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The Great Expectations of the Armenian Revolution: Democracy v. Stability?

Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to explore and discuss one of the most remarkable developments in Armenia over the course of the past two years. Unlike many other incidents that shattered stability in the country following independence, the non-violent yet revolutionary events of April 2018 reverberated positively not only in Armenia, but far beyond its borders too.

One and a half years later, the peaceful transition of power in Armenia is still largely regarded as an undeniable achievement in democracy-building. In many ways, it did exceed the most optimistic expectations of domestic and international observers. However, deeply-rooted and systemic challenges in ensuring the country's security and resilience are mounting, and many remain unresolved despite the high expectations placed on the new authorities.

Given the rapid pace, complexity, and uncertainty of these developments, this contribution reviews the most relevant events that unfolded during and after the revolution, and the most likely further scenarios.

Mobilization and Non-Violence Beyond Expectation

The world applauded the Armenians for the non-violent transfer of power in April-May 2018, known as the “Velvet Revolution” or “the Revolution of Love and Solidarity”.¹ Without a single shot being fired, on 23 April 2018, former president-turned-prime minister Serzh Sargsyan handed the reins of power to Nikol Pashinyan after a decade in power. Pashinyan was a former journalist and political prisoner-turned-opposition MP, and an exceptionally charismatic and talented revolutionary leader. Who could have thought that a protest march by the politically marginal Pashinyan and a handful of protesters – triggered by Sargsyan's move to run for prime minister once his second presidential term expired² – would result in an almost total popular mobilization in

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the position of the European Union.

1 Cf. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Press release: Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivers speech at UN General Assembly, 26 September 2018, at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2018/09/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-speech/>.

2 Cf. Richard Giragossian, Armenia 2018: Political Transformation & Transition, A Summary Political Assessment, RSC Regional Studies Center, Yerevan, Armenia, 22 January 2018, at: https://regional-studies.org/images/pr/2018/january/22/RSC_Armenia_Political_Assessment_January_2018.pdf.

only two weeks, with the financial involvement of the Armenian diaspora around the world?

The international community was certainly taken by surprise; so were the old authorities and, most likely, Pashinyan and his closest support circles themselves. The Armenian revolution, in that sense, exceeded all expectations – both in terms of the scale of mobilization, the social composition, and the geography of the protest movement, which covered the whole country and involved many women and young people, and in terms of the response from the ruling elite, who chose not to resort to the use of force. Whether their restraint was due to the approaching Genocide Remembrance Day on 24 April, traditionally a day to mark national unification, their unwillingness to compromise relations with the West, which had given clear signals it would not tolerate the use of force,³ the lack of clear encouragement from the country's main strategic ally Russia,⁴ or the hope for maintaining power through other channels, there was no crackdown on the tens of thousands of protestors. Instead, Sargsyan peacefully resigned.

This puts the situation in Armenia in stark contrast to what was going on, for example, in Nicaragua at roughly the same time, where mass demonstrations led President Ortega to order the massacre of hundreds of peaceful protestors. The recent situation in Venezuela where President Nicolás Maduro's regime resorted to violence, and the situation in Sudan at the time of writing, where military forces cracked down on democratic protestors in Khartoum, killing scores of innocent people, also demonstrate Armenia's great achievement in not losing a single life during the revolutionary events of 2018.

The protestors behaved peacefully throughout the protest marches, turning them into near festivities, with some of the leaders of the movement claiming to have drawn inspiration from the theory and practice of non-violent civil disobedience as taught by Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. All of this in Armenia, which does have a history of forceful dispersal of rallies and suppression of opposition. The most tragic event of this nature, and the one Armenian society has not come to terms with, occurred on 1 March 2008, when ten people lost their lives as a result of a government crackdown amid street protests over the contested elections that brought Sargsyan to power the first time around. Pashinyan was a prominent opposition figure then, supporting Sargsyan's rival, Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrosyan. He was sentenced for inciting mass disorder and spent two years in prison. The violence of 1 March 2008 – extremely traumatic for a small and united Armenia – also had remarkable political ramifications, seen by many as setting the political

3 Statement by the Delegation of the European Union and EU Member State Embassies in Armenia on recent political developments in Armenia, Yerevan, 19 April 2018, at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/rwanda/43169/statement-delegation-european-union-and-eu-member-state-embassies-armenia-recent-political_en.

4 Cf. "Pochemu Moskva dolzhna vmeshivatsya?" ["Why Should Moscow Interfere?"], *Armenia Sputnik*, 23 April 2019, at: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/society/20180423/11635410/pochemu-moskva-dolzhna-vmeshivatsya-peskov-o-protstah-v-armenia.html>.

price for retaining or gaining power in the country. For years, this anticipated “price” was among the issues that derailed any serious attempt at mobilizing the public for change.

