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## **Social protests, modular revolutions and democratisation. Selected categories in the analysis of the phenomenon of colour revolutions**

The revolutionary events that occurred in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, among others, continue to be a bone of contention for the numerous authors trying to identify the reasons for the outbreaks, the duration and specific nature of these protests. The disputes between scholars mainly concern the detailed enumeration of the factors that caused the outbreak of these so-called colour revolutions and the overthrow of authorities, but all scholars are in agreement that the events under analysis have been caused by a peculiar composition of many factors rather than a single one. This paper concentrates on the role of factors related to two dimensions: domestic and international. The purpose of the paper, however, is not to analyse case studies or compare individual events, seeking similarities or differences between them, but to review the categories applied in the literature on the subject, their operationalisation, and an attempt at the systematisation of the current research trends as regards colour revolutions. The most important characteristics of colour revolutions are presented first. Next, the international and endogenous factors that have influenced the breakout and course of the protests are discussed. The final part of the paper involves considerations on the democratisation potential of colour revolutions.

Researchers dealing with the phenomenon of colour revolutions agree that all the protests share some fundamental characteristics. Numerous authors point to the fact that in the case of Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan it is difficult to talk about a classical revolution. The classical approach associates revolutions with violence, whereas in the case of the colour revolutions we witnessed non-violent behaviour. Pavel K. Baev writes that a colour revolution can be perceived as a “mass protest or an

unarmed uprising aimed at replacing, through elections, the sitting government that represents a semi/quasi-democratic regime” (Baev, 2011, p. 3–22). The definition by Donnach Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese incorporates similar elements, as they indicate that a colour revolution refers to non-violent protests that have resulted in overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The former definition additionally emphasises the political character of revolutions and stresses the importance of elections. Therefore, colour revolutions are political phenomena, and they have not led to changes in social structure or the redistribution of assets. The slogans of these revolutions were also strictly political, as their main objective was to change the political system. Contrary to traditional revolutionary concepts, the protests that occurred in the post-communist area did not proclaim utopian slogans, but called for a change in the authoritarian *status quo* and its replacement by a democratic system of the western type. It was a significant common feature of all the colour revolutions that they occurred in countries lacking a democratic political system prior to the revolution. It is also important to note that none of the regimes was totalitarian and admitted a certain level of freedom in expression of views, tolerance of opposition and freedom of the media. This explains why the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine succeeded, while they were impossible in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus, not to mention Uzbekistan.

Characteristically, we are talking about relatively moderate regimes which legitimised themselves by cyclical, albeit frequently falsified, elections. These elections were advantageous for the opposition, allowing it to easily create a division into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Additionally, the elections gave the electorate an opportunity to take a stance. Depriving the people of this opportunity by falsifying election results motivated them to act. The elections provided an opportunity to stage demonstrations. They were relatively safe for the opposition on account of the foreign election observers present in the country at that time. The governments could not resort to violence. Repressions against the opposition in between elections could go unnoticed, but during an election campaign its voice was heard internally and abroad. Therefore, it was important for independent public opinion polls and election observations to be conducted by independent observers.

Another significant factor was provided by the presence of a united opposition, charismatic leaders and material support offered by financial elites. The consolidation of the opposition was also significant for external, international actors, who received a clear and unequivocal message

where to direct their support. Another common characteristic shared by all the colour revolutions was the influx of financial, organisational and personal assets from abroad. The support provided by organisations associated with the European Union and the United States allowed the opposition to pressurise the authorities, obtain financial means to mobilise civil society, support the independent media and stage protests. The joint activities of civil society and united opposition, and the support of external entities, allowed a two-fold strategy to be implemented. On the one hand, it was about the discrediting the regime, secondly – about persuading people to go to the vote. This strategy was rooted in the belief that the unpopular regime would want to invalidate election results. Under such circumstances, people were encouraged to take to the streets and start a general strike intended to force the authorities to step down (Baev, 2011, p. 3–22; Beacháin, Polese, 2010, p. 3–10).

