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What Georgians think about the Armenian Revolution

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Abstract

Armenia’s “velvet revolution” will hardly have any direct impact on Georgia or on the state of Georgian–Armenian relations. However, the events that unfolded in their neighboring country fascinated and amazed the Georgians, even though they did not yet understand the significance of the events. The two countries share important similarities, and both use the other as a point of reference. Many Georgians compared the unfolding events in Armenia with their own “Rose Revolution” in 2003, as well as the two Ukrainian revolutions—the “Orange” and Euromaidan, in 2004 and 2014, respectively. Those revolutions mark critical points in the histories of these countries, albeit in different respects. How can Armenia change, and if it does, how will Georgians view those changes? I will discuss those questions from two perspectives: that of regional balance of power and that of the development of democratic institutions.

“What’s the Point of a Revolution if the Geopolitical Orientation Doesn’t Change?”

Georgians instinctually examine the unfolding events in their region through a geopolitical lens. Armenia is a pro-Russian country, and it is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This contrasts with Georgia, which aspires to EU and NATO membership. When Georgians began to discuss Armenian events, the first question was: Will the Armenian Revolution change the country’s external orientation? Aren’t true democratic revolutionaries supposed to be pro-Western? If not, what is the point of replacing Serzh Sargsyan with someone else?

It took time to eliminate that misunderstanding. Indeed, the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine was trig-

gered by opposition to Russian domination, but not all similar events are about geopolitics. Georgia’s Rose Revolution was not about foreign policy, although it propelled a group of strongly pro-Western reformers to power. Their predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was pro-Western as well; indeed, he was the man who made a formal bid for Georgia to join NATO. (Peuch 2002)

Geopolitical alignments are rooted in fundamental choices made by societies, and such alignments tend to survive even the most dramatic political changes. The Georgians and Armenians made such fateful choices in the twilight of the Soviet Union when broad protest movements in both countries picked quite different priorities. Georgians invested everything into the idea of independence, which made Russia their adversary and made the West an imagined or real ally. This

situation remains at present. In contrast, Armenia mobilized around an irredentist agenda of unification with Nagorny Karabakh, which made “the Turks” (implying Azerbaijan as well as Turkey) its arch-enemy and Russia—its chief ally (even if not always reliable). Guarding the results of the victory in the Karabakh war became the chief objective of the Armenian state, and it still is, but there is a price to pay. Many Armenians would prefer their country form an alliance with the European rather than Eurasian Union, and Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the Armenian Revolution and the new interim Prime Minister, is likely one of them. Because such an alliance would be detrimental to Karabakh, it cannot even be discussed.

This does not mean that relations between Georgia and Armenia must be poor. After becoming the prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan said that “inter-state relations between the two countries must not be founded on geopolitical factors or influence”. (JAM news 2018) This displays how Georgian–Armenian relations have developed since independence. Both countries understood that they need each other regardless of their relations with larger powers.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Armenian Revolution has no foreign political dimension. The competition between Russia and the West is central for regional politics of the South Caucasus. It is not only about countries’ involvement with military and economic blocs, it is also—if not primarily—about the clash between values, norms, and models of development; it is about soft power as well as hard power.

From this perspective, the Armenian revolution is a grave defeat for Russia. While the latter’s political leadership remained nonchalant, as though nothing of import occurred, (see the contribution by Pavel Baev in this issue) the Russian commentariat does not hide its anger and frustration. (Shevchenko 2018, Leontyev 2018, Solovyov 2018)

Georgia’s Rose Revolution was not intended to be anti-Russian, but it profoundly changed the country in ways that brought it closer to the West. Mikheil Saakashvili’s government failed to turn Georgia into a European-style liberal democracy, partly because this was not its real priority and because such democracies cannot be created with a top-down approach. However, it turned a failing state into a fairly efficacious one, replaced rampant corruption with a government that was amazingly clean by regional standards, strengthened meritocracy at the expense of clientelism, and tried to embed an inclusive concept of citizenship. The very fact of the Rose Revolution and subsequent reforms pushed the West to take Georgia’s claims to be part of the Western world more seriously, even if fundamental reluctance persists. Geor-

gia’s turn might have influenced the EU’s reversal of its earlier decision not to include the South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy, which was created in 2003, but the South Caucasus was added in 2004. Later, in its Bucharest summit in 2008, NATO promised eventual membership to Georgia, despite deep divisions within the alliance on when (if ever) and how this promise may be fulfilled. In 2009, following the 2008 Georgian–Russian war, the EU created a new European Partnership instrument which made it possible for Georgia to sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

