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# Popular protests and political change in Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East since 2000

The article explores the relationship between popular protests and political change since 2000, with the aim of explaining under which conditions those protests brought to a democratic transition. Significant popular protests occurred in 2003/4 in some Eastern European countries (Georgia and Ukraine); then, in the early 2010s, in some North African and Middle Eastern states (Tunisia and Egypt) during the Arab Spring; finally, in the late 2010s also in Latin America against both populist (Bolivia) and liberal governments. In the late 2010s, other protests have occurred in some Eastern European (Armenia), North African (Sudan), and Middle Eastern countries. Way has explained when and why protests have been successful, arguing that it is due to the influence of internal factors (like the low organizational strength of governments in power). For example, Venezuelan and Iranian regimes repressed popular protests and resisted change. Instead, the variable that has played a bigger role in influencing the democratization process (of Tunisia) is the international one. In the six countries without a democratic outcome (Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Egypt, Sudan and Bolivia), external autocracy promotion has been disadvantageous to democracy. Instead, Tunisia has been immune to any external pressure, and a democratic transition materialized in that country.

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## Introduction

A very frequent political event in the last decades has been the diffusion of many episodes of popular protests: in Latin America, Eastern Eu-

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rope, North Africa and the Middle East. The novelty is that the objective of those protests is a political change, because many of them have occurred in pre or post-elections' phases. Instead, popular protests for economic reasons (for example in Latin America or North Africa) were more frequent during the Cold War. However, it has to be admitted that there are often both political and economic causes of protests. And which is the outcome of those protests: a government or a regime change? And do those protests bring (for example) also to a democratic transition, that is often one of the main objectives of people going in the streets? In many cases, people also express a widespread feeling of frustration, and thus they protest not only to have more civil and political rights, but they also ask for less corruption and they also request a higher level of economic performance.

This article will explore the relationship between popular protests and political change since 2000, with the aim of explaining under which conditions those protests brought to a democratic transition. Many popular protests have often been called "revolutions", but it has to be admitted that not all protests that are going to be analyzed in this essay were really revolutionary, because for example violence has not been always used (see the definition reported in chapter 2). Thus, in this article the concept of protests will be preferred. Second, the democratic outcome has been very rare after all these popular protests; thus, it is better to talk about political change, that can bring to a government or a regime change, with many combinations among authoritarian, hybrid or democratic regimes, or within the same category of authoritarian, hybrid or democratic regime. In fact, some political changes were only short-lived, ending in a "return to the past", to an authoritarian coup or even to an armed conflict (as in Libya, Syria and Yemen).

However, the two concepts of revolution and of democracy come from different traditions of study. Political science has concentrated on the analysis of political regimes, including democratic<sup>1</sup> ones, while political sociology has focused on processes of social change, including revolutionary ones, based on the use of violence – which have often led, as in the case of Lenin's Russia and Mao's China, to the establishment of communist regimes. These two concepts will be introduced in the two theoretical chapters (1 and 2). In the empirical section (paragraphs 3.1., 3.2. and 3.3.), cases of both successful and failed popular protests will be considered. Significant popular protests occurred in some Eastern European countries (such as Georgia and Ukraine) with the "color revolutions" of the noughties (3.1); then, in the early 2010s, in some North African and Middle Eastern states during the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia and Egypt and spread to other countries

<sup>1</sup> For a review of the political science literature on the main definitions of the concept of democracy, see Collier and Levitsky (1997).

(3.2); finally, in the late 2010s also in Latin America against both populist (Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua) and liberal (Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador) governments (3.3). In the late 2010s, other protests occurred in some Eastern European (like Armenia<sup>2</sup>), North African (in Algeria, Sudan...), and Middle Eastern (in Lebanon, Iraq...) countries.

The conclusions will be divided in two paragraphs. In section 4.1., there will be a review of the political science literature in order to answer to the question: when and why were those popular protests successful? In section 4.2., the innovative contribution of this article will consist in individuating the variable that can explain when and why those protests led to a democratic transition; in fact (up to now) this has occurred only in Tunisia.

## 1. Revolutionary processes

Mattina (1983) identified the following features of a revolution: a process of bottom-up mobilization, the recourse to violence, and changes in institutions with a change in government and/or regime. The existence of a process of bottom-up mobilization is fundamental for distinguishing revolutions from coups; the latter may display the other two effects but involve the use of “surgical” violence, that is, political actions from the “top down” (which are circumscribed in time and space). Subsequently, Kimmel (1990) specified that the final effect (the change in institutions) is not always guaranteed to take place; some revolutions are successful, while others are not. Ieraci (2015) also reaffirmed that the revolutionary process first destabilizes the power structure and then generates a new political order.

Among the features associated with revolution, Arendt (1963) referred to changes in the social structure, but this is just one of the possible outcomes of revolution, which did occur for example in the communist revolutions. However, after 1989, this factor does not always seem to be present. Moore (1966) also saw revolution as the total overthrow of the previous arrangement, in favor of a “new society” and a “new world”. The distinction made by Skocpol (1979) between “social revolution” (rapid and fundamental transformations of society and class structures) and “political revolution” – which transforms state structures but not social structures, and is not brought about through class conflict – is important for the purposes of classifying the various types of revolution.

<sup>2</sup> The geographical label of Eastern Europe includes post-communist (former Yugoslavia’s and Soviet Union’s) states: thus Caucasian, Baltic countries, and also those who have been often called with the “politically correct” label of Central Europe. Asian protests like those in Hong Kong will not be analyzed, because it was a sort of deviant case.

Then, Paparo (2016) emphasized two variables: the outcome of the (political/social) change generated by the revolutionary process and the type of change (greater openness/closure of the system) that it produces. This latter dimension enables a distinction to be made between liberal and authoritarian or totalitarian revolutions; only in the first case civil liberties and political rights are recognized, and the aim of the revolutionary process is to establish a polyarchic regime (Dahl, 1971).