It was possible to apply these strategies owing to the power of the demonstration effect<sup>1</sup> and the civil society acquiring the knowledge of an efficient protest repertoire. After the successful revolution in Serbia, activists established the Centre for Non-Violent Resistance, for the purpose of disseminating information on peaceful protests. Activists from Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan stayed in touch with the Serbs, taking advantage of their knowledge of how to mobilise society. The process of mobilisation and learning was bidirectional. The protesters were learning, as well as the authoritarian regimes that were carefully observing the colour revolutions. Their most typical response involved curbing the activities of non-governmental organisations financed from abroad and refusing visas to Western observers. Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Budny list several types of reactions of non-democratic countries to colour revolutions. A number of countries responded by isolation, for instance limiting citizens' access to information about the revolutions. Secondly, the opposition was marginalised by means of manipulating electoral law or mass criticism in the media. Thirdly, the situation of the groups that were likely to revolt was improved (they were rewarded). Fourthly, the authorities resorted to repression, firing persons who supported and encouraged protests or depriving them of means of subsistence in other ways. Fifthly, society was persuaded that the colour revolutions defied the history, tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> Protests commenced under the influence of observations (usually in the media) of protests elsewhere.

tion and identity of a given country and sponsored by foreign countries with completely incompatible interests (Finkel, Budny, 2012, p. 6).

Researchers into transformations and revolutionary changes of political systems have also identified another variable – that of the international context. Studies explaining the reasons for colour revolutions frequently stress the power of relations with western countries, the European Union and United States. The academic literature presents two main theoretical trends that explain the phenomenon of colour revolutions (Tucker, 2007, p. 539). The first one inscribes them into a broader post-Cold War context that divided Europe into East and West. There are two explanations provided by this trend. One refers to the Occidentalism of opposition leaders in post-soviet countries, who feared that the autocrats in power would lead to the exclusion of their country from 'Europe' and pushing it towards the 'East'. This fear resulted in the outbreak of protests. It is true that both Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko frequently used the argument of a 'return to Europe' or a 'stable position in Europe' in their speeches.

Another explanation which is particularly popular in Russia (Кара-Мурза, Александров, Мурашкин, Телегин, 2006; Гапич, Лушников, 2010; Энгдаль, 2010) and China, indicates that colour revolutions resulted from the activities of the United States, seeking to export its political model and include post-soviet countries in their influence zone. American involvement in the promotion of democracy in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan was indeed considerable. It is estimated that the US spent some 41 mln dollars in Serbia to promote such movements as *Otpor*. The money was used to finance a special bureau to co-ordinate aid to the democratic opposition in Serbia. In Kyrgyzstan, such foundations as the National Endowment for Democracy, Eurasia Foundation, as well as the US Department of State and USAID financed 170 non-profit organisations supporting democracy, development and civil society. They also provided financial support to the independent press published in Bishkek and to Radio Azattyk, and even financed the travel expenses of young people from Kyrgyz going to Ukraine to see the events of the Orange Revolution. The fundamental problem in this trend, however, is an excessive tendency to focus on only one factor that triggered the outbreak of protests and to assume that the relationship between the foreign 'exporter' and local 'importer' was a one-way flow of instructions.

The other theoretical trend mentioned above which attempts to explain the colour revolutions tends to concentrate on the nature and activities of opposition movements in individual countries. Scholars particularly

emphasise the role of individuals learning how to operate effectively on the basis of their own experience, or by obtaining useful knowledge from external actors, especially from countries that had already experienced a colour revolution. Owing to the application of proven methods and international support, it was possible to mobilise great numbers of protesters against electoral fraud.

The most popular advocates of this approach include Valerie J. Bunce, Sharon L. Wolchik and Mark R. Beissinger, who use the notion of 'diffusion', 'modular revolution' and 'electoral model'. Diffusion describes the way a new method of overthrowing dictators by means of elections disseminates: applied in one country, it spreads to one country after another in the post-soviet region. Diffusion can be identified when similar innovations (new activities, ideas, institutions and policies) emerge in many different countries. The above-mentioned authors speak about the diffusion of the electoral model, which encompasses several modules (Beissinger, 2007, p. 261), such as:

