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What Made Russia Indifferent to the Revolution in Armenia

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Abstract

Russia's reaction to the dramatic collapse of the firmly entrenched regime in Armenia, which is one of its few formal and real allies, was subtle and demonstratively neutral. Contact with the opposition was minimal, but the idiosyncratic counter-revolutionary stance was abandoned. This unusual self-restraint may be the result of Russia's entrapment in Syria, and it may also be due to a mistake caused by the overload of rigidly centralized leadership.

Introduction

The April revolution in Armenia greatly surprised Russian leadership, as it did most stakeholders in the multiple conflicts in the Caucasus. However, one would expect that Moscow should have been more informed and better prepared. Experts had warned about brewing discontent in this impoverished South Caucasian state

(Minchenko, Markedonov & Petrov, 2015), but policy-makers in the Kremlin are resolutely uninterested in any form of independent expertise. President Vladimir Putin called and “warmly congratulated” Serzh Sargsyan on his appointment to Prime Minister, though protocol did not dictate him do so (Putin, 2018). From that moment on, the mainstream media strictly ignored the

street protests in Yerevan. That silence stimulated fierce debates on the escalating turmoil within social networks that connect millions of Russian users with thousands of eye-witnesses. Furthermore, the mainstream media silence reinforced the self-deception in the proverbial Kremlin corridors that nothing of import was occurring (Petrovskaya, 2018).

Consequently, Sargsyan's resignation on April 23 came as a shock, and while the propaganda machine scrambled to explain it, Putin was politically paralyzed—as had occurred on several occasions throughout his long administration. Though military intervention was certainly out of the question, Moscow had an arsenal of “hybrid” tactics at its disposal, all of which could have been rapidly deployed. In the crucial weeks when Nikol Pashinyan advanced his claim for the position of prime minister, Moscow remained indifferent and uncharacteristically aloof, marking potential consequences for Russian–Armenian relations and, more importantly, damaging Russia's “principled” stance against revolutions. This lack of response on events of high importance has, therefore, negatively impacted Russia's profile on the international stage.

Abandoning the Counter-Revolutionary Crusade

The dominant discourse in Russia on the subject of contemporary revolutions has been strongly negative, contrasting heavily with the Soviet ideological glorification of this phenomenon as an “engine of progress”. The proposition that a forceful overthrow of legitimate order, even those of a dictatorial nature, brings only chaos and violence is accepted as a political axiom, thereby reducing discussions on such politically incorrect issues as the “right for rebellion” to the margins of the blogosphere (Volkov, 2014). This fierce condemnation goes beyond the rational stance of an authoritarian regime, which firmly controls elections and finds a grave threat in street protests. Vladimir Putin tends to take such issues personally, hiding but never overcoming the shock of watching angry crowds protest, as he did from the windows of KGB headquarters in Dresden in November 1989 (Hill & Gaddy, 2013). That trauma was reinforced with the shocking images of the gruesome death of Libyan dictator Muamar al-Qaddafi, which Putin attributed to US malicious manipulation of the violent chaos (Sestanovich, 2018).

What makes this natural aversion to popular uprisings particularly aggressive is the assertion that the so-called “color revolutions” in Russia's neighborhood, as well as the hopeful “Arab spring” in the Middle East, are instigated and sponsored by the USA and the EU. As conspiracy theories are elevated to the level of state

policy, Russia's struggle against various attempts at forceful “regime change” fuel a key part of its rapidly evolving confrontation with the West. President Putin portrays himself as a champion of the counter-revolutionary cause and makes a claim for Russian leadership in global resistance against the US policy of preserving its eroding “hegemony”. The “color revolutions” were even defined as a new form of warfare, despite scant enthusiasm among the top brass for elaboration on this theoretical innovation (Bouchet, 2016).

The lack of response in Moscow to the explosion of street protests in Yerevan marks a stark contrast with Russia's ideological stance against revolutions. It was certainly of great importance for Russian leadership that no anti-Russian or pro-EU slogans were displayed in the peaceful rallies across Armenia. Furthermore, as Pashinyan asserted that the alliance with Russia would remain strong, some opinion-makers in Moscow ventured the point that the unfolding crisis was different from other “color revolutions” (Markedonov, 2018a). In the previous series of street protests in Armenia during the summer of 2015, the friendship with Russia was also never in question, but this did not stop Moscow from inventing Western interference (Andreasyan & Derluigian, 2015). An explanation of the new Russian passivity is hard to find, but Syria is likely a factor.

The Long Shadow of the Syrian Debacle

Many overlapping ambitions influenced Putin's risky decision to launch a military intervention into the Syrian civil war in September 2015, and a prominent incentive was the perceived need to stop and push back the wave of revolutions. The explosion of social anger in the Arab world and the uprising in Ukraine were caused by vastly different factors, but according to the perspective of Moscow, the Tahrir and the Maidan were parts of the same Western conspiracy. By early 2018, however, the “Arab spring” had abated, leaving behind two collapsed states (Libya and Yemen), two forcefully suppressed upheavals (Bahrain and Egypt) and only one success story (Tunisia), while the Ukrainian breakthrough had deteriorated into political squabbles in Kiev and a military deadlock in Donbass. Syria is no longer a key battlefield in the struggle against revolutions but is instead a permanently mutating violent disaster. Putin declared a “victory” in the war against the rebels and terrorists, only to find the Russian expeditionary forces entrapped in new spasms of fighting (Baev, 2018).