A Purely Armenian Revolution

Observers of other revolutions and power shifts in the post-Soviet space may also have expected a geopolitical twist to the Armenian revolution – after all, in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as in Moldova, it was all about the “integration vector”. Corruption and lack of economic progress were associated with maintaining close ties with Russia, whereas democratic reforms, greater freedoms and economic prosperity meant working together with the European Union (EU). There was no such divide in Armenia at all with no expression of geopolitical preferences and no hailing of foreign flags. People rallied under Armenian flags, defending a purely domestic agenda – they mobilized on an anti-corruption platform, expressing indignation with the situation in which the country’s wealth had been concentrated in the hands of a few privileged individuals closely linked to the ruling elite, with the rest of the population hardly making ends meet.⁵ “Democracy is a system of values for our society, internal belief, not geopolitical orientation”⁶ was the message Pashinyan sent repeatedly to Armenia’s international partners.

The absence of EU flags may be explained by the lack of a clear pro-EU discourse in the country. Such a discourse would represent an alternative to Armenia’s strategic alliance with Russia and its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This is particularly relevant in view of the fact that in 2013, Armenia unexpectedly and virtually at the last minute rejected the fully negotiated Association Agreement with the EU, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The leaders of the revolution consciously sought not to antagonize Russia in this context.

On the other hand, it was evident that Russia would not proactively support any sort of upheaval in Armenia. Contrary to widely held expectations, Russia also chose not to intervene with visible attempts to reverse the revolution, despite having a credible candidate in place. In spite of the general unease with the revolutionary changes, the recognition of Armenia’s inexorable dependence on Russia most likely contributed to this surprising “laissez-faire”. Russia chose not to alienate Armenia, which generally remains friendly compared to some other former USSR Republics, for example, despite periodic

5 Armenia was among the three poorest countries in Europe in 2018 according to GDP per capita; cf. Poorest Countries In Europa, Graphicmaps, at: <https://www.graphicmaps.com/poorest-countries-in-europe> (last updated on 10 October 2018). Armenia was also facing one of the highest brain drain rates among the former USSR Republics.

6 Democracy is value, not geopolitical orientation: Pashinyan tells Johannes Hahn, News.am, 29 January 2019, at: <https://news.am/eng/news/493341.html>.

outrages against the sales of arms to Azerbaijan or instances of violent behaviour by the Russian military stationed in Armenia. It was, therefore, in Russia's interest not to create a new hotspot in its neighbourhood and run the risk of losing control over its main ally in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, Moscow sent a clear message that it was inadmissible to escalate the situation at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and the line of contact with Nagorno-Karabakh during the days of internal instability in Yerevan.

Another assumption might be that, unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Armenia is a highly ethnically homogeneous society, consolidated around national values such as language and religion. Although Russian is widely spoken as a second language, there is only a very marginal Russian-speaking minority present in the country, constituting less than one per cent.⁷ Armenian society may be divided politically and socially, but not ethnically, which means there is a limited basis for propagandistic "kin" minority mobilization on Russia's part. These factors arguably contributed to the consolidation of the mass movement under patriotic pro-Armenian slogans and the absence of any sentiments of third-country affiliation.

The Unexpected Fruits of Democracy

Serzh Sargsyan's expectations with regard to the constitutional changes of 2015 did not seem to materialize. The sweeping reform transformed Armenia from a semi-presidential into a parliamentary republic and was widely believed to have been initiated to give him an opportunity to stay in power as prime minister beyond the decade of his presidential term.⁸ Even a public promise not to seek the post of prime minister did not entirely convince the Armenian population – the constitutional amendments were adopted in the national referendum of December 2015, but not without a significant number of electoral violations.⁹

In what may have been perceived as a desperate attempt to cling to power, Sargsyan broke on his promise and was elected by the Republican-dominated Parliament on 17 April 2018 amid public protests. This proved to be the final straw, triggering what became the Velvet Revolution. Within just a week, Sargsyan was forced to resign by the burgeoning movement led by Pashinyan.

7 According to the 2011 Armenian Census 23,484 people or 0.8 per cent of Armenia's citizens spoke Russian as their first language, 11,862 of the speakers were Armenians, 10,466 speakers were Russians, and the other 1,156 were of other ethnicities. Cf. Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, *The Results of the 2011 Population Census of the Republic of Armenia*, p. 595, at: <https://www.armstat.am/en/?nid=81&id=1512>.

