

INTRODUCTION

The current series of regime changes in different parts of the world started with the transformation and collapse of the Soviet Union as the manifestation and guardian of communist ideology and totalitarian practices. This, in turn, released a chain of transformations in Eastern and Central Europe. These events and developments were seen as a triumph of liberal democracy over communist ideology and practices; and in a way it was exactly that, though the declarations concerning the 'end of history' or 'mission accomplished' were not only premature, but as it soon became clear, dead wrong. An aftershock, or rather series of after-tremors, to this epochal change, which can be justifiably defined as a world-wide social revolution, came slightly more than a decade later in several of the former Soviet republics (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan) in the form of the so-called 'colour revolutions' that combined in different degrees, *depending on the specific country* (sic!), expressions of popular discontent, external meddling, and opportunistic struggle for power; these were rather *coup d'états* than social revolutions.

Then, less than a decade later, came the 'Arab Spring' or the 'Arab Awakening', as it is also called, whose directions and meaning for these countries as well as for the world at large is still difficult to gauge. While these events have some common roots and similar features, as well as significant differences, often the former are exaggerated, and sometimes ignored. On the one hand, these events are all entwined by a general context, which is that of a globalising world with an almost instant flow of information. They are also a part of the general tendencies of different peoples, ethnicities, religions and other groups, which had hitherto been marginalised and disenfranchised, now demanding their say in deciding how to live, with whom to live and even where to live. In the eyes of many in the West, this is an accelerating run towards the 'end of history', a realisation of the idea of universal history. At the same time, the developments in all these societies, notwithstanding their quite obvious (often obvious because they are on the surface, i.e. relatively superficial), similarities are also very different. Even if the discontent of the Arab peoples has some significant common causes (repressive regimes that were

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mainly concerned with staying in power and enriching themselves, and more often than not serving the interests of foreign elites rather than their own people), their ethnic and religious compositions, demographic characteristics, levels of economic development, presence or absence of the 'oil curse', as well as their strategic alliances differ hugely. Equally, corruption, mismanagement and inter-ethnic tensions in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan may have had many similar features and even causes, but there is no single uniform solution, their common history within the Czarist Empire and the Soviet Union notwithstanding. Happy countries, paraphrasing Tolstoy, may indeed look alike, but every unhappy country is unhappy very much in its own way. If this observation is correct, and below we will try to prove that it is, then countries that become happier, i.e. more prosperous, peaceful and free, will eventually indeed become in some important respects more similar to one another, though never, of course, becoming the same. However, as unhappy countries are all different, remedies that would make them happier are also different. Moreover, Tolstoy, though undoubtedly a brilliant writer, was not as great a philosopher as he wanted or even pretended to be, or as Isaiah Berlin put it, he was a fox who longed to be a hedgehog.¹ Today the world has too many aspiring hedgehogs in power, who – often sincerely – believe that the big picture of the world they hold is true for everybody. Foxes, in their view, are like those blind men who grope different parts of the elephant, and depending on the part they touch, imagine it either as a pillar or a tree or a rope. However, differently from the elephant – an organic integral system, where all parts are subordinated to and serve the system as a whole, the world is a much less integrated system and therefore foxes studying details, i.e. specific societies or issues, are after all not so blind. Even happy countries are not exactly the same, though there are some general features or principles, and ignoring them is problematic, if not impossible, in achieving happiness (peace, justice, prosperity and freedom). Yet, these are only the general features and principles that have to be adapted to cement conditions in any specific society. We, as individual human beings, are

¹ I. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, Ivan R Dee, 1993.