Russian leadership considers the “color revolutions” as the most deadly weapon the West can wield against it. Its allegations that such upheavals are financed and masterminded by the West are, of course, absurd, though it is true that the very spirit of such revolutions undermines Russian influence in these countries. It was wise of the Russian leadership not to equate the Armenian revolution with Ukraine’s Euromaidan, and it is clear that the Russian grip on Armenia may be strong enough for it to continue wielding strong influence over the country. However, considering the precedent of a Russian ally’s government departing simply because people in the street demanded it may be very dangerous. In fact, it may have a demonstration effect for the Russian people as well: why not try something similar in their own country. As a result of the Armenian Revolution, the balance of soft power in the region shifted away from Russia. After this, a lot depends on the final outcome of the revolution: While it will certainly replace the power elite, we do not yet know whether it will also change the model of development and fundamentally transform Armenia’s institutions.

If it does, the change will also be meaningful for Georgia. While the latter has never been a full democracy,¹ it has been considered a stable regional leader of democratic freedoms. Moreover, during the last decade, all of Georgia’s neighbors tended toward increased autocracy. This implied that Western governments exerted less pressure on it for violating democratic norms, as it is difficult to be tough on the regional beacon of democracy. However, being surrounded by autocratic regimes does not bode well for the prospects of genuine democracy in Georgia. If the velvet revolution succeeds in making Armenia’s political regime truly democratic, Georgia may lose its position as the regional leader of

1 In Freedom House ratings of the last twenty years, Georgia has routinely scored between 3 and 4 points out of 7—this makes it a “partly free country”, or a hybrid regime which is relatively close to a democracy (the score of 2.5 would make Georgia one). Armenia usually scored between 4.5 and 5—a hybrid country, but closer to being an autocracy. See *Freedom in the World* ratings on freedomhouse.org.

democratic freedom, but it may also receive a new stimulus to become a freer country.

Revolution and Democratic Legitimacy

However, do “color” or “velvet” revolutions actually make countries more democratic? The record of such is mixed. First, they occur in so-called “hybrid” regimes rather than outright dictatorships; such regimes allow for open political contestation, and their claim to being democracies is not purely formal. However, there is no level playing field, and incumbents manipulate available resources to skew results in their favor. There are structural reasons for countries having such regimes, and democratic openings such as “velvet revolutions”, while exciting, do not always help.

Distrust of electoral institutions is endemic in such countries. This distrust tends to persist when new revolutionary leaders organize elections themselves. How do we know they are fair? Verdicts of foreign or domestic observers are often inconclusive. If people are not used to trusting electoral procedures, they will always be prone to question the results. Hence a fundamental question emerges now and again: in a democracy, what is an authentic representation of the “will of the people”—elections, or a huge rally in the streets?

Democratic theory, as well as the practice of established democracies, suggests an unequivocal answer: street rallies have their function, but the final verdict should come through elections. This does not occur in countries such as Georgia or Armenia. Instead, “direct democracy”—defined as people expressing their will taking the process to the street—claims moral superiority over an electoral process that is presumed corrupt and unfair. However, this attitude may eventually work against the new revolutionary regime as well.

