consensus opinions in the U.S. on a whole host of issues related to Iraq that have shaped questionable responses by the American government.

Linking Academia to Policy:

But this is where you, the group of scholars at this conference, come in. It is up to scholars across the disciplines to help explain the macro issues, the context we are operating in—in this case in Central Eurasia—to identify what the media, the public, and policymakers need to know to make sense of events.

The main challenge, of course, is in getting the message out in understandable and easily accessible ways for a more general audience, and in finding ways to shape a consensus opinion.

Many issues that are on the agenda of this conference have direct relevance to current public debates in Washington, DC about what is happening in the region. I would like to highlight a few of these under six rough headings.

First, we have many panels that deal with **the cultural and historical context of Central Eurasia**. In understanding current political developments, it is crucial to grasp the differences between regions of Central Eurasia and within them. The different histories of ancient kingdoms and more recent political societies in the Caucasus, for example; and the different traditions and experiences of nomads and pastoralists in Central Asia, have all helped to shape different self-perceptions, political attitudes, and geopolitical orientations among the states.

Religion has evolved differently and plays different roles in different states. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz seem to wear Islam more lightly, let us say, than Uzbeks and Tajiks, for a variety of reasons. And all have reacted differently to the revival of Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Christianity has played different roles at different times in Georgia and Armenia, even though both have the distinction of being the region's oldest Christian cultures. We now see the rise of a new nationalism in Georgia centered around the church and a new religiosity, which is absent in contemporary Armenia. Armenian nationalism rallied round the Church in the late Tsarist era, but for modern Armenia, the genocide has played more of a factor in identity and state-building.

All of these issues become relevant when we contemplate issues of how to divide up the region for study and for policymaking. The members of the Central Eurasian Studies Society have resolved, for example, that Central Asia is part of Central Eurasia. But the U.S. State Department has floated a plan to include Central Asia in an expanded South Asia bureau, while the Caucasus will remain within the Europe and Eurasia Bureau.

Some scholars in Washington, DC have been making the case for this change for some time. And there are some reasonably good reasons, even historical reasons, for including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in South Asia. But this move has greatly angered the Kazakhs, for example, who have never even seen Kazakhstan as part of Central Asia—as, of course, it was technically not in the Soviet period. They find it very hard to see how they fit into South Asia.

And, it also raises policy questions—given the tendency for the U.S. government to make bureaucratic divisions fairly rigid. How, for example, will the State Department factor in Central Asia's interactions with Russia and China? Or how will they respond to Kazakhstan's self-declared intention to develop to "*European* standards" and its request to chair the OSCE in this context?

Russia and China and the Central Asian states are all currently cooperating together in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); China's economic penetration of Central Asia is expanding, as are its bilateral political and security relations with individual Central Asian states outside of the multinational framework of the SCO. Demographically, as ethnic Russians withdraw from most of Central Asia—with the exception of Kazakhstan, where they are actually returning in relatively large numbers—ethnic Han Chinese traders are moving in, raising issues of more permanent settlement. China's western Xinjiang region shares indigenous Muslim populations with Central Asian states and Beijing's fears of potential political upheaval and terrorism in Xinjiang have made it exert considerable pressure on its weaker Central Asian neighbors to resolve outstanding border disputes and rein in nationalist activists with links to the region (such as cross-border Uighur political movements).

Will Central Asia's inclusion in the State Department's South Asia bureau facilitate or complicate understanding and responding to issues like these?

Second, this issue of the role of China in Central Asia, along with the regional perceptions of the United States role in the colored revolutions, raises a number of questions about how we should examine and understand **the new levels of international involvement in Central Eurasia**.

As the conference's panel on Alexander the Great and the Mongols suggests, Central Asia and the Caucasus have been crossroads and arenas for great power interaction for centuries. And we now see the emergence of new regional players, and shifts in the positions of the old, in these regions. Both the European Union and the United States are newcomers who are still finding their way. While Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey are all trying to put their old wine in new bottles, one way or another, to remarket themselves to Central Eurasia.

But we also have something much more interesting and complex to contemplate in the emergence and entry of international NGOs into Central Eurasia—be this, the World Bank and other representatives of the humanitarian and development communities, Human Rights and media development groups, and new educational entities like the

various American Universities that have sprung up across the region, or the Gulen schools that were first pioneered in Turkey. All of these offer new networks and different sets of connections to the outside. And many of the regional governments see some of these organizations as a threat, rather than simply as an opportunity, for a variety of reasons that need to be understood.

