

## The anatomy of Russia's grip on Armenia: bound to persist?

Aram TERZYAN\*

### Abstract

*The 2018 “Velvet revolution” in Armenia has engendered a bunch of unanswered questions regarding both its domestic as well as foreign policy implications. Given the newly-elected prime minister’s critical stances on Armenia’s plight in the Russia-led unions, it is easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes. This study analyses the anatomy of Russia’s powerful grip on Armenia, with a focus on country’s huge economic dependence on Russia, the “frozen” Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as Kremlin’s traditional special ties with Armenian incumbents. Even though a breakthrough on reducing the enormous asymmetry in Armenian-Russian relations is unlikely anytime soon, owing to its vast legitimacy the new Armenian government may well reinforce its agency. That said, in theory it has an opportunity to cut back the heavy reliance on Kremlin’s overwhelming political and economic support and somewhat rectify its compliant foreign policy behavior. Yet, further research is essential for in-depth analysis of ruling elite’s interactions with Kremlin.*

**Keywords:** Armenian-Russian relations, Armenian “Velvet Revolution”, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, authoritarianism promotion

### Introduction

The 2018 “Velvet revolution” in Armenia has engendered a bunch of unanswered questions regarding both its domestic as well as foreign policy implications. Given the newly-elected prime minister Nikol Pashinyan’s critical stances on Armenia’s plight in Russia-led unions, it is easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes. Notably, in the fall of 2017 his “Yelk” parliamentary faction submitted a bill proposing Armenia’s withdrawal from the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – framed as a dormant union detrimental to country’s interests (Azatutyun, 2017).

Yet as a prime-minister Pashinyan denied the possibility of a secession from the EAEU and confirmed the indispensability of Armenian-Russian strategic partnership. Essentially, it is easy to

---

\* Aram TERZYAN holds a Ph.D in Political Science from Yerevan State University. He is currently a visiting postdoctoral researcher at *Malmö* University, e-mail: aramterzyan@gmail.com.

fall prey to structural reductionism and contend that irrespective of ruling elites' nature, Armenia is immensely bound by constraints of vast political and economic dependence on Russia. Meanwhile, a more nuanced analysis of the anatomy of Russia's grip on Armenia helps evaluate the political feasibility of diminishing country's heavy dependence on Russia. There has been a tendency in the existing literature to regard Armenia's geographic location and material weakness as instrumental in inviting Russian coercive policies (Babayan, 2015; Ter-Matevosyan *et al.*, 2017). This makes Armenia's "Russia-first" foreign policy hardly surprising and, perhaps, not even worth studying since its actions all follow system-level theoretical expectations. Yet this study seeks to balance taken-for-granted assumptions of structural inevitability with agency-level factors in determining Armenia's foreign policy making.

Therefore, along with core structural constraints, most notably the "frozen" Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia's immense economic dependence on Russia, this study delves into individual-level factors, such as the former Armenian Presidents' preferences and choices behind the compliant behaviour towards Russia. This in turn, prompts a focus on Russia's authoritarianism promotion as a crucial tool for producing autocracies in CIS countries and absorbing them into its ranks (Ambrosio, 2016; Secrieru, 2006). Meanwhile, the frameworks 'authoritarian learning' and prospect theory seem amenable to accounting for Armenian Presidents' compliant behaviours *vis-à-vis* Russia. This specifically applies to the second President Robert Kocharyan as the core 'architect' of the path that led to Armenia's economic and political absorption by Russia.

The authoritarian learning literature is concerned with learning from both internal and external experience. In the analysis of the post-Soviet region, the literature has chiefly focused on the fostering and promotion by Russia of authoritarianism in other states (Ambrosio, 2009; Vanderhill, 2013). While authoritarian learning literature has not touched on individual learning, prospect theory puts attention on how decisionmakers formulate choices by using past reference points (Hall, 2017, p. 163). Each individual weighs up gains and losses of a possible decision. Presumably, individuals with pronounced power motivation are likely to make decisions, including foreign policy ones, that would be conducive to maintaining their power (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, p. 155). Thus, I assume that along with above-mentioned constraints, the lessons Kocharyan learned from the steady survival of Kremlin-sponsored regimes, have influenced the strategic choice of the Russia-led path.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly discuss Putin-led Russia's reinforced foreign policy towards the CIS countries that led to Armenia's economic absorption. This section focuses on Russia's economic and energy grip on Armenia. Subsequently, I delve into the "frozen" Nagorno Karabakh conflict, that has been critical to Armenia's compliance with Kremlin-led rules. In the next sections I discuss the intentional dimension of Armenian policy makers' choice of the Russia-led

trajectory within the frameworks of authoritarian learning and authoritarianism promotion. The conclusion briefly discusses the main findings.