8 Cf. Zia Weise, *Armenia's disputed move toward true democracy*, Politico, 4 June 2018, at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-true-democracy-disputed-move-eu-agreement-turkey/>.

9 Cf. OSCE/ODIHR, *Republic of Armenia, Constitutional Referendum, 6 December 2015*, OSCE/ODIHR Referendum Expert Team, Final Report, Warsaw, 5 February 2016, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/220656>.

In a system of nuanced control over political players and groups, and of tolerated harmless protests, it remains unknown how much the authorities knew about Pashinyan's plans and at what point the miscalculation brought them to the point of no return.

Only two weeks after Sargsyan's resignation, that same National Assembly elected Nikol Pashinyan as interim prime minister, under the same constitution (albeit in a second attempt, on 8 May 2018). From the legal point of view, everything was done democratically and in accordance with the amended constitution – the one crafted for Serzh Sargsyan. Such a democratic turnaround was clearly beyond the expectations of the Republican Party. This would probably not have happened, had Sargsyan not run for election himself, but left the role of prime minister to the then incumbent Moscow-connected Karen Karapetyan whom he had personally hand-picked, and who had a Karabakhi background. Relatively young, charismatic, experienced, and supported by the Kremlin, Karapetyan seemed popular and ideally positioned to continue the path of slow and largely imitational reforms that would help retain relative stability.

Furthermore, as a result of a transparent and democratic process, snap parliamentary elections were held on 9 December 2018. Pashinyan's My Step Alliance secured over 70 per cent of the vote, while the Republican Party (RPA) did not make it into parliament at all. Ironically, had they not blocked the amendments prepared by the new government's working group in order to make the electoral legislation more credible, transparent, and democratic, the threshold to enter parliament would have been lowered from five per cent to four per cent and the RPA would have been represented.¹⁰ However, they lost the opportunity for even marginal representation.

The fact that the outcome of the early elections reflects the will of the people is beyond doubt, confirmed by observers. According to the International Elections Observation Mission (IOEM), they "were held with respect for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust that needs to be preserved through further electoral reforms".¹¹ Overall, in stark contrast with all previous elections held in Armenia since independence, the 9 December early elections were characterized by a general absence of electoral malfeasance, good administration, and general adherence to procedures.¹² This marked a fundamental change in the electoral culture of Armenia and brought a breath of fresh air into the overall internal political context. Although the electoral

10 OSCE/ODIHR, Republic of Armenia, Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 December 2018, ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Final Report, Warsaw, 7 March 2019, p. 26, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/413555>.

11 International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Armenia – Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 December 2018. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, p. 1, available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/405890>. For the election day, the ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) was joined by delegations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the European Parliament to form the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM).

12 Cf. *ibid.*

legislation and practices still need to be revised and improved, the opportunity to cast votes freely, with no vote-buying or other kinds of pressure as in the past, was uplifting for Armenian citizens and inspired the international community.

The 132-member National Assembly significantly differs from the previous legislature in terms of political representation. With 76.5 per cent first-time MPs, it has only three party groups, with the largest My Step Alliance occupying 88 of the seats (two thirds of MPs). Prosperous Armenia won 26 seats (19.7 per cent) and Bright Armenia won 18 (13.6 per cent). 24 per cent of MPs are female. In line with the constitution, the four largest national minorities are represented in parliament with one seat each. The National Assembly formed eleven Standing Committees, eight of which are chaired by My Step Alliance MPs, two by Prosperous Armenia and one by Bright Armenia representatives. An unprecedented number of civil society representatives are now members of parliament.¹³

Prosperous Armenia, led by one of the wealthiest tycoons, was part of the previous ruling regime for almost a decade, but switched camps and supported Pashinyan at a crucial moment of his movement. Bright Armenia, once in an alliance with Pashinyan, however, did not stand by him at the onset of the revolution and bears the fruits of this decision with marginal representation in Parliament. Both opposition parties have carefully distanced themselves from the ousted authorities and claim allegiance to the revolution. In spite of this, the former ties may be easy to restore as soon as the popular support for Pashinyan declines. At the same time, the My Step Alliance in power is struggling to establish itself as the political party of the “new generation”. Speaking at the party congress on 23 June 2019, Nikol Pashinyan said the party did not espouse any of the traditional political ideologies but “has rejected ‘isms’ because hardened ideologies no longer exist in the contemporary world [...] In the political sense, we are not liberal, we are not centrist, we are not social democrat; we are a civil party. [...] What does this mean? [...] This means that we place ourselves beyond ideological standards and we are forming a new ideological plane which is based on four key pillars: statehood, citizenship, national identity and personality.”¹⁴

The process leading up to the snap elections and formation of the stable (rather than interim) new government and parliament can be characterized as rather successful, despite the attempts of parliament, dominated by the former ruling party, to sabotage the new authorities between May and December 2018. For example, on 2 October 2018 there was an attempt to sabotage the prospect

13 Cf. New Armenia’s Parliamentarians, EVN Report, 13 January 2019, at: <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/new-armenia-s-parliamentarians>.