International Islamist movements fall under this rubric of new networks and connections to the outside that are often seen as a threat. I have already mentioned the Gulen schools, which promote a socio-conservative philosophy, and generally aim for the bottom-up Islamization of society through education. But these schools also provide a rigorous, scientifically-based education that is generally popular with the pupils who enroll there, including many who are not from Muslim families. This is one side of the coin.

On the other, we have *Hezb-ut-Tahrir*, for example, and other organized groups that use Islam as a mobilizing force. These are also transnational networks that offer a window on the world for the region. But this is a more elaborately and rigidly framed window, with a very definite view on the re-establishment, for example, of an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia. The question of whether or not the ideology and activities of *Hezb-ut-Tahrir* are a significant security threat to individual states is one of the most heated current debates in the region, and many states have chosen to ban the organization entirely. The British government has also moved to ban *Hezb-ut-Tahrir* in London, where it is headquartered, as part of its response to the July 7 bombings on the London transport system.

We should also bear in mind that it is not just Islamic groups that have moved into Central Eurasia, but a range of other religiously-based groups and organized NGOs. Christian organizations, like the Mormons and many protestant groups, raise their own set of questions when operating in states that have been predominantly secular for 70 years under Communism or have their own traditional, organized religions.

There have been numerous, often violent clashes, for example, between representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and other Christian groups, who are proselytizing in Georgia at a time when the Georgian Orthodox Church has become synonymous with a rising sense of Georgian nationalism.

Third, the penetration of foreign Islamist movements into Central Eurasia raises the problems of reconciling private piety, political activism, and **the relationship between state and religion**. Groups like *Hezb-ut-Tahrir*, for example, reach out to and recruit among those who feel socially, economically, or politically disenfranchised and cut off from any kind of public participation in decisionmaking.

In Azerbaijan, young Azeris are turning to religion in unexpected ways and for a variety of different reasons, but often to find their own voice or a new identity within society. New Sunni mosques, for example, are attracting more young Azeris than traditional Shi'ia places of worship—which are associated with the old Soviet state and the older generation.

Since the political confrontations during the Azeri Presidential elections of October 2003, and the subsequent government crackdown on the opposition, political Islam has begun to emerge as a mobilizing force among youth in Azerbaijan, who are disillusioned with mainstream politics. This trend follows patterns elsewhere in the region and in the Middle East, but it is very much out of step with Azerbaijan's secular political traditions that date back to the early 20th Century and its first independent republic.

A radical Islamist element has also been rising among youth in the North Caucasus since the late 1990s, when militant groups entrenched themselves—not just in Chechnya—but in North Caucasus republics like Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the heavy-handed reaction of the authorities, who, among other responses, have closed down virtually all the mosques in Kabardino-Balkaria.

As an illustration of the extent and seriousness of the militant phenomenon, volunteer fighters from the North Caucasus were captured by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2001-2002. And there is also now clearly an ideological link between Chechen and other North Caucasian radicals and international jihadi terrorists, even if there may not be a strong organizational or financial link. Terror tactics adopted by jihadis in Chechnya have been propagated by video and the internet, and adopted elsewhere—including in Iraq. Several panels deal with this range of issues.

Fourth, the fact that youth are particularly vulnerable to extremist groups across the region means that the **issues of the next generation in Central Eurasia**––those coming of age after the end of the USSR—are particularly acute, as panels at this conference also underscore. Young people across the region are trying to find an anchor, and we have to address how their identities will shift and evolve in comparison with their parents; and what impacts this will have on the states themselves and their outward orientation. These are all questions that should come up in several of the panels.

Just as an illustration of this, which segues into another set of panels at the conference, I was struck during a trip to the Caucasus this summer by how much language issues are now separating off many young people from their parents in Georgia. Educated youth in Georgia tend to be English-speaking, and have lost the former fluency in Russian as a second language. In fact, those younger Georgians who have Russian language skills have often moved to live and work in Russia. This has left a concentration of non-Russian speakers behind who increasingly have less direct contact with Russians.

One of my older colleagues in Tbilisi recently lamented that he does not know what to do with his precious collection of Russian-language books. His children don't speak Russian and do not want them. They are already disconnected from his intellectual life, which was rooted in both languages and cultures. And those students who remain in Tbilisi's universities and institutes are more "pro-U.S." than students I encountered anywhere else in region.