- using falsified elections as an opportunity for mass mobilisation against the pseudo-democratic behaviour of authorities;
- foreign support for the development of local democratic movements;
- organising radical youth movements that use unconventional tactics before the elections, in order to weaken the repressive potential of the authorities and prepare for the ultimate struggle;
- consolidated opposition;
- external diplomatic pressures and an exceptionally high number of election observers;
- mass mobilisation before the results of falsified elections are announced, and using non-violence resistance methods, as described by Gene Sharp.<sup>2</sup>

According to the above-mentioned authors, these elements underwent diffusion, leading to the outbreak of ultimately successful protests. The dissemination of the new operating scenario was facilitated by several factors. Firstly, the model is easy to apply, since it is divided into concrete tasks and stages. Secondly, the senders and recipients of the messages that undergo diffusion share certain similarities. The new revolutionary method spread from one country to another where conditions were similar. All

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<sup>2</sup> Gene Sharp – American author of textbooks on non-violent resistance. G. Sharp recommends a well planned and determined protest be used instead of negotiation and pacts.

the revolutionary modules were applied in post-communist authoritarian countries that shared a similar past, sometimes they were also located in close proximity of one another, and were at a similar level of economic development, and so on. Thirdly, diffusion was possible thanks to the supra-national network of domestic and foreign activists responsible for the dissemination of the model.

The imitative nature of the colour revolutions lies in a fact noticed by researchers, whereby the power of the example set by earlier revolutionary events influenced the mobilisation potential and confidence in victory in successive countries. Georgian activists established contacts with the Serbian *Otpor* in spring of 2003 (six months before the Rose Revolution) when visiting Belgrade during a trip sponsored by the Soros Foundation. Upon their return to Georgia, they established the *Kmara* organisation which kept in touch with *Otpor*, learning peaceful protest techniques from the Serbs. Even the organisation's logo (a clenched fist) was borrowed from *Otpor*. The story of the Ukrainian youth movement *Pora* is similar, and is modelled on Serbian and Georgian organisations. Fourteen *Pora* leaders were trained in the Non-Violent Resistance Centre established by *Otpor*. The Centre organised training sessions for youth leaders from all over the world on how to stage protests, set up movements and mobilise voters (Beissinger, 2007, p. 263).

Although numerous scholars point to international stimuli, foreign countries' support for revolutions, or their weakening, and specific geopolitical locations as primary factors, a definite majority stress the importance of internal stimuli which are considered to be of key importance for protests. Lucan Way represents the school of what is called a 'structural explanation' for why some authoritarian leaders were able to suppress the threat of colour revolutions why others were not. He indicates that autocrats can survive if one of the below conditions is met:

- presence of highly institutionalised party governments united by ideology or revolutionary tradition;
- presence of an extensive, coherent and well-paid coercive apparatus;
- strong state control of the economy, allowing clientelistic bonds to be formed by means of bribery or firing people from work (Way, 2008, p. 55–69).

Regimes where one of these three dimensions is strong are much better protected against revolutionary upheavals. Whether in Kyrgyzstan, in the time of Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, or Ukraine with Leonid Kuchma, or Georgia with Eduard Shevardnadze, the leaders were not

supported by a strong party, or relied on a loose coalition bonded by clientelistic relations. Georgia and Ukraine are a good illustration here. Right before the 2003 revolution in Georgia, the For a New Georgia bloc fell apart, which was set up after another presidential party, the Union of Citizens of Georgia, broke up in the summer of 2001.

The cases of Serbia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, in turn, involve the presence of a weak coercive apparatus that was not remunerated on a regular basis. The police in Kyrgyzstan had to pay for their uniforms, fuel and repairs to official vehicles themselves. The limited loyalty of the officers of the coercive apparatus towards the insolvent state resulted in their failure to react when the opposition was occupying the buildings of local authorities in some regions of Kyrgyzstan. The weak coercive apparatuses in Serbia and Georgia were also the result of the history of military defeats in the 1990s. Michael McFaul observes that disagreements inside the coercive apparatus as concerns the use of violence by the army and police are a significant factor in revolutionary success. The stronger the disagreements, the greater the probability of the opposition's victory (McFaul, 2005, p. 7).

