

Young democracy guerrillas join forces

From Belgrade to Baku, activists gather to swap notes on how to topple dictators

Ian Traynor in Tirana
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Razi Nurullayev was seized by the Azerbaijani police three weeks ago near his home in Baku, dragged away and jailed for five days for being a democratic nuisance. A week earlier, on a main street in Minsk, Yauhen Afnagel and 100 other young Belarus democracy guerrillas staged a political stunt. They demonstrated for half an hour, holding pictures of a "disappeared" opposition politician and then ran for cover before President Alexander Lukashenko's police could arrest them.

In Uzbekistan, meanwhile, a few dozen Tashkent students switched their lights off together in a synchronised show of defiance last week - a small gesture of protest, but risky and daring given the murderous regime of President Islam Karimov; and perhaps the start of something bigger.

The activists involved in all three incidents linked up in Albania yesterday to form a transnational network of young democracy fighters - a student international aimed at toppling dictators.

Rotten regimes

Mr Nurullayev, Mr Afnagel and one of the Uzbek student organisers who cannot be named for their own security were among hundreds of young revolutionaries who gathered in Tirana at the weekend to celebrate the downfall of several rotten regimes and plot the overthrow of current dictatorships.

"This is the first time something like this has happened - it's great," said Ivan Marovic from Belgrade, a veteran of the Serbian Otpor youth movement that helped bring down Slobodan Milosevic five years ago.

The activists danced, drank and then got up in the morning for earnest arguments about "knowledge proliferation", "flash mobs", Foucault, the value of logos and corporate branding, political marketing, the meaning of politics and how to maximise subversive impact.

"We mocked the power as much as possible," said Alina Shpak from Kiev, explaining her Pora movement's triumph in unseating the old Kuchma regime in last winter's Orange Revolution. "You can't be afraid of someone you're laughing at."

From the Chinese frontier to the borders of the EU, the vast post-Soviet space has been in the grip of revolutionary fervour over the past few years - a second wave of democratisation after the 1989-91 revolutions symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Young veterans and strategists of the Orange, Rose and Cedar revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Lebanon, as well as of the anti-Milosevic uprising, were joined in Tirana by Albanian youngsters organised to fight everything from illegal Italian waste dumping to corruption and

violence against women. Alongside them were student leaders hoping to emulate the success of their peers against the daunting dictatorships in Belarus, Azerbaijan and in Uzbekistan, where President Karimov has just demonstrated his ruthlessness by massacring hundreds.

"We all consider your chains our own," declared the Albanian youth leader, Erion Veliaj, 25. "We hope you all reach a non-genetically modified democracy."

If the revolutionary class of 1989 comprised middle-aged dissidents and intellectuals graduating from underground bookclubs to the barricades, the class of the new millennium is a revolutionary vanguard that is media savvy.

Their tools are the internet chatroom and the text message, the logo and brand recognition, the eye-catching flyer and pithy sloganeering. These outfits are non-hierarchical, decentralised, nominally leaderless and organised with militaristic precision.

"Our idea was to use corporate branding in politics," said Mr Marovic of Serbia's Otpor, which has become the model for parallel movements across the region.

"The movement has to have a marketing department. We took Coca-Cola as our model."

As well as acting as an ambassador, training revolutionaries in other countries, he is also developing a computer game - A Force More Powerful -with programmers in the US. You win by outwitting and toppling regimes through techniques of non-violent guerrilla activism.

If the gathering in Tirana seemed like a student campus, the talent and determination of the young organisers were obvious. Aided by western support, advice and funds, they have chalked up a series of stunning victories - three in four years - in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Other young protesters have taken part in mass action in places such as Kyrgyzstan.

Controversy has raged over the precise role of the west, and the US in particular, in financing and directing the revolutionaries for "regime change".

While the Serbs and the Ukrainians, for example, benefited from US support and money, the Uzbeks and Azerbaijanis are bitter about the lack of American backing in the face of formidable repression. "The US was pushing for regime change and was ready to invest millions of dollars," Mr Marovic said of the Serbian scenario. "The funds were there."

Double standards

Others accused Washington of double standards for singling out Belarus and the regime of Alexander Lukashenko as a target for overthrowing while tolerating the Karimov and Aliyev regimes in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan because the first is useful to the US military in Afghanistan and the second is crucial to American oil interests in the Caspian basin.

"The Americans don't want a revolution in Azerbaijan after 13 years of dictatorship," Mr Nurullayev said. Last month he met the US ambassador in Baku to plead for help for his organisation, Yokh, which means "no".

He has not heard back from the US embassy.

Yokh is a new movement of 100 activists, styled on Serbia's Otpor, Ukraine's Pora, and Georgia's Kmara.

"We can't go on the streets and hand out our flyers. It's too dangerous," said Mr Nurullayev.

But Baku is a windy city. Yokh has just had a million flyers printed, declaring: "No to corruption, No to dictatorship." They will be dumped at high spots in the city at night to be picked up by the gusts and scattered across Baku.

In Tashkent, too, the lights-off action last week was a first tentative step by the democracy guerrillas to challenge Mr Karimov, fight the fear and mobilise the young.

The Tirana gathering heard about the launch of Bolga (The Hammer), a small group of Uzbek students at home and in the diaspora inspired by the Georgians and the Ukrainians.

Bolga's organisers declare: "What is our task? To take actions to disperse fear and silence in our society.

"What is our goal? To hold free elections, create a free society.

"What is the Bolga movement? It is a democratic and leaderless movement of Uzbek youth. We throw away the trash of totalitarianism from our minds. We are street cleaners, so we wear orange clothes."

Energised by their first networking experience, the youth leaders declared themselves all for one and one for all, aping the Nato treaty's stipulation that an attack on one organisation will be taken as an attack on all of them. There was a touch of the evangelising of the born-again congregation.

"Turn to your neighbour, look them in the eye and say to them, 'You are not alone,'" Mr Veliaj urged the gathering. A common declaration adopted yesterday stated that "each fight is our fight".