### **1. The path to tightening Russia's economic grip on Armenia**

The shift in the Russian leadership's foreign policy thinking from 'liberal ideas' to geopolitical and particularly pragmatic geoeconomic realism in the early stage of Putin's presidency (Thorun, 2009, p. 28) significantly determined policy priorities towards the newly independent CIS states. The ambition to restore Russia's 'greatness' and in particular to consolidate control in its traditional 'sphere of influence' prompted Putin to renew and promote the so-called 'CIS project'. It came down to tightening the Russian grip in its backyard, aimed at shielding it from 'unwanted intrusions' and suppressing the CIS states' pro-Western foreign policy pursuits (Skak, 2011).

To this purpose, the Russian leadership emphasized the necessity of expanding Russian capital, strengthening ties with political leaders, as well as retaining and reinforcing its military presence in CIS countries. Putin threw his weight behind the takeover and monopolization of strategic economic and energy infrastructures in the CIS countries as a powerful tool for influencing their behaviour and punishing 'disobedient' political leaders (Secrieru, 2006). Essentially, by offering huge militarisation-oriented support to power-hungry leaders, Kremlin sought to resonate with their pursuit of building up security forces and pro-regime groups against unwanted political and social attacks. In effect, the promotion of authoritarianism in CIS countries, with the goal of producing autocracies and absorbing them into its ranks, has been placed at the heart of Russia's renewed post-Soviet policy. Even though it is hard to assess the extent to which the rise of authoritarianism in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan has been correlated with the Russian mechanisms of its diffusion (Brownlee, 2017, p. 1335), the fact that both countries eventually signed up to the Russia-led trajectories suggests that Putin's 'packages' considerably appealed to Armenian and Kyrgyz leaderships.

The renewed 'CIS project' worked out particularly well in Armenia where, unlike neighbouring Georgia, it produced significant outputs over a relatively short period of time. More precisely, Armenian and Russian Presidents came up with the so called 'mutually beneficial' 'assets-for-debt' swap that would gradually but immensely step up Russian influence in the Armenian economy since the fall of 2001 (Eurasianet, 2002). The recipe is simple: in exchange for a write-off of its around \$100 million debt incurred since 1991, Armenia agreed to transfer strategic state-owned assets to Russia, including six hydroelectric power plants (Eurasianet, 2003). Moreover, in 2003, Armenia ratified an agreement that allowed Russian RAO Unified Energy Systems (UES) to take over the financial control of the Medzamor nuclear power plant, accounting for about 40 percent of Armenian

electricity production (Azatutyun, 2003). Overall, Russia took over around 90 percent of Armenia's power generating capacities. Besides, within the 'assets-for-debt' swap arrangements, Kocharyan's government handed over Armenia's largest cement factory to the Russian ITERA gas exporter in payment for its \$10 million debt for past gas deliveries (Eurasianet, 2003).

It is noteworthy that both Georgia and Ukraine similarly had huge debts to Russia, yet Armenia was the only one to make substantial concessions for its write-off. Indeed, the tightening economic grip on Armenia gave Russia political leverage to influence the country's behaviour. In October 2002, Armenia, along with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed the founding documents of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), thus confirming the strategic choice of the Russia-led trajectory. The Armenian-Russian military cooperation significantly intensified in the fall of 2003. On the eve of the Georgian 'Rose' revolution, Armenia signed a series of military agreements with Russia (Secieru, 2006).

Over time Russia has significantly tightened its economic grip on Armenia. As a single country, Russia is the main external trade partner of Armenia, being the destination for 20 per cent of Armenian exports and source of 70 per cent of remittances (Worldbank, 2015). Russia also maintains lead in the realm of foreign investments in Armenia. According to official information, there are about 1,400 enterprises with Russian capital, which is over one fourth of all economic entities with involvement of foreign capital (Sargsyan, 2017). Last but not least, Russia is home to more than 2.5 million Armenian migrants, who would be subject to harsh mistreatment in case of Armenia's 'non-Russian' foreign policy options. This assumption is based on the Russian authorities' massive crackdown on the Georgian population in Russia, following Tbilisi's determination to sign up to the Association Agreement with the EU (Emerson and Kostanyan, 2013). It is perhaps for this reason that the President of the Union of Armenians in Russia Ara Abrahamyan has warmly welcome Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, focusing specifically on its positive implications or at worst – the possibility to avoid repercussions for Armenian community in Russia (Panorama, 2013).