The success of the 2003 ‘Rose Revolution’ made it a model for the opposition of Saakashvili’s government, and their strategy was to emulate the Rose Revolution,

not to contest government through elections. They failed, but the political process was far from healthy. Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire turned politician, changed that by bringing his Georgian Dream party to an electoral victory in October 2012. Has this precedent created a new normal in Georgia? Not everyone is convinced. Arguably, Ivanishvili’s enormous personal wealth, by Georgian standards, makes him an exceptional case. The 2016 parliamentary elections increased Ivanishvili’s “Georgian Dream” party to more than 75 percent majority in Parliament, and he consolidated his control over all branches of power. The idea that elections are irrelevant is gaining traction in parts of Georgia because no one can match Ivanishvili’s resources. It was because of this issue that the United National Movement (UNM), the chief opposition party, split in January 2017: loyalists of Mikheil Saakashvili, former president and now émigré opposition leader, believe that they should prepare for another (hopefully “velvet”) revolution; those who still believe in elections, broke away and created a new party, European Georgia. Armenia’s example may be used by Saakashvili and his followers to prove their point that change will come through people rallying in the streets, not elections. At the moment, there is no visible sign that Georgian people are in the mood to change the government through street protests,² but the Armenian revolution may influence the strategy of the Georgian opposition.

How to break the vicious cycle? Will Nikol Pashinyan’s new government succeed in persuading Armenians that they should rely on ballot box from now on when they decide to change their government? Or will the success of the 2018 velvet revolution legitimize efforts of future opposition movements to force the next government to capitulate to the people in the streets? This has been a truly important question for the Georgian democracy, and it will be one for Armenia as well.

About the Author

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² Protests against closure of two Georgian nightclubs in the context of the government’s anti-narcotics crusade on May 12 and 13 as well even larger rallies caused by perceived injustice in the law enforcement system in early June demonstrated that Georgians are losing patience with the Georgian Dream government; but attempts of the UNM to politicize the movement by raising the demand for early elections failed.

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Political Changes in Armenia: a Litmus Test for the European Union

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Abstract

Although they were essentially driven by domestic factors, the political events that unfolded in Armenia in April–May 2018 bear strong implications for external actors, particularly for the European Union (EU). This is because the EU regards itself as a promoter of human rights, democracy and the rule of law worldwide, especially in its neighbourhood. As part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004, the partner countries’ effective commitment to ‘shared values’ (i.e., democracy, human rights and the rule of law) is a prerequisite to closer relations with the EU. Therefore, whether and how the European Union can diffuse its democratic values are crucial questions to gauge its influence in its vicinity.

Introduction

This article argues that Armenia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’ represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the EU. In essence, while it is strongly backed by a broad constituency deeply dissatisfied with the incumbent elite and political regime, the change of leadership in Armenia opens an era of uncertainty, both domestically and regionally. Domestically, the new Prime Minister faces both strong pressure and potentially major obstructions to come to terms with the ‘old’ system of governance and deliver on reforms (Giragosian in *World Politics Review*, 2018). Regionally, political upheavals in Armenia (and the uncertainty associated with them) may heighten the tensions with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (Vartanyan, 2018), among other tensions, by stiffening Armenia’s position (Abramyan, 2018). As a multi-layer system of governance whose foreign policy involves multiple players, the EU is not well equipped to react promptly or decisively to unexpected and/or large-scale changes, even when such changes are framed as aspirations to the values supported by the EU. This was made abundantly clear on a number of occasions, including in the EU’s own neighbourhood with the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and the 2013–14 crisis in Ukraine (Delcour and Wolczuk,

2015a). Nevertheless, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Armenia has also emerged as an opportunity for the EU (in line with the conclusions of the 2015 ENP review) to tailor its policy to the aspirations expressed by Armenian society and accompany home-grown reforms. In fact, it is also a chance for the EU to make up for its past shortcomings in supporting domestic change in Armenia.

The EU’s Policy in Armenia: a Low Prioritisation of Political Reforms

Over the past decade, the EU’s engagement in favour of Armenia’s democratisation has indeed been inconspicuous. It has mainly taken the form of declarations and assistance and has thus lacked the EU’s key leverage in terms of support for democratisation—political conditionality. For instance, the EU criticised the use of violence by the Armenian authorities in response to demonstrations, especially in the wake of the 2008 presidential election. Additionally, the EU has consistently allocated part of its assistance to support human rights and the rule of law (for instance, by providing aid for the development of civil society and the reform of the judiciary). However, the EU did not make political change a precondition for closer ties with Armenia,