Grilli di Cortona (1991) analyzed revolutions (in Russia, China, Germany, Algeria, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran) that resulted *in authoritarianisms and totalitarianisms*. Having pinpointed 1789 as a watershed for establishing the most recent meaning of the term, Grilli considered a revolution to be «those processes that entail (on the one hand) the crumbling and destruction (internally and through illegitimate and violent forms and by means of mass mobilization phenomena) of a political regime and its juridical order, and (on the other) the installation of a new juridical political regime». It is with this meaning, inclusive both of a “revolutionary situation” and of a “revolutionary outcome” (Fisichella, 1987; Huntington, 1968), that the definition proposed in this essay identifies the three key components of every revolution: bottom-up political mobilization, the presence of violence, and the process of discontinuous transition from one government and/or regime to another<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Democratization processes

Huntington<sup>4</sup> identified three waves of democratization. The first took place in the Western states during the nineteenth century. The second occurred after 1945 and involved few non-Western countries (such as Israel, India and Japan). The third began after the collapse of the fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal in the middle of the 1970s, and then spread to Latin America, ending in mid 1980s with the (last) democratic elections in Argentina in 1984 – and thus did not involve Cuba, Paraguay and Chile. A fourth wave (with potentially global features) started after the end of the Cold War in 1989, involving the countries of Eastern Europe, and some Asian and African countries<sup>5</sup>. Each wave has of course ebbed at certain times, for example

<sup>3</sup> The debate about theories of revolution is too complex to be summarized in this article. See Tilly (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Huntington (1991). The thesis on the existence of only three waves has been shared by many scholars of Comparative Politics (Diamond, 1999; Doorenspleet, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> The thesis on the existence of four waves has been advanced by International Relations' scholars. The third and fourth waves were close, but different in the magnitude: Latin America (the former), the global system (the latter). New African or Asian democracies were authoritarian before 1989 because of the Cold War (McFaul, 2002; Fossati, 2013).

with the onset of authoritarian counter-waves, like the one in the 1920s that involved communist Russia and fascist states like Italy, Germany and Japan. The post-1989 fourth wave was also followed by an anti-democratic reflux that started in the second half of the 1990s; the countries resistant to democratization were part of the Chinese and Islamic civilizations (Huntington, 1996). The Arab Spring, that began in 2010, did not bring to any “wave”, because there was only one democratic transition (in Tunisia).

The first three waves and the fourth were marked by profound differences. The first three waves were mainly in Western countries, took place over long periods of time, and involved similar processes (Grilli di Cortona and Lanza, 2011; Grilli di Cortona, Lanza, Pisciotta and Germano, 2016; Grilli di Cortona, 2016). Morlino (2003) identified the main temporal phases of the passage from an authoritarian to a democratic regime: transition and consolidation. The crisis of a non-democratic regime may bring to a transition, or might fail, in which case the authoritarian leaders manage to stave off a political change. Transition is a fairly lengthy phase, which begins when the old institutions enter into crisis and civil rights begin to be liberalized, for example by facilitating freedom of the press and of association. Installation, by contrast, is a punctual event that coincides with the first free elections and usually occurs in the final phase of transition. Consolidation comes later, is a long process rather than a punctual event, and leads to two results: the institutionalization of the regime (that is, its duration over time, without changes to the rules determining the form of government or the electoral system), and the legitimization of the democratic authorities on the part of citizens (Ieraci, 1999). In the countries of the first two waves, these processes were stable, albeit long, and punctuated by episodes of conflict such as the two world wars. After 1945, the European political parties promoted democratic consolidation and facilitated the key process of the shift from transition to consolidation, which took place in the 50s. Subsequently, democratic consolidation was also promoted by external actors: for instance the European Union (EU) in relation to Greece, Spain and Portugal (Pridham, 1991).

The third wave involved “Ibero-America”, where consolidation was anomalous, because the institutionalization of regimes was strong (in the rather unstable combination of presidentialism and proportional parliamentary electoral systems), but popular legitimacy remained low due to the high levels of economic inequality. In the second and third wave, the relationship between revolutionary and democratic processes was tenuous; in many countries democracy arrived after the defeat in war (like the Falklands’ armed conflict), rather than from a revolution. In some cases, there were popular protests, as in Latin American countries in the 80s, but not full-fledged revolutions as such.

The fourth wave was distinguished by what Carothers (2002) labelled «the end of the transition paradigm». Carothers argued that the linear pattern of democratic transitions during the Cold War was no longer to be found; the point of departure for transitions (authoritarianism) was known, but the point of arrival (democracy) vanished. Furthermore, after 1989 the majority of regimes “got stuck” half way down the path, and there are many cases of illiberal democracies and/or hybrid regimes: in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In illiberal democracies the minimum conditions of polyarchies (free party competition and universal suffrage) are respected, but some civil rights, such as freedom of the press, are not safeguarded; in such cases, the judiciary is not entirely independent of the executive branch either. If not even that threshold is reached, because of widespread electoral fraud, or the exclusion of whole sectors of the electorate from citizenship, perhaps due to different nationality, or in the “hyper-presidentialisms” – where heads of state dissolve parliaments – the regimes have been described as hybrid. Morlino<sup>6</sup> classified the various hybrid regimes as limited (that is to say, illiberal), protected or “lawless”. Thus, illiberal or limited democracies are a sub-category of hybrid regimes. In protected regimes some actors (the armed forces or monarchies) exercise a veto power; in lawless hybrid regimes, state institutions are weak, and the rule of law is not respected. Carothers’ thesis can be applied to governments in Russian-influenced Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, while in Latin America the majority of countries had already gone through democratic transition before 1989; only Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro embodies Carothers’ political scenario. In this article, the difference among democratic, hybrid and authoritarian regimes will be anchored to Freedom House’s political indicators, that (respectively) distinguish among free (1 to 2.5 scores), partially free (3 to 5 scores), and unfree (5.5 to 7 scores) regimes<sup>7</sup>.

