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# US games in Central Asia

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*The American encouragement of velvet revolutions in the former Soviet republics poses a threat to peace and stability in Central Asia*

**T**HE 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine that brought a pro-western leadership to power in the second biggest ex-Soviet state after Russia now threatens to spill over to Central Asia, with potentially dire consequences for regional stability.

Ukraine became the second newly independent state after Georgia where massive public protests led by youth movements trained and funded by western organisations swept away post-Soviet regimes that vacillated between Russia and the West, and installed Governments committed to joining the western camp.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are now being cast in the role of pace-makers of "velvet revolutions" in other post-Soviet states. Within days of the Opposition leader, Viktor Yushchenko's victory in a disputed presidential election in Ukraine, Georgia's President, Mikhail Saakashvili, who led a "revolution of roses" in his country a year ago, came to Ukraine to sign a "Carpathian Declaration." It described the recent political changes in the two countries as "a new wave of liberation of Europe which will lead to the final victory of freedom and democracy on the European continent."

Mr Saakashvili declared that Georgia and Ukraine have formed a "democratic bridge" in the former Soviet Union, and that other governments in the region should "accept the reality that the democratic model has no alternative."

Ukraine's newly appointed Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, who was the fiery leader of the

power. Neighbouring Uzbekistan or Tajikistan cannot boast such democratic credentials, but their leaders do not fear "velvet revolutions". None of the five parties that contested parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan in December was in opposition to the country's strongman, Islam Karimov. Tajikistan's leader, Imomali Rakhmonov, does not worry about the outcome of the February 28 parliamentary elections either, having purged most of his opponents and resisted US recommendations to liberalise the electoral law and allow Opposition media.

In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, the coalition of nine Opposition parties, led by the former Prime Minister, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and the former Foreign Minister, Roza Otunbayeva, is expected to put up a strong challenge to pro-government parties in the parliamentary election next month by exploiting popular discontent over the painful transition from socialism to capitalism in a country where nearly half of the five million people live below the poverty line.

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US hopes for a 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan will not be easily accepted by Russia. Moscow's major air base in that country has afforded it a strategic foothold in Central Asia as well as enabling it to balance the presence

height of the "orange revolution" to study its experience in peaceful toppling of the Government.

"Ukraine's experience has exceptional importance for Kazakhstan," a member of the delegation told the Russian Kommersant daily after the visit. "The ideas of the revolutions of roses and chestnuts are beginning to penetrate Kazakhstan."

As in Kyrgyzstan, the Opposition in Kazakhstan has former allies of the President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in its ranks. They include the ex-Speaker of Parliament, Zharmakhan Tuyabai, who quit his post in protest against alleged vote rigging in last year's parliamentary election. With active encouragement from Washington, the Kazakh Opposition has recently formed a coalition and plans to field a single candidate in the 2006 presidential election. The US Congress is demanding that Mr Nazarbayev release from prison several Opposition leaders even as a "Kazakhgate" trial continues in New York against an American businessman accused of giving bribes to Kazakh officials, including Mr Nazarbayev.

Kyrgyzstan is also a member of regional groupings that will be weakened if it pulls out. These include the six-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, led by Russia and China, as well as the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union and the Organisation of Central Asian States.

However, the biggest danger of "velvet revolutions" in Central Asia is that they may not be as peaceful as they were in Georgia and Ukraine, which have European culture and mentality. The political struggle in Tajikistan in the early 1990s erupted into a seven-year



cratic model has no alternative."

Ukraine's newly appointed Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, who was the fiery leader of the "orange revolution" in Kiev, further clarified the mission of the Tbilisi-Kiev axis, promising in her typical straightforward manner to "peacefully export the orange revolution wherever it may be possible."

During the stormy election campaign in Ukraine, would-be revolutionaries from other ex-Soviet states flocked to that country to gather experience in staging coloured revolutions.