Moscow is stuck with an ostracized dictator in Damascus, who can only sustain his grasp on power with large-scale military support from Russia and Iran, but the “brotherhood-in-arms” between them involves all sorts of troubles (Grove & Abdulrahim, 2018). The

Russian forces stay clear from the escalating conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria, as well as from the fighting between the Turkish army and the Kurdish forces. The Russian command also tries to preserve the “de-conflicting” mode with the US forces, despite the heavy resonance from the direct clash in February (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). This complicated maneuvering means that Putin’s order on reducing the Russian grouping in Syria cannot be executed because without numerous “boots on the ground”, Russia can neither influence this new post-ISIS phase of the Syrian war nor can it ensure the security of its two bases (Khmeimin and Tartus). This imperative to sustain the intervention signifies a protracted stress for the Russian Navy and Air-Space forces—and undercuts Russia’s ability to launch new military interventions.

Mistakes Caused by a bad Overload

The engagement in Syria impacted on the Russian reaction to the Armenian revolution in several ways, as it demanded more resources from Moscow (e.g., rebuilding the Syrian air defense system) and perhaps most importantly, as it prioritized Russian attention to the fast-transforming war. This war management added anxiety to the already precarious relationship between Russia and the U.S., which deteriorated badly after the U.S. Treasury enforced new, heavy-hitting sanctions. Trump’s increased toughness and braggadocios statements about the hundreds of Russians killed in Syria compelled some mainstream Moscow experts to question whether Washington really aimed to undermine elite support for Putin’s regime (Kortunov, 2018). The need to monitor the developments on the Korean peninsula, where Russia’s exposure is high but its ability to effect change is low, was another stressor that heavily overloaded the Kremlin system of political decision-making, thus resulting in miscalculations, procrastinations and blunders.

Though the proposal that the lack of Russian response to the Armenian crisis was a mistake may appear dubious, it builds on the fact that Russia’s political system is extremely centralized and that the attention span of the “decider” is invariably limited. Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, Putin displayed little interest in the conflict transformations in the Caucasus and has actually never developed a particular “chemistry” with Sargsyan. Moscow took the quick termination of fighting in Nagorno Karabakh in April 2016 as proof of Russia’s capacity to control the status-quo (de Waal, 2018). The Kremlin administration was also quite preoccupied with the peaceful execution of Putin’s presidential inauguration on May 7. It is quite possible that Putin’s courtiers dismissed Pashinyan’s Gandhi-style march across

Armenia in early April as a show of little importance by a marginal trouble-maker (Antonova, 2018).

The Russian military base in Armenia is too isolated to serve as a springboard for a military intervention, which would have required prohibitively heavy effort and risk. However, Moscow has mastered the art of applying a wide range of “hybrid” means, many of which could have been effectively deployed in support of the friendly dictator-in-distress in Yerevan. Corruption, which is the main irritant for Armenian society, has produced many profitable links between Moscow and Yerevan that are ideally suited to manipulate elites and crowds, and yet, they remained idle. The infamous Russian “troll factories” did not attack Pashinyan’s high-impact posts on *Facebook*. The inattentive Kremlin clearly missed the ripe moment to attempt an indirect power projection. That Sargsyan said, “I was wrong”, rather than ask Moscow for emergency support is a testimony to the strength of a very particular war-forged Armenian political culture that remains profoundly incomprehensible to Russian elites. That astounding resignation might have triggered an overreaction from Russia, but Putin could not find a counterpart to connect with and was disinclined to grace the intrigues of the beleaguered Republican party with his attention.

Conclusions

The following may be reasonably concluded: if Moscow had attempted a “hybrid” intervention in the Armenian crisis and failed, then the damage to its international positions would have been significantly greater. Nevertheless, it was just as possible for the Kremlin to demand a forceful suppression in the early stages of the protests in Yerevan as it was to order a brutal dispersion of peaceful rallies in Moscow on May 5. Though Putin’s court assumes the stance of “non-interference in internal affairs” regarding the Armenian revolution, the rationale behind this pose is highly unconvincing and remains subject to interpretation (Markedonov, 2018b). This analysis suggests that the unsatisfactory experiences from Syria informed the self-restraint shown by Moscow, where resources for proactive foreign policy moves are now assessed with greater care. A further suggestion is to apply the ever-useful “Occam’s razor” method, which dictates that Putin and his court made the mistake of ignoring the beginning of the explosive crisis, but avoided the more serious blunder of attempting a belated “hybrid” intervention. Russia’s ability to provide assurances of security to post-Soviet autocrats is now seriously compromised, but a reproduction in Moscow of a joyful triumph of street democracy in Yerevan still remains rather improbable.

See overleaf for information about the author and references.

