



Test case for the South Caucasus: is Armenia’s consolidation of the achievements of the “velvet revolution” possible without revision of the Nagorno-Karabagh issue?

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Abstract.

The success of peaceful protests in Armenia demonstrated complexity of the geopolitics and choices which the countries in the South Caucasus face. It revealed the contradictions and dichotomies, including peculiar relations between democracy and security. It caused mixed reaction in Baku due to the nature of the protests, the slogans of which reflected the greater strive towards reforms and political independence of Armenia society- on the one hand, but unchanged nationalist rhetoric – on the other. The issues which are watched in Azerbaijan are whether the revolution will succeed in changing in substance the entrenched power centres and elites, and thus destroy the myth of invincibility of Russia, whether the Karabagh issue will be affected by the political changes in the country and whether the success of protests will give an inspiration to the democratic forces and can be repeated in Azerbaijan. Viewed from the country, the political breakthrough of Armenia does not seem sustainable without normalizing relations with neighbours and revision of the approach to Karabagh issue.



Introduction.

The streets in Yerevan filled with protesters took many observers by surprise. From the country, whose politics, economics and defence has been under substantial Russia's control – a few would expect such a scale of public protests soon. The reaction, analysis and predictions related to Armenia events in Azerbaijan varied depending on the actor, but there has been one uniting trait – a scepticism regarding capacity of these street protests to challenge Russia's political influence and change the situation in substance.

Very few doubted that regardless of their results, current events are signalling Armenia society's dissatisfaction with the political and economic stagnation, in spite of the military control over Nagorno Karabagh of Azerbaijan, thus disclosing the peculiar connection between democracy and security. On the other hand, it might be viewed as yet another expression of the waning influence of Russia's status in Eurasia, joining the signals from the other traditional partners, such as Kazakhstan. There are a few dichotomies and tensions, which are reflected in the current protests in Armenia and which are of importance for the whole region including Azerbaijan.

Society Versus Elites.

In terms of political power and ruling elites Armenia has had, in spite of the formal change of power during last two decades, what is characterized by the Freedom House “an entrenched leadership”. The group of Karabagh war veterans had a firm grip on power for 20 years since 1998, when the intellectual Levon Ter-Petrosian lost his power to the military commander Robert Kocharian. These groups, who fought the Karabagh war, have had strong relations to the military - industrial complex and their financial interests directly tied to the military cooperation with Russia. As most of the kleptocratic elites, the Karabagh war veterans and their cronies monopolized the economy and were dragging the process of reforms and consolidating the political and economic status quo, characterized by corruption, lack of freedoms and poverty. The protests were triggered by the attempt of the prime minister Serj Sargsian to implement the scenario, which would preserve his power through Constitutional changes. While formally promoting overall positive Constitutional changes towards greater de-centralization- replacement of the Presidential republic by parliamentary, similar to that in Georgia, it was viewed in the society as a trick of the president to overcome two term presidential limits and retain his power by means of the Constitutional changes. The anti-establishment nature of protests were also reflected in the image of the spontaneous leader Nikol Pashinian - the cap, the backpack and informal outfit. The political substance of the protests and passion of people caused a lot of sympathy, inspiration, with some share of jealousy in Azerbaijani society¹. Political opposition, civil society leaders, bloggers and ordinary users of social networks were widely sharing and re-posting information about widening street protests in Armenia. For them, victory of opposition in deeply dependent on Russia Armenia would mean breaking the concept of invincibility of Russia and its influence in the region, which is often used by official Baku to justify its “cautious” approach to reforms and Integration in the West.

¹ Adilgizi, Lamiya (2018) Azerbaijan watches the Armenian rebellion with the jealousy and hope. Eurasianet, 27 April. <https://eurasianet.org/s/azerbaijan-watches-armenian-rebellion-with-jealousy-and-hope>



This also explains silence and absence of reaction of the government in Azerbaijan for a few days of the protests. According to the opposition leader Ali Kerimli, the public protests in Armenia not only destroyed the official Baku's myth of the "invincible Russia", but showed how the position of creative elite and army joining the protesters, as well as peaceful resignation of the prime-minister could serve a model and inspiration for Azerbaijan public. Yet, there is awareness that to repeat the same in the oil rich state will be more difficult than in the country with less centralized and abundant country.

Russia Versus the West.