14 Pashinyan Explains Party Ideology, The Armenian Mirror Spectator, 20 June 2019, at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2019/06/20/pashinyan-explains-party-ideology/>.

of snap elections, as the “old guard” mobilized resources to undermine Pashinyan – an attempt that was quickly neutralized.¹⁵

Democratic reforms planned by the new government are reflected in the five-year government programme adopted on 8 February 2019 as well as in the roadmap for the implementation of the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) adopted on 1 June 2019. CEPA, signed in November 2017, has been recognized by the new Armenian government as the blueprint for reform. While Armenia’s general geopolitical orientation has not changed due to the revolution, with Russia remaining the country’s main strategic ally, there is certainly a genuine openness to embracing European values and further diversifying foreign policy. Engagement with Europe has intensified beyond expectation, bearing in mind the disappointment of 2013.

Democracy-Building Challenges

However, the great expectations that the new authorities would achieve quick gains, especially in the fight against corruption and serving justice in the 1 March 2008 case mentioned above, did not materialize as quickly as planned. The immediate efforts to eradicate corruption were directed at high-profile individuals against whom criminal cases were initiated and whose illegally acquired assets were partially recovered and returned to the state budget, with varying success. The realization of the need to build a more institutionalized and systemic approach to this fight came later, and found expression in the new Anti-Corruption Strategy adopted towards the end of 2019 that envisaged a Corruption Prevention Commission and an Anti-Corruption Court. While the initial ad hoc approach scored the prime minister many points in terms of consolidating popular support, the systemic fight meant putting in place reinforced legislation and dedicated institutions aimed at tackling corruption in all fields, including the judiciary.

Investigation into the 1 March 2008 violence was regarded as a top priority by the new authorities. Shortly after they came to power, in the summer of 2018, an arrest warrant was issued against Armenia’s second president Robert Kocharyan, who was placed into pre-trial detention on charges of overthrowing the country’s constitutional order while exercising his role as head of state. It soon became obvious that the numerous legal, political, and emotional factors at play put the effectiveness of this measure and its timing into question. Thus, on 17 May 2019, Kocharyan was released under the guarantee of the

15 On 2 October 2018, the National Assembly, still dominated by the Republican Party, convened an extraordinary session and adopted a draft law, according to which a National Assembly session would be considered interrupted if external forces prevented the session from taking place. Prime Minister Pashinyan called on the people to gather in front of the parliament building, quickly summoning a few thousand protestors. The bill did not survive and ministers belonging to parties that voted in favour – Prosperous Armenia and ARF-D – were subsequently dismissed.

then incumbent “president” of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) Bako Sahakyan, and his predecessor Arkady Gukasyan. Kocharyan had been the leader of the NKR from 1994 to 1997, prior to becoming president of Armenia. The decision to release him infuriated Nikol Pashinyan, who called for a return to the revolutionary means of resistance and asked the people to block all court buildings in the country. This approach caused an outcry in the civil society and the international community, but it also revealed the inherent problems in the long-defunct, unreformed and untargeted judiciary, and the difficulties in addressing them.

The crisis finally led to the conceptualization of the long-overdue large-scale justice reform that involves checking the integrity of judges. However, it also revealed the limits of the room for manoeuvre in the existing constitution for pursuing certain honourable goals in the justice sector. Moreover, it allowed the opposition to consolidate around the figure of Kocharyan and criticize the prime minister for engaging in personal revenge (Kocharyan was re-arrested shortly after). The ensuing attempts to alter the composition of the Constitutional Court, proposing the resignation of the judges appointed under the old regime, raised questions with international organizations, and revealed some gaps in the government’s communication strategy. The deterioration of the government’s relations with the Nagorno-Karabakh elite, and of Armenia-Russia relations (Kocharyan being a friend of the Russian president) also followed. In addition, radical right-wing groups started raising their heads in attempts to undermine the authorities by playing on conservative, male chauvinistic and homophobic sentiments in society.

Nevertheless, in spite of a number of miscalculations and belated reactions, one and a half years after his accession to power, Nikol Pashinyan still enjoys broad, albeit declining, public support:¹⁶ People surround him wherever he goes, expressing respect and appreciation. However, the burden of problems inherited by the new authorities – including the challenges of good governance, economic underperformance, brain drain, external regional interests and, most importantly, the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh – pose serious questions as to the sustainability of the gains of the unique and impressive Armenian revolution and its impact on security and stability, both internal and external. Combined with exceptionally high expectations among citizens regarding improvements in their well-being, the new authorities are under extreme pressure to deliver on all fronts in a volatile situation that is far from stable.