This may not seem to be so much of an issue—and for many people it may seem like an entirely positive development. But this shift in second-language usage feeds into U.S. policy concerns, when Russian-Georgian political relations are currently fraught and bordering on hostile, and Georgia has become a flashpoint in U.S. and Russian bilateral relations. Policymakers in Washington are currently discussing ways of encouraging dialogue between Georgians and Russians to help alleviate their conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. But Georgians and Russians increasingly do not understand either each others language or each others viewpoints, so linguistic issues play an important role here.

Fifth, beyond these issues, we have many other panels that touch on important topics for policymakers, such as **energy and security**. U.S. policy throughout the 1990s focused on ensuring the development and security of Caspian energy exports across the Caucasus to Turkey through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline as a means of increasing the supply of oil and gas to world markets. However, looking ahead, natural resources could become a new frontier for inter-state conflicts—in Central Asia in particular. As in the Middle East and other regions where energy resources are unevenly distributed and water is scarce, some countries have the upper hand—thus exacerbating existing tensions over other political and security issues.

For example, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have considerable oil and gas resources, but Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan control Central Asia's major watersheds, which originate in their mountainous regions. Uzbekistan has already turned off gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan during political disputes, while the latter has threatened to divert water resources. Likewise, Uzbekistan has threatened Turkmenistan with military intervention if there is any diversion of water flows from the Kara-Kum canal in conjunction with a grandiose plan of President Niyazov to create a huge lake out of an existing reservoir in Turkmenistan.

And Kazakhstan is engaged in a series of ongoing disputes with China over watersheds, which could increasingly flare-up in the future as China pursues the long-term development of Xinjiang, and thus reduces the flow of water in rivers like the Ili and Irtysh that supply Kazakhstan's two large eastern lake systems, as well as—in the case of Irtysh—the Ob River basin in Western Siberia in Russia. These issues occasionally appear in the press, but then fade into the background. We clearly need to understand the dynamics of these disputes in greater detail before a crisis ensues and develops into a larger conflict that could pull in both China and Russia.

Sixth, issues related to **poverty and different perceptions of hardship** are clearly tied to conflicts over resources. In Central Asia, for example, deep-rooted, structural poverty of the kind that is evident in other developing countries is overlaid by "transitional poverty" and the emergence of the so-called "new poor"—groups of professionals, state employees, and those on fixed incomes who were relatively comfortable under the Soviet system but now find themselves plunged into poverty thanks to faltering state budgets and the collapse of formal social safety nets. The situation in the Caucasus is very

similar, with the additional problem of internally displaced populations from regional conflicts, who have been thrown into poverty after being forced from their homes.

In some cases in Central Asia—for example, in Uzbekistan—poverty has also been enforced or facilitated by the government. In Uzbekistan, wages for agricultural workers are kept low or are not paid at all for long periods to boost the profitability of cash crops like cotton. Measuring poverty is a tricky thing, however, as many people who would be categorized as poor, on the basis of formal wages and per capita incomes, have devised many mechanisms for overcoming their situation. They have developed other sources of income and support—including small-scale, often illegal, trade; and remittances from family members working abroad. Many people in Central Asia also do not necessarily see themselves as poor in an objective sense. Poverty is often a relative condition.

But, overall, poverty has significant domestic governance implications. And the **international dimensions of poverty** in Central Eurasia are also important. **Economic migration** from Central Asia and the Caucasus to Russia has become a major regional phenomenon in the last few years—as several panels at the conference recognize. The mostly unregulated movement of people across borders in search of work will dramatically change the region over the next two decades.

Migrants are altering the demographic structure of Russian regions, raising questions about the future composition of the Russian labor force, and changing the political dynamic between Russia and the states of Central Eurasia. Migrants bind Central Eurasian economies and Russia together in the same way that the United States and Latin American states like Mexico have become bound together. They create new trade patterns and financial flows, which complicate efforts to monitor individual GDP growth. The increased presence of migrant workers also leads to demands for new bilateral political arrangements between Russia and regional states.

Right now in Central Eurasia, migrants are continuing the ethnic inter-mixing in the region that took place in the Soviet period—but this time in a haphazard fashion rather than at the direction of Communist central planning. The movement of Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others to Russia—and also it should be noted to Kazakhstan—is a complete reversal of the trends of the late Soviet period, when Russians and Ukrainians moved into Central Asian republics as part of the USSR's plans to increase their industrial and urban development.