About the Author

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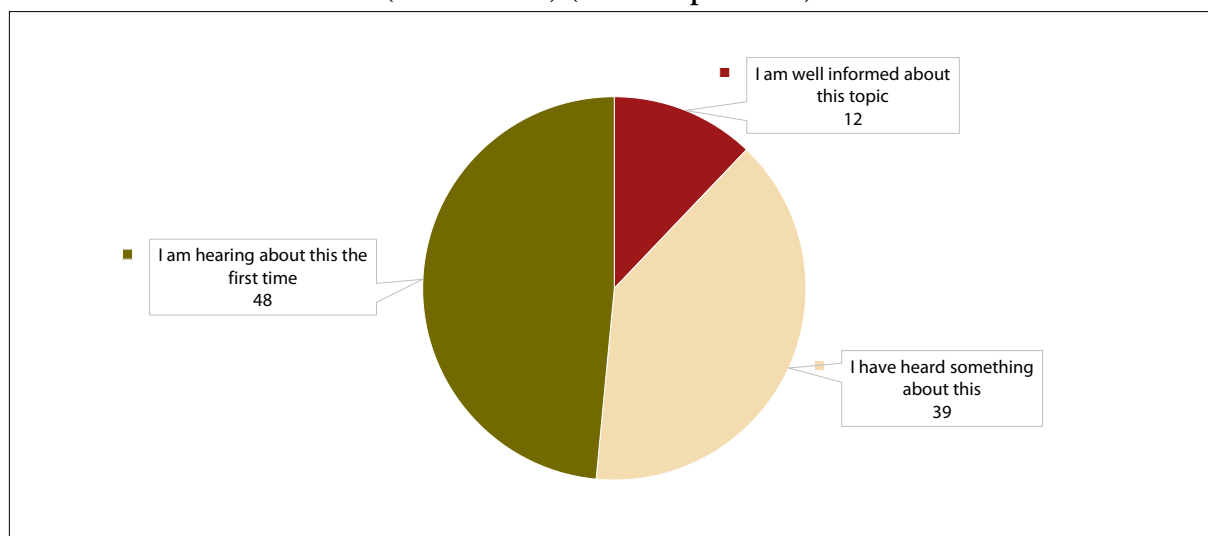
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OPINION POLL

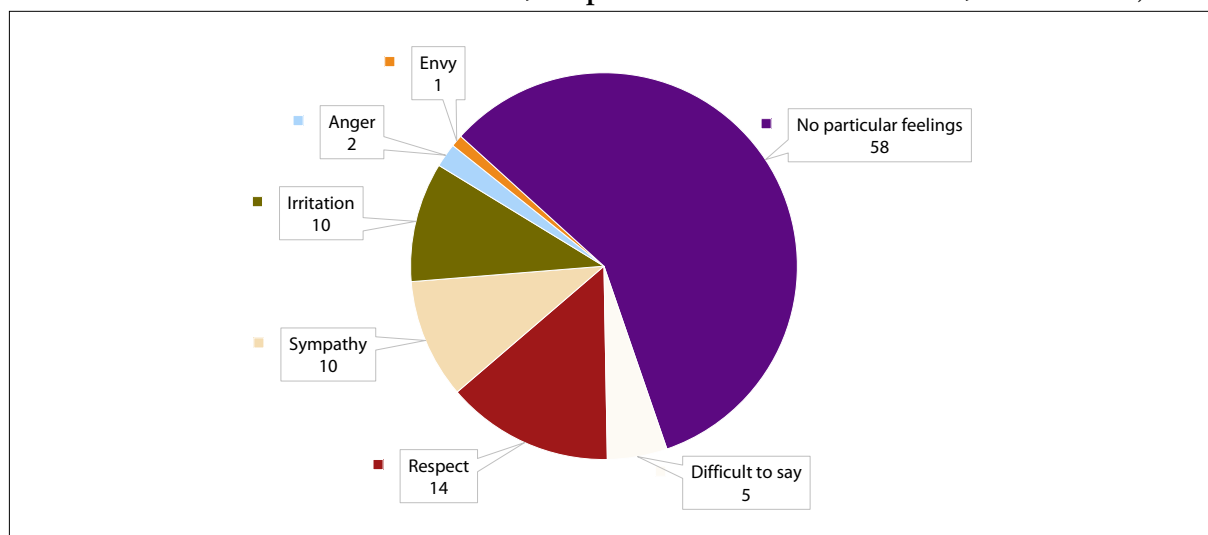
Russian Public Opinion on the Protests in Armenia (as of Late May 2018)

Figure 1: Have You Heard About the Mass Protests in Late April and Early May in Armenia Against the Election of the Former President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan to the Office of Prime Minister? (One Answer) (% of Respondents)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 24–30 May 2018, $N = 1600$, <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/06/protesty-v-armenii/>>, published on 6 June 2018

Figure 2: What Are Your Feelings About the Protesters in Armenia? (in % of Respondents Who Had Heard About the Protests; Respondents Were Shown a Card; One Answer)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 24–30 May 2018, $N = 1600$, <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/06/protesty-v-armenii/>>, published on 6 June 2018