16 Two major blows have hit Pashinyan. In the regions, his party lost local elections in Kapan on 23 September 2018, and later in Abovyan on 13 June 2019, where the Republican Party and the Prosperous Armenia Party retained their respective positions of power. However, Pashinyan declared this the triumph of democracy and did not call the results into question. A recent opinion poll by the Centre for Insights in Survey Research illustrates his public popularity further; cf. International Republican Institute (IRI), Center for Insights in Survey Research, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, July 23-August 15, 2018, p. 49, at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.10.9_armenia_poll_presentation.pdf.

Democracy v. Stability

The fear of “rocking the boat” in a country weakened by a protracted conflict was actively cultivated by the former authorities, who instilled the notion of an inverse relationship between democracy and stability, which has become a synonym for security. Success in building stability appeared to be undeniable, as deeply entrenched corruption had in a way consolidated the closely-knit Armenian society. At the same time, the pro-forma democracy and freedom of expression were retained, allowing occasional opportunities for “letting off steam”, thus preventing major outbursts of public indignation. Needless to say, the ruling party’s near total control over the judicial and the legislative branches of government, in addition to the executive, ensured an almost unquestionable obedience. In addition, widespread poverty meant that daily survival was the primary concern of the majority of the citizens; questioning authority played a secondary role. Widespread corruption and money laundering thrived against this background, and migration was seen as the first choice in escaping inequality and despair, as well as the obligatory military service in the circumstances of an unresolved conflict.

In fact, Serzh Sargsyan’s main argument for standing for election as prime minister following constitutional transition, and for breaking his earlier promise not to stand, was based on his long-term experience as chief negotiator with Azerbaijan, maintaining a security partnership with Russia and personal connections to Karabakh. It was argued that if he was no longer chief negotiator, war would be inevitable, as nobody could replace him.

The former authorities have also maintained close personal and, allegedly, business ties with Russia – the only hard security guarantor for the vulnerable Armenia. With a major military base in Gyumri, Russia exercises effective border control on the Armenia-Iran segment of the state border, has observation posts along the closed border with Turkey, exercises joint border control with Armenia at Zvartnots international airport, and has interests in major infrastructure and energy companies. The level of integration with Russia has increased since Armenia joined the EAEU.

However, along with providing security guarantees for Armenia, Russia has also been attempting to export its current political culture. There was an expectation that sacrificing democratic freedoms and human rights for the sake of stability would work in Armenia, and also cultivated perceptions of the necessity to make justified sacrifices in the face of imminent danger from Azerbaijan. However, the events of April-May 2018 proved that the Armenian people did not want the kind of stability offered to them – predictable poverty, inequality, and thriving corruption. The protesters were certainly aware of the possible security risks of the revolution, namely that Azerbaijan could have used the moment of political instability in Armenia to attack. However, even that did not stop them from rising up against the injustices of the existing system. As it turned out, for at least one year following the revolution, relative

stability was retained, and arguably even strengthened, if we consider the protracted period of calm on the line of contact between May 2018 and May 2019.

The April 2016 four-day war, when Azerbaijan attempted to impose a military solution upon the Karabakh issue, highlighted serious problems in the Armenian army, revealing its unpreparedness and resulting in many casualties (this is now being investigated by an ad hoc standing parliamentary committee to inquire into those events set up in 2019 – an unprecedented move in Armenia’s recent history). It also triggered a strong wave of suspicion and conspiracy in society regarding the substance of the confidential peace negotiations conducted by President Sargsyan personally. The negotiations represented “a flimsy foundation for a stable and lasting peace process”,¹⁷ both preceding and following the April 2016 war. Although for the ruling elite in Armenia, the war solidified the argument for the need for strong control in the name of preventing another attack, the credibility of the negotiators and security guarantee providers was damaged, with the negotiations seen as defeatist by certain segments of society.

These sentiments found their expression in the “hostage crisis” of summer 2016 that ensued following the April war, when a police compound was seized and several hostages were taken by a strongly anti-Russian, nationalistic and radical grouping named “Daredevils of Sasun” (*Sasna Tsrer*).¹⁸ The incident likely made many in Armenia’s powerful circles realize the fragility of the internal peace and showed that the iron-grip stability was not sustainable and could easily be shattered in the absence of democratic legitimacy. Paradoxically, while rejection of violence generally represents a commonly shared value in the Armenian society, the brewing potential for protest resulted in an outward expression of public sympathy to the armed men.

