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Armenia's Colourless Revolution

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Introduction

Armenia is a landlocked country situated in the South Caucasus region. History of the region was shaped by the clash of three major empires: Ottoman, Persian and Russian trying to win control over it. The modern history of Armenia began in 1991, when the country seceded from the crumbling Soviet Union. Those were difficult years as the fledgling country was in ongoing war with its new post-USSR neighbour – Azerbaijan. The war was waged over “Nagorno-Karabakh”, a region that was mostly populated

by ethnic Armenians, however was formally part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR.

In the international arena, Armenia joined the UN in 1991, the Russia-led defence pact called the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in 1994, and also in that year, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). Armenia became part of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 and until September 2013 had been negotiating the EU's Association Agreement

(AA), which included a free trade agreement. Two months before the intended completion of negotiations, and after a visit of then President Serzh Sargsyan to Moscow, Armenia announced that it would cancel negotiations with the EU on the AA and that it was going to join the emerging Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) instead. Armenia joined the EAEU in 2014.

Pillars of Armenian modern political identity

Armenia's relations with neighbours as well as internal politics are determined by a specific **political identity**, that is built on four (main) pillars:

1. **Armenia being the first Christian country in the world.** The country prides itself on being the very first nation in the world to accept Christianity as a state religion (AD 301). Armenia's political identity contains a Christian worldview, traditionalism and conservatism.
2. **Genocide of Armenians.** This historical grievance is similar to what the Holocaust is to Jewish people. The genocide determines relations with Armenia's neighbour – Turkey – which continues to deny that the killing of 1,5 million Armenians around the Ottoman Empire during the First World War was a deliberate tactic. Armenia's foreign policy has been up till today distinguishing

between the countries that recognise the genocide and those who do not.

3. **Diaspora.** According to estimates there are as many as 8 million Armenians living outside of Armenia, which itself has a population of less than 3 million. Many of them live in the neighbouring countries of Georgia, Turkey and Iran, but also across the Middle East, including Lebanon and Syria. Then there is the so-called “modern diaspora”, that was a result of the genocide as well as other events of the turbulent 20th century that dispersed Armenians around the world. There are significant Armenian diasporas in Russia, the US (especially in California), France and Cyprus. The Armenian diaspora has traditionally had an impact on Armenian politics. It also provides a remittance flow back to its ancestral homeland. According to the Central Bank of Armenia, for the year 2018 it equalled 12% of the country's GDP. The diaspora also finances a number of social, humanitarian and infrastructural projects in Armenia.
4. **The “Karabakh syndrome”.** Armenians call the Nagorno-Karabakh region “Artsakh” and consider it one of the cultural and historical centres of Armenia. Ethnically motivated clashes escalated into fully fledged war between Armenia and Azerbaijan even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The conflict ended by a mere cease-

fire agreement in 1994 and resulted in Armenians controlling the whole Nagorno-Karabakh region plus seven adjunct regions of Azerbaijan, that were not historically part of the “Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast” of the USSR. The predominantly Armenian “Republic of Artsakh” was declared on this territory. The conflict is still “hot” despite the cease-fire, and experiences occasional escalations of tension that claim the lives of soldiers and civilians on both sides of the “contact line”.

Previous administrations used the threat of renewing war with Azerbaijan as a leverage to keep a firmer grip over society via the security apparatus, armed forces and system of mandatory military service.

This “perpetual state of war” has impacted internal politics as well as foreign relations of Armenia. Significant resources are tied to its defence. Previous administrations used the threat of renewing war with Azerbaijan as a leverage to keep a firmer grip over society via the security apparatus, armed forces and system of mandatory military service. Armenian society feels strongly connected to Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, which is perceived as a “brotherly country”. Unrecognised, the

“Republic of Artsakh” is totally dependent on Armenia – economically, financially, in terms of trade, security and defence. There have also been strong personal and political connections between Armenia and Artsakh – several high-level politicians holding power in Armenia were born in Artsakh or directly involved in fighting there in the 1990s. This means that the “Karabakh issue” has always been present in the Armenian political discourse.

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The sustainable solution to the conflict should be found by the OSCE Minsk Group, which incorporates main stakeholders and is co-chaired by the US, France and Russia. The goal of the effort is to reach a diplomatic solution based on a compromise.

Neighbourly relations determined by the geopolitics

The most important foreign relation of modern Armenia is its “marriage of reason” with Russia. Though not an immediate neighbour, Russia has served to balance Turkey in Armenia. Tiny Armenia is no match for a huge Turkey, and that’s why it needs a big ally. Secondly,

the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is with Azerbaijan, a country that is three times bigger in terms of area, population and GDP, solidifying Armenia's need for a big protector. These were also reasons why Armenia joined the common defence organisation – the CSTO. Russia maintains a military presence in Armenia, in Gyumri, where around 5.000 personnel are stationed on a permanent basis. They assist with patrolling the border with Turkey, so that Armenia can dedicate all of its military forces to borders with Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Russia operates from the military airport in Yerevan – which is the base for Russian MiG-29s and helicopters. Russia also provides Armenia with weapons at discount prices or older pieces as free donations. This way Russia keeps Armenia on par with Azerbaijan.