The third factor, that of control over the strongly privatised economies of Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, was also conducive to revolutions. Given the presence of relatively independent business groups, the opposition could count on their direct support, or at least neutrality. Ukraine is the most spectacular example, where local oligarchs supported Yushchenko in the 2002 parliamentary elections and in the 2004 presidential campaign. Support included the organisation of campaign offices, transport for election observers and the purchase of thousands of relatively cheap cameras (300 dollars each) used to record election irregularities, providing equipment used at demonstrations following the falsified elections, field kitchens, tents and other equipment allowing demonstrators to occupy the centre of Kiev.

Characteristically, the states where colour revolutions broke out were ruled by what is called competitive, or electoral authoritarian regimes, whose political systems allowed limited competition. Under such circumstances, the regimes suffer a great risk, both on account of the unpredictable nature of the election results, and of the discrepancies between a 'true' and 'false' democracy that might inspire citizens to stage protests. Falsified elections mark a time when the people who are unhappy about election fraud are mobilised. This is what happens when highly unpopular elites are trying to maintain power.

Social perceptions of the corruption of the autocrats in power are a very strong factor triggering revolutions. The widespread corruption, disastrous economy, frozen conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia resulted in the criticism of Shevardnadze's policies. As early as 2000–2003, Ukraine was shaken by extensive protests, sparked by the murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze ('Kuchmagate'). In Kyrgyzstan, the governments of A. Akaev and K. Bakiev were characterised by the intensive exploitation of all possible resources, despite the disastrous state of the economy, arousing social resentment (Beissinger, 2007, p. 262).

Apart from the factors related to the state apparatus and political elite, a significant role is played by factors related to counter-elites and their activities, as well as the presence of media that are independent from the authorities, and are therefore able to publicise election irregularities. Numerous authors stress the fact that the success of the colour revolutions was supported by the consolidation of opposition forces, even if this was only temporary. This concerns mainly Serbia and Ukraine, where a single presidential candidate had to face up to an unpopular incumbent president. There was no such consolidation in Georgia, while Kyrgyzstan witnessed a short term tactical alliance between Felix Kulov and Kurmanbek Bakiev.

Another factor that was conducive to the revolutions was active youth groups – *Otpor* in Serbia, *Kmara* in Georgia, *Pora* in Ukraine and *Kel Kel* in Kyrgyzstan. Their objective was to build up hopes for change and convince people that it made sense to participate in the elections, to bond different social groups, aid opposition candidates to reach their electorate effectively, mobilise people to take part in strikes, protests and election campaigns, publicise the electoral fraud and prepare protests, for instance by teaching non-violent protest tactics. Media that were favourable towards the opposition also played an important role. In Serbia, this included the B-52 radio station, and, after it was closed down by Slobodan Milosević – ANEM and Radio Index in Belgrade. Had the election irregularities not been publicised, there would not have been protests of the opposition and the mass mobilisation of society in September 2000. In Georgia, an important role was played by the Rustavi 2 television station, which was critical of Shevardnadze. During mass demonstrations in November 2003 this television station broadcast a documentary, *Bringing down a dictator*, presenting the *Otpor* campaign against Milosevic in Serbia. Ukraine had the website *Ukrainskaja Prawda*, set up by Gongadze and continued despite his tragic death. It played an essential role in publicising election irregularities. Television in Kyrgyzstan was supervised by A. Akaev who also



silenced opposition newspapers with defamation trials that left the editors in financial difficulties (Общественное объединение “Журналисты” 2005, 2014).

All the above mentioned factors, related to the political system, opposition activities and media, are most frequently referred to in the literature as the elements explaining the revolutions. Depending on the theoretical and methodological framework, scholars develop different hierarchies of individual elements and establish different cause-and-effect relations between them. The significant role of exogenous factors related to the international contexts should also be borne in mind.