After the revolution, *Sasna Tsrer*, with many of its leaders remaining under trial but released from detention, created a political party in the run-up to the 9 December 2018 early elections, but did not pass the threshold. Its platform calling for the almost total criminalization of the former elite, further militarizing Armenia in preparation for war, and broad territorial claims did not resonate sufficiently in the context of the “revolution of love”. The illegitimacy of the former regime, however, was not called into question.

17 Hans-Joachim Schmidt, The Four-Day War Has Diminished the Chances of Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2016*, Baden-Baden. 2017, pp. 111-123, p. 122.

18 Armenia protesters, police clash over hostage crisis continues, *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2016, at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/armenia-protesters-police-clash-hostage-crisis-160721052049006.html>.

Democracy: A Security Guarantee or a Factor of Instability?

Whether a fragile democracy can survive and thrive in Armenia in a complex domestic, regional, and global context is a question that can only be answered with time.

The new authorities have a different approach to security. As Prime Minister Pashinyan recently articulated in his address to the European Parliament on 4 March 2019: “[...] democracy is not merely one of the viable options for us. Rather, it is a matter of security for us. We believe that for our people and our political culture it is true to claim that democracy provides for stronger and more efficient economic and political institutions, which constitute an important precondition for the development of [the] country.”¹⁹

Along with its vision of security and development through democracy, Armenia also reassured Russia they would plan no major shifts in foreign policy, meaning Armenia still considers Russia its main strategic partner and does not question its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the EAEU. This may seem like a contradiction, and has naturally caused mistrust in Russia as well as raised eyebrows among other partners who are sceptical about Armenia’s democratic aspirations being compatible with membership in the aforementioned blocs.

Despite Russia’s initial wait-and-see policy, and Pashinyan’s attempts to demonstrate harmonious relations with President Vladimir Putin, the first cracks became evident towards the summer of 2018. In July 2018, criminal charges were brought against CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov over the violent clashes that occurred on 1 March 2008 in the aftermath of contested presidential elections and resulted in ten deaths. The charges were brought through diplomatic channels without any prior warning, and were seen as a blow to the reputation of the Organization, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov making a statement to that effect²⁰ and finally resulted in sidelining Armenia (who wanted to appoint another Secretary General) and replacing Khachaturov with a Belarusian official. The Armenian side had a lot to explain to convince Moscow that the cases against Khachaturov, as well as that against Kocharyan, were a purely domestic Armenian matter and were under no circumstances intended to damage the bilateral relationship. The atmosphere remains awkward, with Russia showing signs of disapproval. In this context, some of the new authorities’ bold measures, including those seeking to ensure justice is done in the March 2008 case and to investigate corruption

19 The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Press Release: RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Visit to Brussels, 4-5 March 2019, at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/foreign-visits/item/2019/03/04/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-to-Brussels/>.

20 Russia Claims Political Motives In Armenian Charges Against Ex-Leaders, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 August 2018, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/lavrov-russia-concerned-armenian-arrest-former-pro-moscow-leaders-kocharian-khachaturov-pashinian/29402249.html>.

cases (including in a Russian-owned railway company), have not strengthened relations between Armenia and their main security partner.

It may be argued that what matters to the Kremlin is whether Armenia's democracy infringes upon Russia's vital strategic interests in the country and region, military and economic ones in particular. While those interests are safeguarded and Armenia's democracy is kept in check, the nature of the political regime is only of secondary relevance, but as soon as those interests come under attack, or the country attempts to enhance its sovereignty, shattering Russia's control, its attitude will inevitably change – and this is already becoming obvious. An indication of the change may be seen, for example, in the ten per cent increase in the gas price for Armenia as of 2019.

Democracy in the context of domestic reforms and economic prosperity is arguably a necessary condition to guarantee the security of Armenian society. However, in the unstable regional context and in the context of Armenia's dependency on Russia, it is so far not sufficient to achieve the desired level of security.

Democracy and the Expectation of Peace... or War?