It is worth noting that, prior to Armenia's move towards the EAEU, Russia played its energy card by increasing gas prices for Armenia by 50 percent in April 2013, thus alarming possible economic repercussions of Armenia's European aspirations. Ironically, gas price was reduced as Armenia decided to sign up to the EAEU. Armenia's energy minister, Armen Movisisyan stated outright that the Eurasian choice shields Armenia from gas price hikes (Asbarez, 2013). Remarkably, there has been a tendency in President Sargsyan's discourse to emphasize the hypothetical economic and political hardships that Armenia would suffer in case of deviating from strategic partnership with Russia. In legitimizing Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, Sargsyan used the strategy of a 'hypothetical future' (Terzyan, 2017, p. 191). More specifically, given Armenia's huge economic and

energy dependence on Russia, he particularly noted that the choice of the EAEU would shield Armenia from unwelcome surprises and economic repercussions: “our choice is not civilizational. It corresponds to the economic interests of our nation. We cannot sign the Free trade agreement [DCFTA] and increase gas price and electricity fee three times?.” (Quoted from Ter-Matevosyan *et al.*, 2017, p. 350).

It follows that Russia possesses a bunch of economic and political tools for further tightening its grip on Armenia and influencing its policy preferences.

Well acknowledging the-state-of-the-art, the newly-elected prime-minister Nikol Pashinyan would be wary of questioning outright “Russia-first” approach. Rather, Pashinyan has emphasized the necessity of forging closer economic and political ties.

As stated the Armenian prime-minster in the first meeting with the Russian President:

We have things to discuss, but there are also things that do not need any discussion. That is the strategic relationship of allies between Armenia and Russia ... I can assure you that in Armenia there is a consensus and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenian-Russian relations (Reuters, 2018).

Nevertheless, as the last section of this article suggests, if the newly-formed ruling elite would have an opportunity to somewhat reinforce its agency if it reviewed the practice of heavy reliance on Russia’s political and economic support.

## **2. Nagorno Karabakh conflict: Armenia’s raw nerve or Russia’s powerful leverage?**

Nagorno Karabakh can be fairly framed as Armenia’s ‘raw nerve’, say the central issue on its foreign and security policy agenda.

In essence, Armenia’s strive for building resilience against its fiercest foe – energy rich Azerbaijan, as well as the latter’s strategic ally Turkey has been the core rationale behind Armenian-Russian increasingly intensifying military and political partnership. In 1997, Armenia and Russia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Security with ‘substantial military cooperative contents’(Nygren, 2007, p.114) Moreover, in 2000, Armenia allowed Russian troops to stay in Armenia until 2025, while Armenia’s membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union has confirmed country’s strategic choice of the Russia-led political and economic paths.

Meanwhile, Russia has essentially treated the “frozen” Nagorno-Karabkh conflict as a powerful tool for tightening its grip on Armenia. The formula is simple – Russia would help Armenia enhance

its military and security capabilities in exchange for its loyalty and compliance with Kremlin-led rules.

Interestingly, well acknowledging mounting challenges stemming from the “frozen” conflict, the first Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan consistently cautioned against its repercussions for Armenia's independent and democratic development.

Ter-Petrosyan's discourse suggests that he viewed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict self-destructive and that they would push Armenia into the Russian arms (Ter-Petrosyan, 2006, p.634). In the early stages of his political career, Ter-Petrosyan had espoused an overly critical stance on Russia. He regarded the reliance on Russia as delusional and self-destructive, while the Russian imperial policy was conceived as the most acute obstruction to Armenia's independent and democratic development (Ter Petrosyan, 2006, p. 34). Even though the anti-Russian rhetoric steadily crumbled in the wake of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalation, Ter-Petrosyan did not tend to treat Russia as an indispensable ally and prioritized a non-Russian foreign policy agenda. There was marked pessimism about the feasibility of a symmetric Armenian-Russian partnership. Rather consistent with its imperial traditions, Russia would pursue to absorb Armenia into its ranks. No wonder Ter-Petrosyan invariably stressed that as long as Russia was chiefly preoccupied with domestic issues, Armenia would have to exploit the opportunity to increase its manoeuvring space, especially by achieving speedy conflict resolution. In doing so, Armenia would make the most out of regional cooperation and thus build resilience against a possible ‘return’ of Russian imperial ambitions that would leave Armenia isolated, with little to no room for manoeuvre (p. 634).