It is now possible to understand the link between the (uncertain, incomplete and difficult) post-1989 democratization processes and some (successful or failed) protests. The most important protests took place in hybrid or (weak) authoritarian regimes, where there was a fairly free civil society not subject to significant repressive processes, with political rights guaran-

<sup>6</sup> Morlino (2008). The debate on illiberal democracies and hybrid regimes is very wide, and cannot be reported in this article for reasons of space. The main essays on these two concepts are Zakaria (1997), Diamond (2002) and Merkel (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Freedom House (2019). Those scores represent the average between two evaluations on political and civil rights. Freedom House’s reports are not the only political indicators, and have been partially criticized by some scholars (Ieraci and Paulon, 2010). However, they remain the most reliable, they are published in the fastest time-lapse (at the end of January of every year), and at the same they cover all the years since the beginning of the 1970s. These scores are quite rigid instruments of analysis, but they permit to have standardized indicators on the three categories of regimes; otherwise, a simply qualitative diagnosis would produce too subjective assessments.

teed only to a limited extent and elections characterized by various incidents of vote rigging (as in Georgia, Ukraine and Armenia), or which served to form parliaments with few decision-making powers (as in Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan). In those regimes, the civil society was frustrated by blocked political regimes, that offered no feasible opportunities for positive autonomous development (as in the first three waves), and thus mobilized (in a not necessarily violent way) to demand more democracy.

### 3. Popular protests and political change since 2000

#### 3.1. *Eastern Europe*

The first “mini” wave of protests in favor of democracy took place in Russian-influenced Eastern European states in the early 2000s, prompting talk of electoral or “color” revolutions, such as the “Rose” revolution in Georgia and the “Orange” revolution in Ukraine (Fossati, 2011). In Georgia, popular mobilizations pushed Shavarnadze to quit power after the first (irregular) round, and Saakashvili became the new president. In Ukraine elections were repeated and the “western” Yushenko defeated the “eastern” Yanukovich. These popular mobilizations took place at the time of elections, and then spread through “contagion” or emulation. There were some protests also in Slovakia (1998), Croatia (January 2000), and Serbia (October 2000)<sup>8</sup>. Instances of failed popular protests with political objectives can be found in Armenia (1996, 2003, 2008: Ishkandarian, 2012), Azerbaijan (2003, 2005: Alieva, 2006), Russia (2004, 2009: Ambrosio, 2009; Shevtsova, 2010), Belarus (2001, 2006: Korosteleva, 2009). A case of (partial) success was the “Tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan<sup>9</sup> in 2005 and in 2010, but it will not be analyzed in this essay, because post-1989 regimes of Central Asia have always been characterized by the existence of post-communist authoritar-

<sup>8</sup> In Slovakia, protests were against Meciar’s nationalist party, who was defeated at the elections, because of the European Union postponement of the enlargement negotiations in 1997. In Croatia and Serbia, Tudjman and Milosevic lost 2000 elections because of the end of the nationalistic wars of the 1990s; in Serbia Milosevic wanted to convoke a second round, but protests pushed him to accept the electoral results. Thus, in these three cases, political changes have been the outcome of other more relevant processes (the end of a war cycle and the external pressure of the European Union), but popular protests also influenced the defeat of illiberal nationalist parties.

<sup>9</sup> Akayev had been president of the republic from 1990 to 2005. After the irregular elections of February 2005, the Tulip revolution produced a transition to another autocracy, that of Bakiyev, who remained in power until 2010. Two other presidents (Atanbayev in 2011 and Jeenbekov in 2017) won the following presidential elections, but Freedom House’s (2019) score on Kyrgyz political rights has always remained around 5, that was the average of the last 25 years (Radnitz, 2006; Collins, 2011).

ian regimes, with strong (personalistic) neo-patrimonial features<sup>10</sup>. Popular protests in Moldova (2015), and Macedonia (2016) were mostly against the corruption or the economic crisis, and thus will not be deepened in this article. In spring 2018, there was the “Velvet” revolution in Armenia, after the popular protests that pushed Sargysan, who had been in power from 2007, to resign as prime minister; the opposition leader Pashinyan became the new head of government.

Georgia experienced a nationalist revival in the early 90s, under President Gamsakhurdia, but lost the two wars of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, also because of the Russian military intervention<sup>11</sup>. Russia had supported the candidacy of Gorbachev’s former foreign affairs minister, Shevardnadze, for the presidency of the republic. Shevardnadze held the post of president from 1995 until 2003, when growing popular opposition (during the so-called Rose Revolution) after the contested elections of 2 November 2003 led to his resignation, partly as a consequence of diplomatic pressure from Western governments. In July 2003, Bush had suggested to Shevardnadze to avoid any electoral fraud; after the first round, the US foreign minister Powell declared that there had been several irregularities. Shevardnadze negotiated with Powell and with members of the Russian government, but not with politicians of the European Union. Thus, US diplomatic pressures to organize new elections have been quite strong<sup>12</sup>. Fresh elections on 23 November were won (with 97% of the vote) by the moderate nationalist Saakashvili, who was proclaimed president in 2004.