Russia is now facing the same challenges of immigration as the developed countries of the West, but has only recently begun to come to terms with the phenomenon and the governance challenges it poses. The plight of migrants who are exploited, who have no economic, social, or political rights, and are often trafficked across borders is increasingly coming into focus in Russia. Migrants are also rapidly becoming the victims of often deadly racially-motivated attacks by skinheads and other extreme racist groups.

Russia runs the risk of replicating the problems of contemporary European countries by creating new disaffected immigrant Muslim minority communities that are cut-off from

the mainstream, consigned to long-term poverty, and increasingly vulnerable to extremist ideologies and militant groups. This could be the next source of terrorism in Russia after the North Caucasus.

Conclusions:

In highlighting all of these issues, my intention is to underscore the fact that public debate in the media and public policy has to be informed by the deeper scholarship that takes place in universities and research institutions and is disseminated through important conferences like this one.

As the scholars gathered here understand very well, the "colored revolutions" across Eurasia in the last two years were the complex result of crises in state-building and in the legitimacy of new post-Soviet governments, all operating under different conditions against the backdrop of different, deeper, historical circumstances—not just the shared experience of 70 years of Communism. And history clearly did not stop with the so-called revolutionary events, as none of us would have expected it to.

Going back to my earlier metaphor, by the time we had finished arguing about the shape in the cloud, the cloud moved on. Now we seem to have the "end" of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine with the dismissal of Yulia Timoshenko and her team by President Yushchenko. The bloom is off the Rose Revolution in Georgia. And Kyrgyzstan has seemingly fallen into protracted crisis with political assassinations and rumors of criminal groups infiltrating politics at the highest levels.

What all of these new sets of events demonstrate is the danger of buying into false patterns. Georgia's Rose Revolution, for example, was never a straightforward regional "democratic success" story when you looked closer. Events unfolded in a messy and unpredictable way—as, of course, they tend to do. And, in the end, the much-praised new government of Mikheil Saakashvili got a huge boost in legitimacy and trust in Georgia simply by becoming the *new* government and replacing the bankrupt and despised old regime of Eduard Shevardnadze. Despite the euphoric scenes during President Bush's trip to Georgia in May this year, public dissatisfaction has returned as Saakashvili's government has let domestic reform drag in favor of military adventures in the separatist republic of South Ossetia and foreign policy confrontations with Russia.

In Georgia, few people have seen their material well-being and daily lives improve. And if Saakashvili cannot meet the expectations of the population, then his government's legitimacy will be a rapidly depreciating asset. President Yushchenko in Ukraine recognized this fact fairly quickly in the last few months, as his government turned on itself and became paralyzed, and his popularity dropped precipitously.

Almost 15 years after the end of the Soviet Union, simply being a Ukrainian or Georgian leader that can claim to be separate and independent from Moscow is no longer sufficient. And no matter what "color" a new government is perceived to be, it has to deliver.

In concluding, there are a couple of lessons that we can take from the political upheavals in Eurasia:

First, news and information now travels fast across a range of mediums in the region. People want to live as well as at least their immediate neighbors, and they learn quickly about the possibilities for change from developments elsewhere. Governments that continue to fail to deliver basic necessities and disregard public welfare can not expect to stay in power indefinitely, even if they hunker down, push opposition to the side, and align themselves with neighbors who turn a blind eye to their shortcomings, or indulge in populist politics.

Second, if there are no political institutions to manage the population's demands in a state (be these political parties, functioning parliaments, elections, or the media), people will eventually take to the streets to protest if things get bad enough. And repression does not pay. Mass arrests and shooting at protestors may work in the short-term—as they are working, for now, in places like Uzbekistan—but in the long-term this reduces the government's legitimacy and ultimately risks massive civil violence, sparked by a tipping event.

This was underscored in the events in Kyrgyzstan, where the government is traditionally weaker than in Uzbekistan and there has always been less willingness and even less capacity to clamp down. In Kyrgyzstan, a heavy-handed approach to public protests in Aksy in 2002 generated more, larger-scale demonstrations and forged coalitions in the subsequent period among disparate opposition groups, including some advocating extreme measures to overthrow the government. All of this—combined with government mismanagement and pernicious corruption—eventually contributed to the ouster of President Askar Akayev in March 2005 with the tipping event of the parliamentary elections.

In sum, these are some of the general patterns we can pull out of the colored revolutions—but they are not a pattern, in of themselves, as, I think, the rich array of issues that will be raised and discussed at the Central Eurasian Studies Society conference in these three days will illustrate.