However, Ter-Petrosyan's efforts to redefine the images of Azerbaijan and Turkey in Armenian political thinking did not resonate with the Armenian political elite and post-war Armenian society. His pronounced emphasis on the inevitability of concessions in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict gained him notoriety. The leadership of Karabakh and that of the Armenian armed forces, as well as the diaspora, media, opposition, and intellectuals subjected him to heavy criticism on the ground of his pro-Turkish and pro-Azerbaijani sentiments (News.bbc, 1998a). Ter-Petrosyan was eventually forced to resign in 1998 and was succeeded by Robert Kocharyan, one of the prominent leaders of the Karabakh war, which showcases Ter-Petrosyan's fragile agency and the failure of his pragmatic foreign policy agenda (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, p. 157).

It is worth noting that, from the outset, Kocharyan adopted a pro-Western (European) policy, putting a strong emphasis on Armenia's integration into European organizations. Moreover, he favoured a broader foreign policy agenda that included both political and military rapprochement with the West. In April 1999, Kocharyan attended the celebration of NATO's fiftieth anniversary in

Washington, which Armenian Communist Party leader S. Badalyan labelled as a betrayal of Russia (Terzyan, 2016, p. 150).

Kocharyan hailed the European path as Armenia's "civilizational choice," which would provide the best opportunity for the country's development. He welcomed Armenia's membership in the Council of Europe, a crucial milestone in Armenia's full scale 'homecoming' to Europe (Kocharyan 2011, p. 253). Moreover, in Kocharyan's words, as a typical European country, Armenia would draw on successful European experience of peace and prosperity and thus pursue peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (p. 255).

In effect, in the early stages of his presidency, Kocharyan was largely perceived as a pro-European politician who strived for European integration to increase its manoeuvring space in relation to Russia. This was accurately captured in the notion of 'complementary foreign policy' put forward by Kocharyan, with the view of conducting a well-diversified foreign policy (Terzyan, 2016, p. 149). Overall, the banner of complementarity alluded to the willingness of achieving a breakthrough on the path to European integration, without 'disregarding' the long-standing partnership with Russia.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, over time and particularly in the wake of Russia's Putin-led engagement with its 'near neighbourhood', Armenia plunged into the orbit of Russian influence

The biggest question is to what extent the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been critical to Kocharyan's choice of the Russia-led path.

Notably, from the outset of his presidency, Kocharyan securitized the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and clearly distanced himself from his predecessor on this issue. In contrast to the first President who was invariably emphasizing the necessity of speedy conflict resolution, Kocharyan adopted a much harder position. He blamed Ter-Petrosyan for unacceptable concessions that would potentially be detrimental to Karabakh's security (Astourian, 2000 p. 32). He went as far as to question the ethnic compatibility of Armenians and Azerbaijanis: "The Armenian pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, and the attempts at mass military deportation of Armenians from Karabakh in 1991-92 indicate the impossibility for Armenians to live in Azerbaijan in general. We are talking about some sort of ethnic incompatibility" (Azatutyun, 2003). Such a belief about the ethnic antagonism of conflicting societies may shed light on his hard-line stances on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution.

Moreover, being the man who led the war effort against Azerbaijan in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and becoming its first President, Kocharyan would unlikely take steps that would undermine his reputation as 'a symbol' of Karabakh war victory. And as a politician who gained public and political support due to his staunch opposition to Ter-Petrosyan's discourse on concessions, Kocharyan was faced with path dependence. Essentially, his powerful backers – the Armenian army, the nationalist party Dashnaksutyun, as well as the voters who were particularly

sensitive to Karabakh conflict would preclude him from stepping down Ter-Petrosyan's path. Overall, his discourse suggests that Nagorno Karabakh was the issue of utmost importance on the Armenian foreign and security policy agenda, meanwhile the room for concessions to 'aggressor' Azerbaijan was rather limited. Kocharyan ruled out the possibility of any concession regarding the 'independent' status of the disputed territory (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, pp. 162-163). The securitization of NK conflict may explain why he smoothly shifted from a pro-Western foreign policy agenda to the Russia-led path. Russia's 'warm welcome' into the Armenian economy was synchronized with increasingly intensifying and deepening bilateral political and military partnership. Thus, the critical importance initially assigned to Armenia's rapprochement with Europe in Kocharyan's discourse, would be eclipsed by the growing emphasis on Armenian-Russian strategic relationship and security alliance. Russia was largely framed as the most pivotal security partner (Kocharyan, 2011, p. 272).