The next likely target for such a revolution is Kyrgyzstan, where parliamentary elections are scheduled for February 27 and a presidential poll is due in October. The United States has been actively preparing the ground for a "revolution of tulips" in Kyrgyzstan to replace President Askar Akayev, a staunch ally of Russia, with a pro-American leader. The US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Linn Pasco, who was the moving spirit behind the "orange revolution" in Ukraine, has brought together a powerful Opposition coalition of former allies of the Kyrgyz President, while the US Ambassador in Kyrgyzstan, Stephen Young, publicly called for a "peaceful transfer of power" and promised financial aid to ensure a "fair election."

In a recent interview, Mr Akayev explained why Kyrgyzstan had been picked for a "velvet revolution." The technology of such revolutions works only in countries that have already embarked on the road of democracy, but is ineffective against authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, he said.

"I am sure this technology will not work in Turkmenistan, but it may work in Kyrgyzstan, which has established such fundamentals of democracy as numerous opposition parties, free media and over 5,000 non-governmental organisations," he said.

Indeed, the democratic process has made considerable headway in Kyrgyzstan over the 15 years that Mr Akayev, a former scientist, has held the reins of

## Central Asia as well as enabling it to balance the presence of a NATO base on Kyrgyz territory

Learning from the experience of Georgia and Ukraine, where street protests forced the governments to buckle to opposition demands, the Opposition in Kyrgyzstan has threatened to stage massive demonstrations if the authorities attempt to rig the February vote. It has already started picketing government offices in protest against disqualification of candidates on technical grounds.

The parliamentary election on February 25 in Kyrgyzstan may decide the fate of the October 30 presidential poll, as an Opposition majority in Parliament will be able to block Mr Akayev from seeking re-election. The country's Constitutional Court last year left it to Parliament to decide whether Mr Akayev, who has served three terms, can stand again. Although Mr Akayev promised not to run, he may still change his mind if he fails to promote a strong loyalist to succeed him. His daughter, Bernmet Akayev, is an option, but she is still to prove her mettle in the parliamentary race as the leader of the newly formed party, Alga Kyrgyzstan.

Russia cannot easily allow Kyrgyzstan to fall from its orbit. With the opening of a major air base in that country two years ago Russia acquired a strategic foothold in Central Asia and balanced the presence of a NATO base on Kyrgyz territory under the international anti-terror effort in nearby Afghanistan. Russia has a growing presence in the Kyrgyz economy and Russians constitute the third-largest ethnic group in the country.

The success of a "revolution of tulips" in Kyrgyzstan may trigger a political crisis in Kazakhstan, another Central Asian nation in the sights of US "democratisers." A delegation of Kazakh Opposition activists visited Ukraine at the

Ukraine, which have European culture and mentality. The political struggle in Tajikistan in the early 1990s erupted into a seven-year bloody civil war. Arbitrarily-drawn Soviet-era borders that cut across ethnic lines, smouldering disputes over scarce water resources, and rising religious extremism make Central Asia a powder keg. And, US attempts to implant democracy may cause the region to explode.

The threat of export of revolution has pushed Central Asian leaders closer to Russia. The Presidents of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were in Moscow this month to discuss with Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, the situation and reiterate long-term strategic partnership with Russia. For its part, Moscow announced the launch of a programme to supply the armies of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and other allies in the CSTO defence treaty weapons at cut-rate prices.

Moscow has also warned the West that it will firmly defend its interests in the former Soviet Union. Russia will "sharply react to the export of revolutions to countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), no matter in what colours these revolutions may be draped — rose, blue or any other," the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Ivanov, said addressing an international conference on new threats and challenges, in New York earlier this month.

The Russian defence chief did not provide any details of Russia's possible "sharp reaction" to the Western onslaught, but he stressed the importance Russia attached to strengthening defence ties with former Soviet states.

"Today we have military presence in all CIS countries, with the exception of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan," Mr Ivanov said.

Experts said Mr Ivanov's tough statement could be an indication Russia was reassessing its geopolitical options and assigning a bigger role to its defence muscle in upholding national interests.

"The Kremlin is determined to defend its positions in the CIS by using different methods, including military ones," said Mr Vladimir Popov of the Academy of Military Sciences. COURTESY THE HINDU