Nikol Pashinyan called the Armenian revolution “a triumph of romanticism over pragmatism”.²¹ To what extent romanticism can ensure security, both internal and external, is a test now being conducted in Armenia in the context of the unresolved conflict. Against the backdrop of systemic and deeply-rooted problems, it has been a bold experiment to embark on profound internal changes such as eradicating systemic corruption, reforming the judiciary, fostering the economy, attracting investment, protecting human rights, and opening up to the world. The stakes and the risks are even higher when romanticism guides decisions on hard security, namely the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan have not changed much since the period when hostilities even affected the operations of the OSCE in Armenia. “Preparing populations for peace”²² has become a new buzz phrase on the surface of the Karabakh negotiations. However, the real state of affairs suggests that changing the political system and culture on one side may not be sufficient to achieve peace and stability. There is still a highly militarized environment in Armenia; Azerbaijan remains frustrated over Pashinyan's insistence on giving Karabakh an independent voice in the negotiations; there has been a lack of tangible steps towards land concessions by Armenia, which were expected by Azerbaijan; and there have been escalations of violence on the line of contact involving the deaths of soldiers on both sides. On the contrary, what the

21 “Armenian revolution was romanticism's triumph over pragmatism” – Pashinyan, *Armenpress*, 7 May 2019, at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/973968.html>.

22 Joshua Kucera, Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to “prepare populations for peace”, *Eurasianet*, 17 January 2019, at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-agree-to-prepare-populations-for-peace>.

new government sees as a move based on democratic logic – namely the involvement of Nagorno Karabakh in the negotiations – is perceived as a no-go by Azerbaijan, which does not recognize the de facto authorities there as legitimate interlocutors.

Armenia's prime minister has said he would like the ultimate solution to the conflict to be "acceptable to the people of Armenia, the people of Karabakh and the people of Azerbaijan"²³ and has called on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to make the same statement. However, there has not been similar language coming from Aliyev. In Armenia's view, this hampers negotiations, as it points to Azerbaijan's rather narrow interpretation of the Madrid Principles;²⁴ rather, this approach singles out the principle of territorial integrity as the top priority. In fact, Armenia seeks to come to a common interpretation of the Madrid Principles defining the negotiating space and the multitude of options that it could potentially offer – international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh or its full re-incorporation into Azerbaijan being only two of the possible outcomes, and the most radical ones.

Most of Armenia's neighbours (Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey) do not aspire to democratization, Georgia being the only exception. As far as Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned, the extent of the de facto entity's identification with the Armenian revolution remains vague, accompanied by emerging "us" and "them" divisions. In fact, as Aleksey Antimonov describes it, the political system in Nagorno-Karabakh constitutes a "militarised social democracy"²⁵ surviving thanks to Armenian subsidies. Officially, at least 4.5 per cent of Armenia's national budget is allocated to Nagorno-Karabakh, although the real amount is probably much higher.²⁶ This has not changed since the revolution, and is unlikely to change despite the obvious benefits of peace highlighted by research. Scholars have argued that:

In public finances, both Armenia and Azerbaijan would strongly benefit from large savings on conflict-related *fiscal expenditures*. Military expenditures could be reduced by 2% of annual GDP in both countries to a level comparable with other countries at peace. In addition, Armenia

23 The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Press release, 7 April 2019, at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2019/04/07/Erkrapah/>.

24 The "Basic" or "Madrid Principles" were first presented to the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers at the OSCE Madrid Ministerial Council in November 2007. In July 2009, within the framework of the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, the then leaders of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries, US President Barack Obama, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, highlighted the six most important of them in a joint statement, urging the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev, to "resolve the few differences remaining between them and finalize their agreement on these Basic Principles [...]" OSCE, Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries, L'Aquila, 10 July 2009, at: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>.

25 Aleksey Antimonov, Nagorno-Karabakh's militarised social democracy, *openDemocracy*, 5 February 2018, at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/nagorno-karabakh-s-militarised-social-democracy/>.

26 Cf. *ibid.*

could save annual expenditures of 0.9% of GDP for supporting the local economy in Nagorno-Karabakh and 0.1% of GDP in interest payments, thus saving 3% of GDP every year. Azerbaijan could eventually save expenditures for supporting displaced people amounting to 0.4% of annual GDP, thus reducing total expenditure by 2.4% of GDP yearly. Such large fiscal savings would enable both countries to sharply reduce budget deficits and at the same time substantially increase spending in socially useful areas such as education or health by eliminating present budgetary pressures.²⁷

The necessary conditions for such a scenario, however, are not currently in place. In spite of the occasional optimistic rhetoric reaching the media following some of the meetings between the leaders and foreign ministers, and the 2019 inter-governmental initiative of a journalistic exchange where groups of journalists paid reciprocal visits to both countries, some defence scholars are rather pessimistic in their assessment of progress towards any kind of compromise, let alone full political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.²⁸

Whether this can be preceded by preparing bottom-up reconciliation is another question. The Armenian position with regard to preparing its population for peace by proposing a public debate and mainstreaming it into policy-making points to the expectation of a similar parallel course of action in Azerbaijan, which is perceived to be a rather remote prospect.