Arguably, by establishing a strategic partnership with Russia, Kocharyan believed that it would lead Moscow to adopt a more benevolent stance on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The Russian foreign policy discourse of that time suggests Kremlin's resolution to considerably develop partnership with Azerbaijan into a strategic alliance (Mirzoyan, 2010, p. 45). Russia's strengthening of its military and political partnership with Azerbaijan would provoke fears across the Armenian leadership. The nightmare scenario of Russia-Azerbaijan strategic rapprochement would devastatingly militate against Armenia's policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In effect, Kocharyan was forced to make decisions in conditions of sheer structural and strategic uncertainty, given the insufficient knowledge of Russia's possible foreign policy outputs and their implications for Karabakh-sensitive Armenia. The fears provoked by Russia's choice of Azerbaijan as a strategic partner in the South Caucasus would reportedly prompt Kocharyan to convince Russia to opt for Armenia. Thus, he would drop the European foreign policy agenda and give in to the expansionist Russian policy 'package'.

Kocharyan's successor, Serzh Sargsyan to a great extent remained committed to the 'Russia-first' approach. Yet, consistent with his predecessor's discourse, Sargsyan placed a pronounced emphasis on the European foreign policy agenda, with the EU being framed as Armenia's civilizational choice (Sargsyan, 2011). Nevertheless, in 2013 Armenia made a U-turn by shifting from the Association Agreement with the EU to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

There has been a tendency in existing studies to treat the U-turn as 'no choice option' given Armenia's vast political and economic dependence on Russia, which came to the fore in the face of Russia's increasing assertiveness towards the EU and the Eastern Partnership (Popescu, 2013, Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015). A question arises of to what extent Armenia's sensitivity to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has determined its absorption by the Russia-led union.



Remarkably, Sargsyan, along with other high-ranking officials, has justified Armenia's membership in the EAEU chiefly in terms of its security concerns, with a pronounced focus on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The discourse held by the Armenian policy-makers leads to the conclusion that there was lack of choice for conflict-bound Armenia in avoiding the U-turn (Terzyan, 2016b, pp. 173-174).

A former member of Parliament of the party "Rule of law", H. Margaryan has stated in the interview that since security is the top priority for Armenia, it is impossible to downplay the importance of the Armenia-Russia security partnership in the face of increasingly belligerent tone emanating from Armenia's neighbours (Margaryan, 2015).

Ironically, shortly before Armenia's U-turn, Russia set out to intensify military cooperation with Armenia's fiercest foe, Azerbaijan, in the form of supplying Russian military hardware worth \$4 billion (Eurasianet, 2013). The nightmare scenario of the Azerbaijan-Russia boosting military cooperation produced worries through Armenia and significantly influenced its choice of the EAEU.

Overall, there has been a broad consensus among the representatives of Armenian political elite\* that the acute threats posed to Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey prompt to put heavy reliance on Russia. Thus, despite some resentment that Russian policy may generate, Armenia has to abstain from 'provoking' Russia'. Otherwise, the latter would 'hit where it hurts', most notably by arming Azerbaijan (A1plus, 2014). It follows that Armenia has no choice but to abide by the rules determined by Kremlin.

Interestingly, in the wake of the heavy fighting eruption between the Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces in April 2016, President Sargsyan expressed his discontent with Russian military hardware supply to Azerbaijan and implicitly questioned the depth of the Armenian-Russian alliance. He particularly noted that: "Russia never played for Armenia the role that Turkey plays for Azerbaijan" (Mediamax, 2016).

Remarkably, in a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on April 6, 2016, Sargsyan exposed the severe pain caused by Russia, and Armenia's vulnerability to Moscow's coercion:

Russia is our strategic partner indeed and we are in the same security structure – Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it is naturally painful for us when Russia sells arms to Azerbaijan. But, as you understand, our abilities to influence the process are limited (Sargsyan, 2016a).