In 2008, Saakashvili was re-elected with 53% of the vote. In that same year the Georgian army made a fresh effort to win back South Ossetia, but on this occasion too Russia intervened to repulse the Georgian attack. The European Union, through the mediation of French president Sarkozy, acted as a mediator and guarantor of peace. Under Shevardnadze, Georgia in 2003 had a score of 4/4 in the Freedom House (2019) report. In the first years after the Rose Revolution, the scores improved first to 3/4 and then to 3/3, before

<sup>10</sup> On post-1989 authoritarian regimes, see Fossati, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia was defeated by Abkhaz and South Ossetian rebels, that were militarily supported by Russia. In Abkhazia, there was some ethnic cleansing, because most of Georgians inhabitants (nearly 200000) were strayed. In South Ossetia, the Georgians remained, but kept boycotting elections, that have always been won by Ossetians. In Abkhazia, conflict was resolved with incapacitation; in South Ossetia with dominion. After the 2008 war, nearly 25000 Georgians left South Ossetia. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are “quasi states”; they are formally under the *de iure* sovereignty of Georgia, but are *de facto* independent (Fossati, 2008; Cheterian, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The external diplomatic pressures of the American ambassador Miles in Tbilisi and of the diplomats of the Council of Europe and of the Osce (Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe) were limited in Georgia (Forbrig and Demes, 2007; Jawad, 2008).



returning to 4/4 towards 2008, the year of the military attack on South Ossetia. In 2010, Georgia improved again to 4/3 and to 3/3 since 2012. In short, the Rose Revolution of 2003 did not bring about a change in regime, but only in government (from Shevardnadze to Saakashvili). Georgia remained a hybrid regime, with small differences over time, passing from a post-communist president to a nationalist one<sup>13</sup>.

In Ukraine, the population of the eastern regions mainly speak Russian and follow the Christian orthodox religion under the Moscow Patriarchate. The inhabitants of the western regions are also orthodox, but follow the Uniate rite, and recognize the authority of the Catholic Pope; thus, they are culturally closer to Europe. The population is split roughly evenly between the two parts of the country. Ukrainians make up 78% of the population, while 17% are Russians. Since 1991 pro-Russian and pro-Western presidents have alternated; prime minister Tymoshenko, even if she was elected by Western citizens, tried to mediate between the two coalitions. In the elections of autumn 2004, the successor of the Russophile Kuchma, Yanukovych, emerged victorious after a second round of voting on 22 November. This sparked popular protests, known as the Orange Revolution, with a widespread mobilization of the western population, who claimed that the results had been skewed by election fraud. On 3 December the supreme court ruled that there should be fresh elections. Lithuania, Poland, and Western governments (but not the EU Commission) exerted some diplomatic pressure in favor of democracy. In their official missions, Bush jr and Powell discouraged electoral fraud before the first round of 2004, and threatened to cut economic aid. After the first round of elections, there was another diplomatic mission of four diplomats: Osce's secretary Kubys, presidents of Poland and Lithuania, and "mister CFSP" (Common Foreign and Security Policy) of the European Commission Solana. EU governments threatened to freeze the cooperation agreement of 1994 and to apply economic sanctions, in case of violence against the protesters<sup>14</sup>. On 26 December, the "eastern" candidate Yanukovych was defeated by the "western" Yushchenko, who won with 52% of the vote. Under the Russophiles, Ukraine has maintained the rating of a hybrid regime (4/4), but under the Europhile Yushchenko the score was that of a democracy (3/2) (Freedom House, 2019). In February 2010 the "eastern" candidate Yanukovych won the presidential elections, and Ukraine went back to being a hybrid regime, with a score of 4/3.

<sup>13</sup> On Georgia, see Fairbanks (2004; 2010); Borzel, Pamuk and Stahn (2009); Beissinger (2009); Stewart (2009).

<sup>14</sup> According to Tocci (2008), the European governments have never envisaged that Ukraine could become a member of the European Union: either with Europhile, or with Russophile presidents.

In November 2013 popular protests once again broke out in Kiev and in the western part of the country, with calls for the signing of an association agreement with the European Union and the resignation of President Yanukovich. Following the revolts, the “eastern” Yanukovich fled from Kiev on 21 February 2014 and the “western” Turchynov was appointed as interim president. Other popular revolts broke out in regions with a Russian majority: in south-east Ukraine and in the Donbass (in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk). In the ensuing war, Russia again militarily intervened in support of the rebels<sup>15</sup>. In 2014, the western Poroshenko (one of Yushchenko’s former ministers) became head of state. In the presidential elections of spring 2019, the independent candidate (and “television star”) Zelensky defeated Poroshenko with a large majority of 73 % of the vote. The Ukrainian regime, though governed by a Europhile president, remained hybrid (3/4) (Freedom House 2019). In short, the revolts of 2004 had led to a change in both government and regime; the protests of 2013 only brought to a change of government<sup>16</sup>.

Nagorno Karabakh’s war lasted two years (from 1992 to 1994), and at the end Armenia defeated Azerbaijan, also thanks to Russian support. The Armenian regime has remained hybrid, under the protection of the armed forces, which had increased their power during and after the war. Freedom House (2019) performances were between 4 and 5<sup>17</sup>. There have been several protests since then, but without any success. After the contested elections of 2008, political rights’ performance declined to 6, while civil freedoms’ score was still 4; after 2012, political rights improved to 5 (Freedom House 2019). The nationalist leader (of the Republican Party) Sargsyan has always been prime minister or president of the republic, and in 2015 he amended the constitution to be able to remain in power without any time limit. In 14 April 2018, the “Velvet revolution” started. In 23 April, Sargsyan resigned and the opposition leader Pashinyan was elected prime minister. With that

<sup>15</sup> This conflict has not been definitively resolved, and Russophile rebels control nearly half of Donbass and Luhansk, in south-east Ukraine. This is another “quasi-state”, *de facto* independent, but under the *de iure* sovereignty of Ukraine. Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014. The Ukrainian government has always refused all the proposals of different solutions to his domestic conflict (including federalism), which had been advanced also by Putin, and that could have prevented the Donbass war (Fossati, 2008; Katchanovski, 2016; Kuzio, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> On Ukraine, see Kuzio (2005), Way (2005), McFaul (2005; 2007), Aslund and McFaul (2006), Valasek (2010).

<sup>17</sup> At first, Azerbaijan had besieged the *enclave*, but then Armenia occupied the Lachin corridor, that permitted to unify the territories of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Conflict was resolved with the dominion of Armenia in the *enclave*, and with the incapacitation of Azerbaijan in the Lachin corridor, because Azeri inhabitants in that strip of land were strayed. Russia sent its troops to help Armenia in the war, while Turkey only gave an economic support to Azeris. Nagorno Karabakh is also a “quasi state”: *de facto* independent, but under *de iure* sovereignty of Azerbaijan (Fossati, 2008).

change of government, Armenia improved his political performance to 5/4 in 2017 and then to 4/4 in 2018 (Freedom House, 2019), but has remained a hybrid regime (Feldman and Halibasic, 2019; Suthers and Lanskoj, 2019).