Azerbaijan's concept of independence in 1992 put a full withdrawal from Russia's influence as its cornerstone. The ideas of Elchibey and Popular Front government not only promoted military independence from Russia as key to the country's independence and resolution of Karabagh issue, but also implemented full withdrawal of Soviet bases from the country's territory. The opposite took place in Armenia, who once independent immediately signed the cooperation treaties in the area of defence and security with Russia. While majority of foreign observers and Armenian politicians themselves stress that the events are not about Russia, or challenge her role in Armenia, in fact it is. One of the Azerbaijani facebook users posted a comment : " Our neighbours are cheaters: they want both to have Russia as protector of their security interests, while at the same time – be independent and integrate in the West". When Armenia did not sign the Association Agreement with EU due to the pressure of Russia, the Armenian National Platform EU Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum came up with strong opposing statement, asserting decisiveness of the society to integrate in the West. By Kadri Liik (2017) there is a "geopolitical" division which goes across the borders of countries in the region with societies attracted to European integration, and kleptocratic elites- looking for support of Russia. The Armenian envoys, experts and civil society members have been noticed advocating in Europe that the country should be withdrawn from the group of "laggers" in EaP which included along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus and join the group of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

The societal demand to break stagnation - both political and economic-was strong enough even to write off the foreign policy shift of Sargsian towards greater European integration and cooperation with NATO, as compared to his predecessor or earlier decisions. Besides, the Four Day war of 2016 had a few implications, but most important of them was the shattering image of Russia as the reliable strategic and defence partner.

While Pashinian claimed that Armenia would not withdraw from the Russia led Unions- Eurasia Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty, it was obvious that the new process will start in Armenia- attempt of gradual withdrawal from the political sphere of influence of Russia. This would mean first of all to deal with variety of stakeholders and oligarchs , whose interest and wealth are directly related to economic and political connections with Russia. The role of Karabagh conflict in this dependence is clearly reflected in the political influence for two decades in Yerevan of the so called " Karabagh clan" of the war veterans, former military commanders. The fact that Armenia society got rid of the military commander who is associated in Azerbaijan with the massacres in the Nagorno Karabagh town Khodzjali as a positive development was mentioned many times during the discussions in social networks. For many, the events in Armenia was the first sign of growing awareness of Russia's not benevolent role in the region.



Diaspora versus Russia.

According to political economists, diaspora and Russia are the main sources of rents and political influence in Armenia. Following traditional alliance so far Armenian diaspora's and Russia's interests in the region coincided. In the eyes of Diaspora Russia was the only guarantor of Armenia's security and protector from possible threats from Turkic neighbours- Azerbaijan and Turkey. Diaspora money and political support was crucial in the fate of Armenia leaders since the 90s, as the fall of Levon Ter Petrosian proved after seriously antagonized diaspora by imprisoning some members of Dashnaktsutiun and withdrawing the genocide agenda from relations with Turkey. However, the public protests is an indicator of emerging split in the positions of the Western Diaspora and Russia. In the last few years the following major factors started to influence the position of diaspora: the regime based on economic monopolies created obstacles for investments, caused delay in reforms and integration in the West, the inflow of the new diaspora, who influenced the views of the old one, as well as awareness of unreliability of Russia as a security partner, as Russia has been selling weapons to Azerbaijan. The growing irritation with Russia among public was already expressed a few times prior to the current public protest - as a reaction to the murder of a family by a Russian soldier, and protests to the electricity prices. The leader (formerly member of the Armenian National Movement) of the ongoing "velvet revolution" Nikol Pashinian has mentioned few times during the rallies that Diaspora was on their side. The realism of diaspora seems gradually to take over traditional alliances- besides blocking development of the country, the strategic partner of Armenia has increasingly becoming an international outcast, the target of the international sanctions, and bearer of aggressive reputation. Yet, the realities of the region and overwhelming dependence on Russia, who has way too many levers of influence over small Armenia, and the growing awareness that Nagorno Karabagh issue is a tool of this influence prevents promotion of the country's complete shift to the West. While the Diaspora might be far from accepting the Karabagh issue as a major tool of Russia's influence and obstacle to the integration in the West, there is a growing understanding that Diaspora may make a greater use of their influence in Europe and the US in such questions, as integration in the West and the key security issue like the Karabagh. Indeed, the program, which new prime minister Pashinyan voiced after he was elected includes the point about Diaspora using its influence to recognize the Nagorno Karabagh as a party to negotiations.

Democracy versus Security.

However paradoxical it may look, the current crisis demonstrates, and will continue to do so, the contradiction between security, as understood by the observers both in Armenia and outside it – on the one hand and democracy/wellbeing – on the other. The literature usually justifies Armenia's security concerns (and thus reliance on Russia) by the landlocked location of Armenia and by "bad" neighbourhood. However, this argument requires rather opposite conclusions for the foreign policy of the country, in particular, the direct interest in peaceful and friendly relations with neighbours. Armenia has had a tragic history of relations with Turkey a century ago. However, in the post-cold war period, Turkey did not claim any territories, nor it committed any aggressive action against Armenia. Turkey's economic embargo in the conflict was a non-military response to the military assistance of Russia to Armenia, and US economic sanctions against Azerbaijan. Similarly, Azerbaijan did not claim any of the disputed territories, unresolved since early 20th century, and did not interfere when thousands of Azerbaijanis' rights were violated and all of them were deported from Armenia. Many conflicts in the history were dependent and resolved due to the behaviour of the