---

\*Note: Several officials provided valuable insights, but asked not to be cited in an attributable way.

Nevertheless, Sargsyan's critical position on Russia proved to have stemmed from temporary discontent, rather than from an in-depth review. He even subsequently expressed his vast support for the most disputable and ambivalent aspects of Russian foreign policy, ranging from issues such as the Ukrainian crisis to that in Syria, etc.:

We highly value Russia's role in the world and particularly in our region where numerous processes, which have their impact on stability and security, are going on. Armenia has been watching closely the intensive foreign policy contacts of the President of Russia... I am confident that Armenia only benefits from a greater involvement of Russia in our region (Sargsyan, 2016b).

Overall, the 'frozen' Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, along with ensuing troubled relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey have been critical to Armenia's treatment of Russia as an irreplaceable security ally. Meanwhile, Russia is equipped with a bunch of tools to further this sentiment in Armenian political thinking and public consciousness.

### **3. Kremlin's special ties with Armenian incumbents: A glance at individual-level factors**

The argument that, in Armenia's hyper-presidential system, Presidents' personality and beliefs influenced Armenia's foreign policy outputs goes to the heart of the actor and action dispensability framework. Two crucial conditions, which, if satisfied, can prompt to posit that an individual has been important to an outcome. The first condition is that of 'action dispensability'. If the actions of an individual are removed from the events to be explained, do the events still occur? Therefore, the actions of an individual are indispensable to the outcome as long as their removal would lead to considerable changes in the outcome. The second condition is that of 'actor dispensability'. Would any individual, confronting the same set of circumstances, have taken broadly the same actions? Again, this is a function of two factors. First, the degree to which the individual holds strong and distinctive beliefs and predispositions concerning the matter at hand. Second, the clarity of the situational imperatives is key (Dyson, 2009, pp. 15-16.).

Regarding the 'actor dispensability' particularly in Kocharyan-led Armenian politics, it is worth noting that the post-Soviet transition led to the accumulation of presidential power at the expense of the parliament and the judiciary, neither of which had sufficient power to balance the presidential one or even properly perform their constitutional functions (Payaslyan, 2011, p. 110). The presidential power got immensely solidified after the assassinations of Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan and Head of Parliament Karen Demirchyan in 1999, especially as both limited Kocharyan's power and tended to explicitly disagree with him on many principal issues (Papazian, 2006, p. 235). The head of the Yerkrpah union, Vazgen Sargsyan, was strongly supported by the Armenian military forces and

widely viewed as Armenia's most influential politician of the time (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, p. 160). His assassination provided a fertile ground for immense consolidation of Kocharyan's power. Freedom House reports further notes a range of abuses of Kocharyan's presidential power in the form of massive crackdown on the opposition and media, and the tendency to suppress dissent and pluralism (Freedom House, 2005).

Hence, the absence of checks and balances and lack of a viable opposition rendered Kocharyan the core policymaker or, say, the 'indispensable actor'. The consolidation of his power significantly impacted Armenia's foreign policy outputs as Armenia shifted from pro-Western agenda to the Russia-led trajectory. The critical unanswered question is why Russia's 'renewed' expansionist policy appealed to Kocharyan and prompted a foreign policy change. Particularly in contrast to Georgia, which was almost equally dependent on Russia, Armenia jumped further into Russian arms. The search for the answer to this complex question leads us to investigate the indispensable actor's personality – his dispositions and beliefs.

Media reports and accounts from Armenian politicians suggest that Kocharyan has been characterized by a marked penchant for concentrating power in his hands and making decisions single-handedly. He has been broadly regarded as a tough and unyielding politician in pursuit of his political goals (News.Bbc, 1998b). In terms of political psychology, the above-mentioned could be interpreted as power motivation and a marked need for power. Received wisdom posits that individuals with high need for power tend to require greater personal control and involvement in policy and are more likely to insist that policy outputs match their personal preferences rather than represent consensual group decisions (Dyson, 2009, p. 30). Overall, they are reluctant to delegate power and are inherently drawn to an authoritarian governance. The evidence, ranging from international reports about the plight of democracy in Armenia to a number of Armenian politicians' observations, support this argument about Kocharyan (Payasilyan, 2011, pp. 205-206, Kostanyan, 2011). In effect, Putin's pursuit of promoting authoritarianism in CIS countries significantly fit Kocharyan's ambitions.