### 3.2. *North Africa and the Middle East*

A second wave of protests began in January 2011, after the outbreak of the so-called “Arab Spring” (Battera, 2012; 2014; Ieraci, 2013; Stepan and Linz, 2013; Sassoon, 2016; Stepan, 2018), that started in some countries of North Africa: in Tunisia and in Egypt. But there had been a pioneer case of the Arab Spring, Iran, with the mobilizations against Ahmadinejad’s regime in 2009. The authoritarian leader succeeded in quashing the popular revolts, and there was not any change in government. In Iran, protests started in 12 June 2009, to challenge the results of presidential elections of 11 June, that had been won by the radical candidate Ahmadinejad (with the 63% of the vote), against the moderate Mousavi. Protests of the Iranian “green movement” were repressed by the regime, and nearly 50 civilians were killed; that mobilization was promoted thanks to internet, within the so-called “Twitter revolution”. 4000 persons, among whom vice-president Abtahi, were arrested, and there have also been cases of torture. Freedom of the press and access to internet were limited (Afshari and Underwood, 2009; Kurzman, 2012; Khiabany, 2012; Anderson, 2016; Dabashi, 2017). In November 2019, popular protests against the Iranian regime started again, because of both economic crisis and corruption, and there were nearly 150 deaths.

Following these revolts, the presidents of both countries (Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt) were ousted. Both were presidents of the so-called personalistic (or neo-patrimonial) regimes, characterized by the power of a leader (and his clan). However, the Arab Spring has not been influenced by Western countries’ democracy promotion (Way, 2011; Van Hullen, 2015; Youngs, 2015; Mitchell, 2016); in fact, before 2011 the previous authoritarian governments had been supported by the West, who considered them a “lesser evil” with respect to theocratic regimes governed by Islamic fundamentalist parties. But this time Obama<sup>18</sup> declined to support them and backed the demands for change coming from the people; the typical conservative diplomacy of the “lesser of two evils”, supported in the past above all by Kissinger, was abandoned; also European governments (Ozcelik, 2019) remained quite passive in that critical juncture. The Arab Spring then spread to other countries, such as Libya, Syria and Yemen, but in all three cases it led to very violent wars that are still ongoing, none of which has yet been resolved. In October 2011 the elections for the constituent assembly were won

<sup>18</sup> Cakmak (2019). On lesser evil diplomacy, see Fossati (2017).

by the moderate Islamic party Ennahda. Thus, Tunisia shifted from being a weak authoritarian regime to being a hybrid one. The score for the Tunisian regime went from 7/5 in 2010 to 3/4 in 2011 (and 3 in 2013). After the first legislative elections in 2014, Tunisia scored 1/3 (and 2/3 in 2017 and 2018), becoming the first democratic Arab state, while Erdogan's Turkey has returned to being a hybrid or even authoritarian regime (5/6) in 2017 and 2018 (Freedom House 2019). Following the events of 2011, Tunisia has therefore undergone a change in government, and a change in regime as well, and the religious party Ennahda has remained (at least so far) in power, albeit in a coalition (since 2014) with the secular centre-left Nidaa Tounes party. At the 2019 presidential (and parliamentary) elections, Ennahda's candidate arrived third, and was thus excluded from the second round. However, the new regime is not yet consolidated, as it is a young democracy which still faces powerful threats from Islamic fundamentalist groups like Isis, and has been hit by terrorist attacks: at the Bardo museum in March 2015, at Susa in June 2015, and on the border with Libya in March 2016<sup>19</sup>.

In Egypt, the Arab Spring protests of January 2011 led, the following month, to the fall of Mubarak's (weak) personalistic authoritarian regime. Obama abandoned the "lesser of two evils" diplomacy on this occasion too. The first free elections were held in 2012, which were won by the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leader Morsi was elected president in June 2012; the new government took office in August. The Freedom House (2019) score for the Egyptian regime improved from 6/5 (authoritarian) under Mubarak to 5/5 (hybrid) under the Muslim Brotherhood (in 2012). Then, Morsi introduced a series of illiberal reforms with a view to setting up a kind of fundamentalist theocracy in Egypt. In June 2013 a new wave of popular unrest broke out, targeting Morsi, who was accused of encouraging the Islamization of Egyptian society. The armed forces under General Al-Sisi organized a military coup in July 2013, deposing the Muslim Brotherhood and arresting Morsi. In May 2014, Al-Sisi was elected president with 97% of the vote. Morsi was sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment; then, he died of a heart attack in June 2019. This coup was not supported by the USA under Obama, though it was by Saudi Arabia (Bowden, 2019) and Israel (Hazran, 2019). Egypt reverted to the ratings of an authoritarian regime (military this time), scoring 6/5 in 2013 and 6/6 in 2017 and 2018 (Freedom House 2019). Thus, the two waves of Egyptian protests led first to the shift from a (personalistic) authoritarian regime to a hybrid one (in 2012), and then (in 2013) to a coup, with the country taking a step back towards a

<sup>19</sup> On Tunisia, see Catalano (2012); Stepan (2012; 2016); Netterstrom (2015); Battera and Ieraci (2019).

new (military) authoritarian regime (Brown, 2013; Monier and Ranko, 2013; Springborg, 2017; Pratt and Rezk, 2019).