As regards the normalization of relations with Turkey, progress has been slow in the past two years, and is not generally conditioned on democracy-building in Armenia.

How Stable is Armenia's Democracy?

The sustainability of the gains of the Armenian revolution depends on how successfully (and how soon) the authorities can meet the public's high expectations, and on how well they can preserve their domestic as well as international democratic legitimacy. The public expects, first and foremost, tangible results in terms of improved well-being and economic growth. This will only be achievable if deep structural reforms cutting across all policy spheres are pushed through. Such reforms are complex and time-consuming, requiring a great deal of political will on the part of the government and a lot of patience on the part of the citizens. As for preserving democratic legitimacy, this is of

27 David Saha/Ricardo Giucci/Matthias Lücke/Robert Kirchner/Veronika Movchan/Georg Zachmann, *The economic effect of a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on Armenia and Azerbaijan*, Berlin 2018, p. 2 at: https://berlin-economics.com/the_economic_effect_of_a_resolution_of_the_nagorno-karabakh_conflict/.

28 Cf. Leonid Nersisyan, *Can the South Caucasus Conflicts Escalate into a Regional War?* RIAC, 25 June 2019, at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/can-the-south-caucasus-conflicts-escalate-into-a-regional-war/>.

utmost importance for securing the support of many of Armenia's international partners and donors. However, a more difficult task is bringing about a change in mentality among the public at large, instilling democratic values into the hearts and minds of the people, and building a society that would embrace freedom, tolerance, and non-discrimination and a state with viable institutions that could sustain changes of leadership and government.

The successful scenario for Armenia would, thus, consist in thoroughly reforming the whole system of governance inherited from the past without hesitation – the system characterized by corruption, self-enrichment of public figures, a lack of distinction between business and politics, nepotism and monopolization, impunity, and the impoverishment of a large proportion of the population – in essence, a “captured state”. The strong desire to do away with this has been a declared priority of the government from the very start – and the key mobilizing factor behind the mass protest movement. There is still public support for Pashinyan, while the perceived improvements in people's daily lives owe more to psychological rather than economic factors. Nevertheless, there is the political will to continue with reforms, to deepen engagement with the European Union under CEPA, to diligently implement the CEPA Roadmap, and to make good use of international donors' support to the reform process, including the highly sensitive security sector reform. Following through on his promises with no deviations from this course of action and without giving in to the temptation to draw out some reforms for the sake of preserving public support, is the only way forward. Achieving this, however, would require a delicate balancing act with Russia and avoiding giving the opponents of liberalism and democracy reasons for criticizing and undermining those in power. Grounds for criticism should also be avoided when it comes to staying true to the proclaimed democratic principles in the conflict with the Constitutional Court, being careful not to abuse the overwhelming political advantages, refraining from actions that may raise eyebrows in international organizations, demonstrating professionalism and communicating it strategically.

Any other course of action would result in backsliding on democracy, losing international legitimacy and falling out of favour both domestically and internationally. This would stem from the failure of the reform process, public discontent with the lack of visible improvements, signs of falling into the trap of either favouritism or politization of the various branches of power, political persecution or silencing of the opponents, losing face in the eyes of the international community, namely the Council of Europe, the EU, and others, disagreements within the ruling alliance and its eventual split, and the formation of a stronger democratic opposition, led by the Bright Armenia party, for example. This would still not present a threat to the democratic order of Armenia as such, but could potentially give rise to alternative opposition forces that could challenge the My Step Alliance and eventually take over.

Gloomier scenarios cannot be ruled out, either. The currently marginal nationalist conservative forces could potentially strengthen their case and force the current prime minister out of power; however, something very grave needs to occur in order for that to happen, such as severe and illegitimate repression of their leaders, and public discontent with them. As the first eighteen months of Pashinyan's rule have shown, the methods used by the radical right in Armenia (open harassment and even physical violence against LGBTI people, widespread hate speech, spreading fake news and disinformation) largely lack real influence on the political process. However, should such forces receive outside support and funding, combined with other aforementioned factors, the situation may change.

As regards the Republican Party returning to power and challenging the democratic order in the country, this prospect cannot be completely ruled out either, but remains unlikely as their opportunities for summoning the necessary public support are almost non-existent, in spite of their business connections and lingering influence on the media.

Armenian democracy could potentially be challenged from outside, or put under strain should the regional situation deteriorate. Whether a democratic society can sustain a high degree of militarization remains an open question. At the moment, in spite of the numerous internal and external challenges, Armenia, under the leadership of its prime minister, appears to be doing its best in undergoing the painful process of democratic transition – a process that seems to have become irreversible.