third countries, and non- interference was a crucial factor of the soonest resolution of the conflict. Unless the “bad” neighbourhood is understood strictly in ethnic terms (both states Azerbaijan and Turkey are Turkic speaking population) and the historical grievances simply transferred to the Turkic speaking population of Azerbaijan, there is no real basis for suggestion that there is a inherent aggressiveness or hatred in these states against Armenians. The most recent study of Azerbaijani’s perception of conflict disclosed, in spite of the continued occupation, generally peaceful and in some cases even post-modern views on the conflict with neighbours. (Alieva, Aslanov, 2018) The reliance of Armenia on Russia in involvement in the conflict brought not only destruction and displacement of a more than a million people, including ethnic cleansing, but eliminated hope for the unification of the efforts of three republics to move away from the Russia’s influence and Soviet past and integrate, by the model of the Baltic republics, in the West. It also deprived Armenia from benefitting from the trade with characterized by free market economy Turkey and rich with energy resources Azerbaijan. But most importantly in the presence of the strongly ambitious Russia preoccupied with the regime security it contributed to the delay of the two countries’ development, democratic reforms and Europeanization.

Conclusions.

Events in Armenia so far brought a new and unexpected social and political dynamic in the South Caucasus. In this regard the “Armenian velvet revolution” is an outstanding event , which achieved a few goals so far. It proved possibility of the peaceful change of power in spite of kleptocratic elites, supported by powerful neighbour. The further impact on security, stability and integration of the country and the region as a whole will be dependent on how the new leadership will resolve the paradox of democracy and security and whether the vision of the future will reconcile the regional and national contradictions. Thus it may develop into one of the few scenarios. One assumes the change of paradigms, while the other – of merely the actors. Change of the actors would mean replacement of Russia as a big power guarantor of the status quo in conflict in violation of the international law and UN resolutions by Brussels, or any other Western institution. This will not add substantial security or independence, or even a breakthrough in politics and economics through simply replacing the “patrons”. The first steps of the new Prime Minister indicated so far this scenario.

The goal expressed by the new prime minister, that they will establish relations of equal partners with Northern neighbour suggests the change of paradigms. It requires revision of the approach to the Nagorno Karabagh and change of Armenia’s behaviour to the immediate neighbors – Azerbaijan and Turkey -, as that of an independent actor of international relations. (Alieva, 1996). This should replace the old paradigm, based on the big powers providing for security without changing own’s behaviour in relations to its neighbours and to get liberated from the constructed pre-modern threats used as tool of influence by the regional power and kleptocratic elite. The new paradigm will mean greater responsibility and awareness of Armenia as an actor of foreign policy, by respecting the borders or denouncing the interference in secessionist conflicts, rather than historical “ patron-client” relations with the big powers, whether it is Moscow, Brussels, or Washington. This scenario will pave the way to consolidation of the independence of the country, benefitting from economic cooperation with the energy rich and pragmatic neighbours and will allow eventual integration in the West. The conflict may have even greater chances to be resolved if the similar changes happen in Azerbaijan, the country who was the first to liberate itself from the Russian military presence. In the absence of such changes, the Azerbaijan’s current leadership should drop its military rhetoric and do its utmost to convince the NK communities that they can guarantee their security and safety.



There is of course, the third scenario, in the best spirit of realpolitik, that would allow Armenia and big powers to hope that in the scheme of distribution of spheres of influence, Russia might be satisfied to continue to “provide for the security” of Karabagh preserving its military presence in Armenia and/or peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabagh, while gradually withdrawing from political sphere, relying thus on possibly increasing sense of responsibility of Russia. However, considering the dominant pre-occupation by current leadership in Russia with the regime security, nothing guarantees, that it will voluntarily give up all the means of pressure both on the regional and international actors, and ability to control the dynamic in the region in all spheres. Most importantly, dragging unresolved conflict will delay transformation of economy, as will leave the same basis of the oligarchic structures- the arms race between the two states. In addition, such an agreement with Russia not only will leave the major tool of her control of the region, and will consolidate a civilizational approach to the conflict – internationally, but will delay formation of the common rules of regional relations and foreign policies of the three republics even further. The awareness that only together three states of the South Caucasus can make their way to desired independence, security and breakthrough in political and economic areas and integration in the West is the key to long term consolidation of the political changes in individual countries. Besides its importance for the Armenian society the events showed an increasing weakening of Russia’s role in the region, when even in the country most dependent on Russia, the peaceful overthrow of the entrenched oligarchs - ex-military commanders appeared to be possible.

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