An even more complex case is that of Sudan. “Phase one” of the recent popular protests against the (personalistic) authoritarian regime of Bashir, which began in December 2018, was successful, despite the declaration of a state of emergency by the government in February 2019. In 11 April 2019 the Sudanese armed forces staged a successful military coup against Bashir. Popular protests continued even after the coup (in “Phase two”), in order to promote a full democratization of Sudan, and the armed forces reacted with repression; in June 2019 nearly 100 civilians were killed in Khartoum. The Sudanese armed forces had received the strong backing of the Egyptian military regime under Al-Sisi and of Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of July, an agreement for a democratic transition and a power-sharing government has been signed. The armed forces will govern in the next 21 months; a civilian leader will be prime minister in the following 18 months. Thus, a democratic regime should emerge at the end of this process (in 2021), but the outcome of the current political conflict is uncertain; Freedom House still labels Sudan as a “not free” country (Berridge, 2019; Price, 2019; Hassan and Kadouda, 2019).

In 2018 and 2019, a “new Arab spring” started, with mobilizations in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. In Algeria, people protested against the fifth election of president Bouteflika, who renounced, but Tebboune, the official candidate of the regime, won the elections of December 2019. In the other countries, people mostly mobilized against economic crisis or political corruption. Jordanian, Lebanese and Iraqi prime ministers resigned.

### 3.3. *Latin America*

Two Latin American countries have been characterized by political protests against two populist governments: of Venezuela (against Chavez’ hybrid regime in 2002 and against Maduro’s authoritarian government since 2014) and of Bolivia (against Morales’ hybrid regime in 2019).

In Venezuela, there have been two mobilizations processes: the first against Chavez’ hybrid regime in 2002; the second against Maduro’s authoritarian regime since 2014. When Chavez was outside the country, one million of citizens started their protests on 11 April 2002, asking the democratization of that hybrid regime (under the protection of the armed forces); Carmona, the leader of the business association Fedacamaras, proclaimed himself head of state. After two days, Chavez returned to Caracas. Carmona was arrested, and was sent into exile. Armed forces, even if divided, supported Chavez (Encarnacion, 2002; Cannon, 2004). In Venezuela there is an ongoing deep con-

flict between President Maduro, who took over when Chavez died in 2013, and the opposition, which took to the streets since 2014; around 300 people died in the revolts. The protests were led by the (rightist) president of the parliament, Guaidò, who proclaimed himself head of state in January 2019 after the contested re-election of Maduro in May 2018. Guaidò is supported by the middle-high sectors of the population, and Maduro by the lower classes, which are favored by his populist economic policies. In fact, mobilizations in favor of the radical leftist populist government also started. United States, the European Union countries, and most of Latin American governments (except Cuba, Nicaragua, and Uruguay, with the neutrality of Mexico), are giving a diplomatic support to Guaidò; Serbia, Belarus, Russia, China, Iran, Syria, Turkey and South Africa are favoring Maduro. To date, the Venezuelan “democratic revolution” has not been successful, and has been repressed by Maduro. Venezuela has been considered an authoritarian regime, when it scored 6 in political rights and 5 in civil rights (in 2016 and 2017), or 7 and 6 since 2018 (Freedom House, 2019; Brizeno Ruiz, 2019; Ellner, 2019).

In Bolivia, many citizens mobilized against the fourth election of leftist populist president Morales. In February 2016, there had been a referendum to change the constitution and to permit his re-election, but it was rejected (with 51% of the votes). In December 2017, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice ruled that a fourth term was possible. Bolivia had a hybrid regime with a performance of 3/3 (Freedom House, 2019). Morales declared himself winner after the first round of 20 October 2019, but was accused of electoral fraud by the citizens who had voted for the candidates of the rightist opposition; he finally resigned on 10 November. After that decision, new mobilizations of leftist supporters of the populist president started. The rightist politician Jeanine Anez proclaimed herself interim president. In 2020, there have been new presidential elections, thanks to a political agreement that has been reached by the main Bolivian parties. However, Morales has not be entitled to participate in that electoral competition.

Thus, in both Venezuela and Bolivia there have been two parallel mobilizations: of leftist citizens and of rightist electors, in favor or against the two populist presidents. In other Latin American countries, there were protests with similar political demands along the right-left cleavage. Rightist protesters always ask political reforms to populist presidents, while leftist citizens usually protest against economic austerity of liberal governments. In 2015, rightist electors had mobilized against the inheritance tax that populist Correa was introducing in Ecuador; then, in October 2019, leftist citizens protested against liberal Moreno’s austerity measures, after an agreement between Ecuador and the International Monetary Fund. Ecuadorian leftist populist Correa had governed for eleven years (from 2007 to 2017). In August 2019, similar protests of leftist citizens occurred in Argentina, against

austerity measures of rightist president Macri; then, in October 2019, leftist Peronist Fernandez was elected president. In October 2019, leftist citizens mobilized against the decision of rightist Chilean president Pinera to cut social expenditure and to increase the metro fare; finally, there was a government reshuffle and the interior minister was fired. In October 2019, leftist citizens mobilized also in Peru, when rightist president Vizcarra dissolved parliament and new parliamentary elections were organized in January 2020. In November 2019, other protests of leftist electors occurred in Colombia against rightist president Duque, after some austerity measures. In February 2019, there were other leftist protests against the political economy of rightist Haitian president Moise; that country had previously (in the 2000s) been governed by populist presidents like Aristide and Preval. In April 2018, there were protests of rightist citizens against tax increases decided by leftist president Ortega, but those mobilizations were repressed by Nicaragua's post-communist authoritarian regime. In sum, most of these *estallidos sociales* were against governments' economic measures. The only relevant cases of political protests were Venezuela and Bolivia; the former was a case of failure, the latter of success<sup>20</sup>.