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Russia is present in Armenia not only militarily. It controls basically all strategic sectors of Armenia's economy – either directly or through supportive oligarchs. Russia controls the energy sector – especially natural gas supplies and distribution; electricity; railroad transportation; telecommunication; and major banks. Military and economic dependency leads to political dependency of Armenia on

Russia. Russia can control the internal politics of Armenia also though sympathetic political parties and shape public opinion through related media outlets. This had been easier to achieve before the “Velvet revolution”, when pro-Russian parties were in power.

Relations of Armenia and Turkey are still complex, despite efforts in the past to restore normal relations (2009) which did not materialise as nationalists on both sides strongly opposed such a thaw. The result is that up until today the border between the two countries is closed and barbed-wired. Turkey closed the border in the 1990s in response to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in support of Azerbaijan which is ethnically and culturally connected to Turkey. The current administration in Ankara under the leadership President Erdogan offers no hopes for a positive change in relations. Armenia is indignantly following the recent intensification of relations between Russia and Turkey, especially in the defence and military area.

Armenia is in open military conflict with Azerbaijan, which means that both of the country's eastern as well as western borders are closed. The only option for Armenia to maintain international trade is through its northern neighbour Georgia or southern neighbour Iran, that was however until quite recently under sanctions and trading there for Armenia was limited. Therefore, Armenia is

forced to have good relations with Georgia, as it depends on the transportation routes through Georgia either to Russia or via seaports. This is yet another relation out of reason for Armenia. There are historic rivalries between Georgia and Armenia complicated also by the fact that a significant Armenian minority is living in southern regions of Georgia. Due to the language barrier, this minority is more loyal to Armenia than to their home country. Complaints about deficiencies in respecting minority rights for Armenians in Georgia are also complicating relations between the two neighbours. Also, pro-western and pro-European Georgia, 20% of whose territory is occupied by Russia, is very suspicious of its southern neighbour hosting a Russian base and soldiers on its territory.

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Armenia has good relations with Iran, which are again determined by the geopolitical reality – Iran is a traditional rival of Turkey in the region, militarily strong enough and has interests and ambitions that are greater than the regional perception. Iran is also a regional rival of Azerbaijan with which it has territorial disputes. Iran is also very suspicious of good security and military relations between Azerbaijan

and Israel. Additionally, Armenia depends on Iran for trade. Armenia buys limited amounts of natural gas from Iran, but the pipeline does not have the capacity it could have, or Armenia would want, as the connection is controlled by a Russian company that of course supports Armenia's dependency on Russian gas.

Armenia's relations with neighbours and regional powers illustrate the complexity of intersecting interests in the South Caucasus region, where conflicts among neighbours and the interference of regional powers endanger the fragile peace and stability.

This was not a colour revolution

After regaining independence, political and societal development in Armenia followed the patterns of other poor transitional countries of the former Soviet Union – with all their mistakes and maladies. This led to the development of a political system that was increasingly authoritative, oligarchic, with weak and fragmented opposition and pro-forma democratic elections marred with irregularities and frauds. The public sector was a spoil that was distributed to those loyal to the government and kept via rampant nepotism – obviously ineffective and corrupt.

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simmered among Armenians for quite some time. Due to the fragmentation and weak political opposition, the new opposition started to form among citizens in form of a civic opposition, movements and activists. Several policies of the (previous) government caused mass demonstrations and even riots on number of occasions.

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Armenia had a mixed presidential political system with a strong position of president, who was limited to the maximum of two 5-years long terms. In 2015, the government amended the constitution changing the political system to a parliamentary one with a strong position of prime minister. The amendments also passed through a referendum that was objected by the opposition as fraudulent.

When in spring 2018 the second term of Serzh Sargsyan as president ended, he announced his intention to lead the government as prime minister with strengthened competences thanks to the constitutional change. Moreover,

he previously promised not to continue in power after his presidential mandate was over. His act caused mass demonstrations starting in March 2018 that culminated at the end of April 2018 with Sargsyan stepping down, enabling the parliament to elect the new prime minister. After long and tense deliberations and obstructions, the parliament (note: most MPs still opposed popular protests) reluctantly elected the leader of the street protests Nikol Pashinyan to be the new prime minister of Armenia (May 8, 2018). This series of events was later coined as the “Velvet Revolution” by Pashinyan.