Colour revolutions have aroused hopes for change, not only among ordinary citizens, but also among many scholars studying the post-soviet region. A number of them assigned these mass demonstrations the potential to make their countries more democratic. Two researchers into colour revolutions, V. Bunce and S. Wolchik, claim that the wave of electoral revolutions in post-communist countries was as extensive and democratic in terms of its outcomes as the first wave of 1988–1992 (Bunce, Wolchik, 2006, p. 5). They perceive the events in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as the second wave of democratisation in the region, characterised by the following properties:

- the electoral model of democratisation was consciously applied;
- mass participation before, during and after elections;
- fundamental change that resulted in the complete replacement of the political regime, as was the case in Serbia;
- democratic tendencies continued after the elections.

The pressure for changes that would result in electoral fraud being replaced by actual competition was present in many countries of the world, but it was most successful in the post-communist region. In the period from 1992–2005, seven out of twenty-one elections organised in this part of the world brought liberal and democratic forces to power, while in Sub-Saharan Africa only four out of eighteen elections had such a result. The operational mode in all these countries shared several characteristics, such as creating a consolidated opposition, insisting on the registration and participation of as many voters as possible, the concentration of the pre-election debate on the issue of the costs of the lack of democracy and benefits of belonging to the opposition, extensive use of international and domestic observation of the elections, media and opinion polls and, finally, getting ready to stage mass protests should the authorities want to falsify the elections.

What are the factors that resulted in the exceptional success of the electoral revolutions in the post-communist region? In the opinion of V. Bunce and S. Wolchik, it was the close relation of advantageous internal factors (courage and imagination of the activists, consolidated opposition and weakness of the governments) and the external support provided by international actors. Another specific feature of the post-communist region that was decisive for the democratisation success of the electoral revolutions involved the absence of a politically powerful army. Civilian supervision over the army meant that the electoral changes were followed by democratisation changes. If power had been divided between the military and civilians, it would have made the elections an insignificant façade that the military could always take over.

Another significant element involved the fact that the elections were organised both in the communist and post-communist periods. It is not important that they were usually falsified, because their importance lay in drawing a strict division line between the authorities and society, as well as in the citizens having become accustomed to the mobilisation related to elections. When compared to other regions, the level of education in these regions was high, especially in terms of relation to income *per capita*. Even in impoverished Tajikistan, the average time spent at school (11.6 years with average income *per capita* of 1,150 dollars) is longer than in Tahiti, which is as poor (3.93 years with average income *per capita* of 1,680 dollars). Education is a feature that encourages external promoters of democracy because it facilitates the dissemination of information and supports the development of civil society. Educated citizens support civil liberties and political rights, they set up associations and organisations that can spread colour revolutions. Additionally, external promoters of democracy can find local collaborators.

Yet another factor that was conducive to the dissemination of the electoral revolutions was the relative homogeneity of the post-communist region rooted in its shared non-democratic past, having been a part of the same political organism and, consequently, being highly integrated in economic and military terms. The dissemination of ideas, techniques and forms of protests was possible owing to different countries in the post-communist region being similar, thereby allowing activists to assess the potential for success and the opportunities and constraints of protests in one country on the basis of their success in another one.

The aid provided by international donors was also of the utmost significance. The US Agency for International Development, National En-

dowment for Democracy, Open Society Institute of G. Soros and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe were treating the post-communist region as their priority by 2003, and the money was primarily allocated to elections and the development of political parties. V. Bunce and S. Wolchik write that the interest of international entities in financing colour revolutions can only partially be explained by the habits and operating patterns from the Cold War period. The main reason was the strong conviction that the resources donated would yield a positive impact. This conviction followed from several factors. Firstly, states in the post-communist region regularly hold at least partially competitive elections, and have developed political parties and civil society organisations. Secondly, there are advantageous factors that are conducive to democracy, such as local elections, popular opposition leaders and relatively efficient judiciaries and executive authorities in many post-communist states. Thirdly, they border other, similar, frequently democratic states (Bunce, Wolchik, 2006, p. 14).

Despite the democratisation potential of colour revolutions, their outcomes are not satisfactory in terms of achieving stable democracies. Katja Kalandadze and Mitchell A. Orenstein claim that these electoral revolutions are a symptom of the problems of authoritarian and hybrid regimes, rather than a realistic solution (Kalandadze, Orenstein, 2009, p. 1404). In many cases they did not bring about regime change, or remove corruption and clientelism. They failed to strengthen political parties and did not increase the transparency of decision-making processes.