#### 4. Trying to explain the success or failure of popular protests for a political change

There has been an intense debate among political scientists, in order to explain the success or the failure of political protests, especially in Eastern Europe. The first hypothesis on the diffusion of electoral protests has been the contagion effect, that would have influenced at first three countries: Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009). Then, a reflux phase would have materialized, and the following governments learned those experiences and better managed to face popular mobilizations. However, this thesis is not totally convincing; many failure cases (with a rigid control of the governments) preceded the successful Rose and Orange revolutions. The geo-political (second) variable divides the countries into two groups; those closer to the EU would be successful, while those within the Russian sphere of influence would probably fail (Ambrosio, 2009). On the contrary, the empirical evidence only partially confirmed this thesis. Croatia and Serbia (potential candidates of the EU) had a political change, but this outcome materialized also in Russia's area: in Ukraine and Georgia. The third factor is that of the charismatic *leaders* (Dimitrov, 2009), that were popular in "no

<sup>20</sup> For the explanation of the popular revolts in Latin America in 1989/90, see Fossati (1993).

change” cases: for example Putin and Lukashenko. Mc Faul (2005) emphasized that some *leaders* (Shevarnadze, Kuchma...) of the electoral protests were not popular, but the case of successful protests against Milosevic (very charismatic indeed) in Serbia did not confirm this thesis.

The fourth hypothesis was advanced by Beissinger (2009), who focused on the mobilization capability of the opposition forces: 100000 (very radical) persons in Georgia, 500000 in Serbia, 1 million in Ukraine. But the empirical evidence showed that for example failed mobilizations in Armenia in 1996 (with 150000 persons) had been more relevant than successful protests in Georgia. In Azerbaijan nearly 50000 people mobilized in 2005, but opposition was too weak in parliament (Alieva, 2006). In Russia and Belarus civil society and NGOs were weak (Stewart, 2009). In Kyrgyzstan successful mobilizations had not been intense, with only some hundreds people; opposition was unorganized, with rural origin, and mobilized by local elites, without independent NGOs (Radnitz, 2006). The capability of the opposition to unify their forces (except in Armenia in 2008) did not play a relevant role either.

The fifth variable has received the highest support in this debate. Way<sup>21</sup> emphasized the role of the organizational force of governments in power. The weakness of parties, having become only instruments of patron-client relations, characterized Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. In Serbia the weakness of the state stemmed from war defeats in Bosnia and Kosovo. Also Georgia was defeated in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; while Armenia won its war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The main features of these hybrid regimes were three: a strongly institutionalized party, an articulated ideology, and the control of the security apparatus (especially after a military victory). In Serbia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan there was not any repressive capability of the security forces; in the latter, police made some agreements with protesters. Mc Faul (2005) has also emphasized the divisions of security forces in successful electoral protests.

Another (sixth) factor was identified by Way<sup>22</sup>. The low economic intervention of the state in the economy was the premise of its weakness.

<sup>21</sup> Way (2008; 2009). In Georgia and Ukraine, government parties had a very weak organization structure, and had become instruments of patron-client relations. In Georgia, the main party had also lost any ideological anchor; in Ukraine there also was a coalition of very weak parties. Then, in Georgia the security apparatus did not materialize any repression capability, while in Ukraine the armed forces remained divided among different factions. In Kyrgyzstan there was not even any ruling party. Reformists came from communist elites in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Croatia and Slovakia also had low repressive capabilities, but in those two cases, there were no relevant post-election conflicts; thus, this variable did not play any role (Silitski, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Way (2008). In Belarus and Tajikistan the state maintained its control on all the economy; in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, neo-populist Turkmenistan, and (partially) in Uzbekistan, the state kept controlling most of the energy sector.



In Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan there had been many privatizations. Fairbanks (2009) criticized this thesis, because for example Gamsakurdia's Azeri government controlled oil at the beginning of the 1990s and was defeated. Armenia privatized at the same extent of Georgia and Ukraine, but resisted change at first. Silitski (2009) emphasized that infrastructure capabilities (consisting in the ability of offering public goods) of Croatia and Slovakia were high, but they were defeated. McFaul (2005) also emphasized the monitoring capabilities of international actors (seventh hypothesis) and a minimum level of independence of the media (eight variable)<sup>23</sup>. External diplomatic relations were not crucial, as they were scarce for Milosevic and Kuchma, but more intense for Shevarnadze, and all of them failed. Most scholars (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; 2009) have criticized the thesis of the relevance of the international actors. According to Fairbanks (2009) the economic links with the West were low; many promoters of the protests had scarce relations with the West, and were successful. Kuzio (2005) emphasized that most of the financing to Ukrainian protesters came from little and medium local firms. Way (2008)<sup>24</sup> emphasized that external diplomatic pressures became relevant only where states and parties were weak. Thus, these seemed only intervening variables; in strong and autonomous states, international monitoring was less intense and media were less independent.

Thus, of the all hypotheses regarding the capacity of governments to resist change, the one with the highest empirical support was that of Way, who referred to the organizational strength of governments in power, playing down the role and capacity for mobilization of opposition groups and the pressure of external actors. In cases of successful protests, Way emphasized the existence of a strongly institutionalized party (or organization), with a structured ideology, and with the control of the military apparatus (especially the armed forces). Way's theory has been confirmed by the cases of Latin American, North African and Middle Eastern protests. Georgia under Shevardnadze, Ukraine under Yanukovich, Armenia under Sargsyan, Tunisia under Ben Ali, Egypt under Mubarak, Sudan under Bashir, and Bolivia under Morales did not satisfy Way's pre-conditions, unlike Iran under Ahmehdinejad, and Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro; Sudanese future political evolution is still uncertain. In the latter, the ruling parties (or religious organizations) had strongly penetrated state institutions; in the former, this had not happened. Then, in both Iran and Venezuela, (democratic)

<sup>23</sup> Government control over media was strong in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (Dimitrov, 2009). The same occurred in Azerbaijan (Alieva, 2006). In Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, the international monitoring was less intense, and irregularities were stronger (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Way re-affirmed his theory, elaborated within Eastern Europe, in the comparison with protests of the Arab Spring (Way, 2011).

protesters have been weakened, because of the relevant role played by two structured ideologies: Khomenei's Islamic fundamentalism, Chavez' neo-populist third-worldism.