The new government embarked on introducing reforms and set transparency, as well as fighting against corruption, monopolies and oligarchs as their main priorities. A number of top officials of the previous regime ended up in pre-trial detention including former President Robert Kocharyan, who has had very close ties with Moscow. Other oligarchs were given an opportunity to buy themselves out from potential criminal proceedings by paying taxes or fines, that they were not paying in the past due to their exclusive relations with the previous government(s).

The “Velvet Revolution” also meant high hopes for common people that politics would change and “serve” the people instead of “governing”

them. The change brought a wave of optimism – a cautious increase in foreign investments and an influx of people from the diaspora re-settling in their ancestral homeland. The effectiveness of tax collection increased, which in turn meant a slight increase in the state budget. The “revolution” opened more opportunities for young educated people and women in politics. For example, the acting mayor of Etchmiadzin, the seat of the Armenian Church – the “Armenian Rome”, became a woman for the first time in history.

Despite significant changes in internal politics, the “Velvet Revolution” had a limited impact on the foreign policy of Armenia. Pashinyan and other opposition leaders were from the very beginning accenting the internal character of the protests in order not to unsettle Moscow and create the image of another anti-Russian “colour revolution” taking place in its “backyard”. It seems that it worked though – Russia showed restraint and did not interfere when the peaceful revolution was taking place in the streets of Armenian cities.

Russia certainly could have its doubts – Pashinyan got to the parliament in 2017 with his “YELK” coalition, one of whose main goals was for Armenia to leave the EAEU and to strengthen relations with the West. Pashinyan, aware of the geopolitical realities, was quick (on numerous

occasions) to assure Moscow that Russia is a strategic partner of Armenia and that he does not intend to change the course of Armenia’s foreign policy. He went to an even greater length and approved sending Armenian soldiers to Syria under Russian command, a move that was not very popular among Armenians.

At the same time, Armenia criticised a number of Russia’s steps that cannot be perceived as friendly. The most serious is Russia selling its modern weapons to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan pays the full price, and thanks to its natural resources they can afford it. Russia is also interested in selling its defence industry products. This however fuels a regional arms race and by providing its weapons, Russia is trying to impose itself over both sides of the conflict with the aim to maintain influence.

Russia is also increasingly disappointed with the outcomes of the “Velvet Revolution” and nervous about Pashinyan’s “Armenia First” policy. Red lines for Russia were the arrests of former President Kocharyan, sitting on the board of Gazprom’s Armenia branch and the sitting Secretary General of the CSTO, Armenia’s former Chief of Defence general Yuriy Khachaturov by the Armenian police. Russia pushed, foreign minister Lavrov publicly endorsed Kocharyan and he was released from jail, only to be arrested again later. Meanwhile,

pro-Russian media outlets and propaganda sites are spreading anti-Pashinyan messages and trying to plant seeds of discontent among government members.

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Putin fears the likes of Pashinyan, a leader of street protests that came to power and disposed of long-term autocrats that benefited from the oligarchic and corrupt system. It was even comic to see videos from the first meetings of the CSTO and the EAEU attended by Pashinyan – heads of partner states, all of them autocrats for life, trying to keep distance from Pashinyan as if he was a carrier of contagious disease.

A number of small steps were taken after the “Velvet Revolution” that intended to decrease tension on the contact line between Armenia and Azerbaijan. An emergency direct line was re-established between both militaries with the aim to prevent escalation. It seems that this works for the moment – there are less fatalities on the contact line since the summer of 2018. Political leaders with the assistance of the OSCE agreed on the strategy of “Preparing

[the] population for peace”. Up until very recently, harsh and warmongering rhetoric of political leaders on both sides resonated in societies, they adopted uncompromising positions and were pushing their governments to even stricter positions, which in turn made the peaceful solution of the “Karabakh conflict” based on a compromise less likely. Changing narratives and rhetoric is therefore crucial for a viable peaceful solution.

Conclusion

Armenia’s foreign policy is determined by the geopolitical realities and complexities of the South Caucasus region, where interests of big and regional powers intersect. Armenia’s manoeuvring space is limited by the “hot conflict” over Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan, “cold peace” with big neighbour Turkey and “marriage of reason” with “strategic ally” Russia.

The “Velvet Revolution” is a major political change in Armenia’s history and an attempt at democratisation in the post-Soviet Union space. Unlike “colour revolutions” in Georgia or Ukraine, the “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia was not anti-Russian. It has yet to be seen however, if democratic changes, transparency, the fight against corruption and the fight against the

oligarchic system can solidify on the home front, while at the same time Armenia remains part of the Russian sphere of influence and its autocratic Eurasian structures.

As for the internal impacts of the “Velvet Revolution” on Armenia’s political system, some positive developments are visible, there are high hopes from part of the population, but there are also limitations to those expectations. The biggest challenge for the government will be to overcome temptations of the great political power that was entrusted to it by the population in elections. The challenge will be not to repeat mistakes of the previous administration.

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