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Iskandaryan, Alexander

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Armenia–Russia Relations: the Revolution and the Map

By Alexander Iskandaryan, Caucasus Institute, Yerevan

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Abstract

Two polar viewpoints dominate discourses around Armenia's foreign policy. One is that the Velvet Revolution should have led to a U-turn in a pro-Western and anti-Russian direction. The other is that there is no alternative to Armenia's pro-Russian stand. Disappointingly for many, the post-revolutionary authorities of Armenia appear to have moved from the first to the second in a matter of months. This article argues that the polarity is exaggerated: while a power rotation could not change Armenia's foreign policy priorities, dictated as they are by Armenia's surroundings, the existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the sealed borders with Turkey, some change is possible and inevitable as a new generation of elites accedes to power. Unlike their predecessors who grew up and came of age in the USSR, the new elites were raised in independent Armenia and operate within new geopolitical and geo-cultural paradigms.

Changing Expectations

Following the power handover in Armenia in April–May 2018, many observers, especially external ones, predicted significant worsening, or at least a major crisis, in Russia–Armenia relations. The forecasts were chiefly founded on the history of previous Color Revolutions: those in Georgia and Ukraine, for example, did not just cause a deterioration of relations with Russia, or, in Georgia's case, the severing of diplomatic ties. They led to wars, as a result of which Georgia and Ukraine lost parts of their territories. In these two countries and in Kyrgyzstan, the revolutions were viewed as efforts to break with the Soviet or post-Soviet past, moving from what is Soviet and archaic to something that is Western and modern: a change that amounted to a civilizational shift. Given the ongoing standoff between Russia and the West, it is logical to expect this transition to involve a country's putting some distance between Russia and itself.

In the run-up to the Velvet Revolution, this was also the vision held by Armenia's future prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and the opposition alliance that he led. As a member of parliament, Pashinyan voted against Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. Later, the Way Out parliament faction that he lead actively campaigned for Armenia to leave the EEU on the grounds that it was a union of Asian, backward, un-modernized regimes. While this sounds simplistic, it makes sense within the post-colonial worldview, common in post-Soviet countries, in which modernization is synonymous with drifting away from the former parent state and/or becoming pro-Western. Through this lens, alliance with Europe is viewed as a cure to all things Soviet, whereas Russia is seen to project a Soviet imperialistic modality.

The U-Turn?

There was, however, another viewpoint, more common in Armenia and the former USSR than in the West, that no new regime in Armenia could choose an alternative foreign policy, simply because there was no choice to be had. Arguing that a complex combination of external factors precludes radical foreign policy changes in Armenia, proponents of this viewpoint appear to have triumphed shortly after Pashinyan's accession to power. The revolutionary leadership of Armenia made a U-turn in its statements about Russia in a matter of weeks. Not only does post-revolution Armenia's foreign policy represent (even admittedly) a smooth continuation of the previous one, but the very opposition leaders who used to campaign against all ties with Russia are now giving lip service to the need to improve and enhance Russia–Armenia ties. Stressing the importance of continuity in foreign policy, the new government emphasizes the unique nature of Armenia's revolution, which was by no means a "Color Revolution" but a "Velvet" one, in the sense that, unlike the Color Revolutions, it had no relevance to foreign policy in general and relations with Russia in particular, but stemmed from the need to reform the domestic policy sphere, eradicating corruption and ensuring good governance.

In some ways, this is true: the revolutionary agenda was chiefly about domestic politics, and so was the trigger of the power handover. Unlike Ukraine, where things were set in motion by a controversy over the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU, the spark that ignited the revolution in Armenia came from President Serzh Sargsyan's attempt to remain in office for a third consecutive term, treading in the footsteps of the leaders of some Central Asian states and Belarus. By no means central to their struggle, the Westerniza-

tion rhetoric used by the revolutionaries was instrumental, allowing them to criticize the perceived pro-Russian bias in Sargsyan's policies.

It is also true that Europe and the West are perceived in Armenia as symbols of development, modernization and progress. However, while most people want these things for Armenia, support for a pro-Western political orientation is less widespread. Among the new elites, there is a growing perception that orientation is not a requirement for progress: one can strive to be European without being pro-European. Prime Minister Pashinyan and his supporters now voice the view that European choices need to be made by Armenians inside Armenia, not in the form of an orientation.

It Comes with the Territory

The reason for the perceived U-turn in Pashinyan's politics—and for the viewpoint that Armenia's foreign policy is written in stone—has to do with geography more than anything else.

The map shows Armenia as a country with four neighbors: Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey. A less politically correct map shows Armenia to have a fifth neighbor: the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, a de-facto state with its own constitution, parliament, president and army, which is in fact merged with Armenia in every other aspect of life: infrastructural, economic, financial, cultural and linguistic. The mutual border is almost invisible, with goods and people freely moving across, but rather than opening Armenia to the world, this border shuts it off: all the external borders of Nagorno-Karabakh are sealed as a result of the conflict, and so are Armenia's mutual borders with Azerbaijan and its close ally, Turkey.