K. Kalandadze and M. A. Orenstein note that the majority of electoral revolutions in the world, not only colour revolutions in the post-communist region, did not succeed, and those that did, failed to produce sufficient democratisation. There were several reasons for this. The slow pace of democratisation, or its complete absence, results from profound structural problems that cannot be solved by the application of competitive elections. Secondly, there were no political programmes that would focus on the thorough democratisation of the country and which could be implemented right away approved by the key actors of the revolution. Thirdly, these revolutions do not solve the issue of the distribution of power, thus paving the way for further political crises, vote rigging, corruption accusations and, ultimately, the disappointment of citizens with their new leaders. Fourthly, in the majority of post-communist countries, international donors limited their interest only to the time of the revolution and did not apply continuing and consistent support for democracy, the way the Euro-

pean Union supports Central and Eastern Europe (Kalandadze, Orenstein, 2009, p. 1420).

The colour revolutions resulted neither from a mere export of a model designed by a western superpower, nor from a completely endogenous spontaneous revolt of suppressed people. They were an accumulated outcome of numerous factors: the international context, geopolitical interests, the history of protests in post-communist countries, the determination of local leaders, financing structures and political and social processes allowing societies to learn how to stage protests. Colour revolutions were accompanied by enthusiastic forecasts of their democratic potential. They concerned civil activities, increased awareness of the democratic importance of elections and certain tendencies to introduce systemic democratic changes. However, the revolutions have not resulted in the emergence of stable democracies in the majority of cases. In the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, social discontent with the post-revolutionary authorities quickly transformed into bloody ethnic conflicts (in Kyrgyzstan in 2010) and regional conflicts (in Ukraine in 2014). These have undermined the territorial integrity of the state and revealed profound structural problems. On the one hand, they were caused by internal factors, in turn caused by the new governments, which failed to solve the issues of the distribution of power and authoritarian mechanisms of governance after a successful colour revolution. On the other hand, they are related to the temporariness of the aid provided by international donors who were active only at the time of the revolution. There was also a lack of a continuing and consistent support for democracy, the way the European Union supports Central and Eastern Europe.

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### Summary

The so-called colour revolutions that occurred in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, among others, continue to be a bone of contention for the numerous authors trying to identify the reasons for the outbreaks, the duration and specific nature of these protests. The disputes between scholars mainly concern the detailed enumeration of the factors that caused the outbreak of these so-called colour revolutions and the overthrow of authorities, but all scholars are in agreement that the events under analysis have been caused by a peculiar composition of many factors rather than a single one. This paper concentrates on the role of factors related to two dimensions: domestic and international. The purpose of the paper, however, is not to analyse case studies or compare individual events, seeking similarities or differences between them, but to review the categories applied in the literature on the subject, their operationalisation, and an attempt at the systematisation of the current research trends as regards colour revolutions.

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**Protesty społeczne, modularne rewolucje i demokratyzacja.  
Wybrane kategorie analizy zjawiska kolorowych rewolucji**

**Streszczenie**

Tak zwane kolorowe rewolucje, które miały miejsce w Serbii, Ukrainie, Gruzji, czy Kirgistanie do dziś są przedmiotem sporu wielu autorów, usiłujących ustalić czynniki odpowiedzialne za wybuch, czas trwania i specyficzny charakter protestów. Spory pomiędzy badaczami dotyczą szczegółowej listy czynników odpowiedzialnych za wybuch kolorowych rewolucji oraz obalenie władzy, wszyscy jednak zgadzają się, że za analizowane wydarzenia odpowiada specyficzna konfiguracja różnych czynników, a nie wyłącznie jeden powód. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na roli czynników pochodzących z dwóch wymiarów: krajowego i międzynarodowego. Zadaniem tekstu nie jest jednak analiza studium przypadku, ani porównanie poszczególnych wydarzeń w poszukiwaniu podobieństw czy różnic. Jest nim natomiast przegląd obecnych w literaturze przedmiotu kategorii oraz ich operacjonalizacji, a także próba systematyzacji istniejących nurtów w badaniach nad kolorowymi rewolucjami.