## 5. Conclusions: Trying to explain when popular protests lead to a democratic transition

Thus, Way (2008) has explained when and why protests have been successful, arguing that it is due to the influence of internal factors (like the low organizational strength of governments in power). The "contagion effect" favored the diffusion of popular protests after the first episodes of "revolutions" (Georgia and Ukraine in Eastern Europe; Tunisia and Egypt in the Arab spring; Venezuela in South America). Communication processes, linked to the new technologies (internet and social networks) reinforced the contagion effect, but do not seem to be the main causal factor of popular protests. In this section, we will try to explain in what conditions protests, once successful, may lead to a political change (in many cases), and to a democratic transition (only in Tunisia).

Two kinds of protests have been emphasized in this essay: political (anti-government and/or anti-regime) or economic (anti-austerity). This essay has focused on the former, even if it has to be admitted that both motivations are sometimes present. Political protests materialized in hybrid or (moderate) authoritarian regimes (see chapter 3), while economic protests also occurred in liberal (Chile, Argentina) or illiberal (Ecuador, Colombia, Peru) democracies, with respectively medium or high levels of economic inequalities. In Latin America, the cleavage between governments supporting populist or liberal economic policies brought to protests of rightist or leftist citizens.

Of the seven countries with political changes, there has been a democratic transition only in Tunisia. The comparative analysis of the various cases highlights the following political changes:

Georgia: hybrid regime (post-communist president) → hybrid regime (nationalist president);

Ukraine: hybrid regime (Russophile president) → democratic regime (Europhile president) → hybrid regime (Europhile president);

Armenia: hybrid regime (nationalist prime minister) → hybrid regime (opposition prime minister);

Tunisia: authoritarian regime (personalistic) → hybrid regime → democratic regime;

Egypt: authoritarian regime (personalistic) → hybrid regime → authoritarian regime (military);

Sudan: authoritarian regime (personalistic) → authoritarian regime (military);

Bolivia: hybrid regime (populist president) → same hybrid regime.

In Ukraine there were temporary changes after the Orange revolution, and democracy resisted for 5 years (from 2005 to 2009), but then that regime became again hybrid. In the other five cases, democracy has never emerged after the protests (Kalandadze and Orenstein, 2009). After the color revolutions, in Georgia and Armenia there was a transition between two different hybrid regimes. After the Arab Spring, Egypt was a partially free country only in 2012; then, that regime became again authoritarian, but with a military government. After the 2019 protests, the current Sudanese regime is still authoritarian: no longer personalistic but military. In Bolivia, after the protests that brought to Morales' resignations in 2019 and to new elections in 2020, but that regime is still hybrid.

Domestic political factors do not appear to be relevant in explaining the differences between the various countries under examination. Tunisian and Egyptian politics was similar, because they were both (civil) personalistic authoritarian regimes with very corrupted governments; according to the Freedom House, Ben Ali's Tunisia in 2010 had a performance of 6, and Mubarak's Egypt of 5.5. Then, both countries had strong moderate religious parties (Ennahda and Muslim Brotherhood) in power, and both suffered terrorist attacks of radical Islamic fundamentalist groups like Isis. One relevant sociological variable was different, as Tunisia is more modernized than Egypt. But also Algerian republic, or Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies are more modernized, and they have authoritarian or hybrid (and not democratic) regimes. Instead, the variable that seems to have played a bigger role in influencing the democratization process (of Tunisia) is the international one. In the six countries without a democratic outcome (Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Egypt, Sudan and Bolivia), external autocracy promotion<sup>25</sup> has been disadvantageous to democracy. Instead, Tunisia has been immune to any external pressure, and a democratic transition materialized in that country.

In Georgia and Ukraine there are internal conflicts (with the Abkhazi and South Ossetians in the former, and between western and eastern citizens in the latter), and Russia is supporting nationalist rebels opposed to the democratic governments of the two countries. The Armenian hybrid regime, under the protection of the armed forces, has always been supported by Russia, during and after Nagorno Karabakh's war. In these countries, conflicts represent the main obstacle to a full democratization, and Russian interference

<sup>25</sup> Burnell (2010). Autocracy promotion may be defined in exclusive or inclusive terms: with reference to either direct or indirect tools. The former usually consist in military, economic and diplomatic support. The latter include socialization (by promoting anti-democratic values) and bargaining processes, like building an international environment more favorable to the domestic authoritarian coalition.

has strengthened the three hybrid regimes<sup>26</sup>. In Tunisia and Egypt, elections were won by moderate Islamic parties (Ennahda and Muslim Brotherhood), even if more radical groups like Isis organized several terrorist attacks, but only in Egypt there was a military coup. Egyptian armed forces have been supported by authoritarian Saudi Arabia (and not by the USA), which had feared the establishment of a fundamentalist theocratic regime. The same is happening in Sudan, where the democratization process is stymied by the external support of the Egyptian military and of Saudi Arabian monarchy to the Sudanese armed forces – but the outcome of this last political transition is still uncertain. The possibility for Bolivia to become a democracy is also obstructed by Venezuela’s autocracy promotion; that regime has remained hybrid after the new presidential elections in 2020. Populist governments of Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador (two limited hybrid regimes) have always been supported by both Chavez and Maduro.

In sum, this is not a theory on the Arab Spring, that has been mostly influenced by domestic factors<sup>27</sup>; it is an hypothesis that explains why protests have led to democracy only in Tunisia.

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<sup>26</sup> Putin is supporting on one hand nationalistic minorities in Georgia and Ukraine, and on the other hand the government in Armenia, but this different process is not relevant, because the common outcome is a hybrid regime.

<sup>27</sup> Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds (2013). These authors emphasized the absence of oil rents and of regimes based on hereditary succession in order to explain the success of some Arab Spring protests, like in Tunisia and Egypt. Then Egypt returned to an authoritarian regime, instead of Tunisia, and this difference seems to be linked to the international factor emphasized in the text, and not to the above-mentioned (or other) domestic variables.

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