So, for all ends and purposes except cartography, Armenia has only two neighbors: Iran and Georgia. With just two neighbors with whom to trade, two-thirds of Armenia's trade turnover goes via Georgia, and one third, via Iran. Given the complex format of U.S.–Iran and Russia–Georgia relations (including a lack of bilateral diplomatic ties), and the fact that the U.S. and Russia are both important for Armenia, working for a political equilibrium has been part of Armenia's survival tactics since its independence, regardless of regimes and personalities.

The existence of the unresolved conflict creates needs in terms of defense and security, of which Russia is the only potential provider. This makes Armenia different from Georgia, which no longer needs a strong army since it has lost its claims to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some politicians in Armenia—including some of the revolutionaries prior to their accession to power—mentioned

the EU as an alternative source of security. However, the EU as such is not a security provider; it gets its own security from the NATO, of which Turkey, Azerbaijan's ally in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is a member state. Plus, NATO has embargoed sales of arms to the region.

Having no alternative in the realm of security, Armenia has a red line in its relations with Russia that no leader can cross regardless of their pro-Western orientation. Once in power, Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged this in his public statements. He even admitted that it comes with the territory: he said that his views as head of state were so different from what he had preached as an opposition politician *just because* he is now the head of state.

A Post-Post-Soviet World

This said, one can still argue that Armenia's foreign policy cannot be immune to revolutions. The 2018 Velvet Revolution brought about a change of political generations. The Soviet people in power have been replaced by post-Soviet people who were educated and built their professional and political careers in independent Armenia. Sociologists call them the Independence Generation. The world in which they grew up was nothing like their parents' late USSR. Their mental maps and school books, their lifestyles and strategies, their worldviews and narratives are dramatically different from those of men like Serzh Sargsyan for whom the USSR is part of their biography. Without the Soviet indoctrination, the new generation has created a different culture, including a different political culture.

While some of the older-generation leaders had been anti-Soviet dissidents in their younger years, in their post-Soviet lives they had to make an intellectual effort not to think or act like Soviet people. Their instincts were Soviet; those of the new generation are not. As a result, the new generation searches for development models outside the former USSR. They look to the developed world for values, reforms, freedoms and good governance practices; they would never look to Kazakhstan or Belarus, and even know little about those countries and their political models.

The pivot that some expected Armenia's foreign policy to make after the Velvet Revolution is unlikely, because whoever leads Armenia, security is a red line they cannot cross. However, it is also unlikely that Armenia's foreign policy will remain unchanged, because development is a necessity for Armenia, and its only source is Europe. Looking for development in Minsk is just as futile as looking for guns in Strasbourg. This is where Armenia gets its "complementary" foreign policy. Unwilling to serve as a battlefield between East and West, Armenia avoids the dichotomy, insisting that pro-

Western need not be anti-Russian and pro-Russian need not be anti-Western.

As a result, the West blames Armenia for being pro-Russian and Russia suspects it of being pro-Western. However, for a quarter century, Armenia has been able to maintain its equilibrium in a tense environment; for example, it is the only member state of the Eurasian Economic Union to have signed a CEPA with the EU. In some ways, Armenia's foreign policy line is similar to the one that Finland implemented after WWII and until the fall of the USSR, also unwillingly, under the pressure of geographical constraints, and also regardless of domestic political developments.

In domestic politics, post-revolution Armenia also appears to be reproducing the pre-revolution configuration. In it, one of the smaller parties criticizes the alliance and cooperation with Russia from a strong pro-Western perspective. In the previous parliament, this role was played by Way Out, the alliance led by Pashinyan; in the new one, the niche was taken over by the Bright Armenia Party, a former Way Out coalition member. At the other end of the gamut, the Prosperous Armenia

Party campaigns to strengthen ties to Russia. Together, Bright Armenia and Prosperous Armenia have about a third of the seats, whereas the other two thirds—the constitutional majority—are held by the ruling alliance, My Step, which has already shifted to a centrist position similar to that of its predecessors.

Arguably, this self-replicating system to some extent represents Armenian society. The younger, more educated and well-to-do classes, chiefly residents of central Yerevan, prioritize European-style development. Older, less urbanized and less privileged citizens believe in ties to the former parent state. The majority does not have a clear political orientation and supports an ad hoc foreign policy.

Altogether, one can argue that a subtle, consensus-based policy tailored to the changing interests of various actors does not just increase Armenia's chances of survival, but may also enable it to elaborate policy strategies that are more beneficial to modernization than rigid positioning on one side of the political divide could ever be.

About the Author

Alexander Iskandaryan is the Director of the Caucasus Institute in Yerevan, Armenia. His sphere of scholarly interests includes state- and nation-building in the post-Soviet space.

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