The "success stories" of Russian-supported incumbents in Central Asian countries and Belarus and, by contrast, the mounting challenges facing the political elites in other CIS Western-oriented democratizing countries, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, have reportedly contributed to Kocharyan's choice of the Russian path. The concept of authoritarian learning seems amenable to account for Kocharyan's actions, significantly arising out of his power motivations. As indicated above, the authoritarian learning literature analyses learning from international examples with a focus on adaptability, lesson-drawing, emulation and persuasion (Hall, 2017, p. 162).

Kocharyan drew a range of lessons from the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. First, the perception that the Russian-supported regimes, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, have been shielded from Colour revolutions was reinforced. During the Georgian political crisis in November 2003, Armenia gave in to Kremlin's urges for intensifying military cooperation and signed a series of military agreements with Russia (Secieru, 2006). In further letting Russia tighten its grip on Armenia, Kocharyan reportedly believed that the label of 'Russia's true ally in the South Caucasus' would create a bulwark of stability and predictability for his regime's survival.

The second lesson for Kocharyan was that in order to avoid the destinies of former Georgian and Ukrainian presidents, opposition movements and media freedom needed to be limited. By using his hyper-presidential power, Kocharyan controlled institutions and the political system, coerced the opposition, built-up security forces and pro-regime groups. Besides, he launched a crackdown on independent media, and irreversibly shut down the popular A1+ television channel. Overall, the country smoothly plunged into authoritarianism, with all its attributes, such as rigged elections, feeble opposition, fragile civil society and censored media (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, pp. 161-162). Not surprisingly, the Freedom House Reports noted downward trends in Armenia, featuring mounting political repression and the authorities' increasingly unresponsive and undemocratic governance (Freedom House, 2005).

Therefore, I assume that Kremlin's package considerably appealed to Kocharyan due to its emphasis on ensuring the steady survival of the Russian-sponsored regimes, in the face of 'colour' revolutions and abrupt power transitions in CIS countries. Thus, along with above-mentioned economic and political leverages, Russia significantly tightened its grip on Armenia by establishing special ties with its power-hungry incumbents. The latter would 'warmly welcome' Kremlin's expansionist agendas in exchange for its authoritarian support in retaining their power.

Even though Kocharyan's successor had way less agency and room for manoeuvre, Armenia's abrupt U-turn reportedly owed to his own power motivation – the determination to stay in office.

The very fact that Sargsyan frequently exemplified the Ukrainian scenario (Sargsyan, 2014) as a convenient excuse for the U-turn indicates his unwillingness to end up as his former Ukrainian counterpart, Yanukovich, did. Similarly, the representatives of the Armenian political elite often cited the Ukrainian scenario as a justification for the U-turn and implicitly noted that Armenia would rather abstain from provoking Russia (Terzyan, 2017, p. 198). Arguably, the perception of the 'Ukrainian scenario' from the Armenian leadership's perspective is chiefly related to the 'Euromaidan', with a highly unwanted outcome for incumbents. Notably, the opposition Heritage Party's former Vice-Chairman, Armen Martirosyan, noted that the Armenian incumbent's strive for staying in office had

been instrumental in opting for the EAEU, given the Russian guarantees that he would be safe within the Russian-led union (Martirosyan, 2014). Similarly, the party leader, Raffi Hovhannisyan regarded Armenia's U-turn as a deplorable stride towards perpetuating the illegitimate power of President Sargsyan and his regime, in the name of serving national interests (Hovhannisyan, 2014).

Even though it is hard to clearly measure the role of the agent's power motivation and its impact on the foreign policy output, it would be misleading to dismiss the agency-level variables. It would be highly likely for Kocharyan or Sargsyan-style agent, with immense power in its hands, in the absence of checks and balances, to act out of self-interest in determining foreign policy outputs.

Yet, the Armenian "Velvet revolution" engenders a glimmer of hope that owing to his vast popularity and legitimacy, the newly-elected prime minister Pashinyan will not necessarily carry on with the malpractices of his predecessors. Rather, he has an opportunity to cut back the heavy reliance on Kremlin's overwhelming support and thus reduce ruling elite's susceptibility to Russian coercive policies.

Further research could focus on Pashinyan-led elite's behavior *vis-à-vis* Russia and the extent to which it would be capable to redefine its submissive policy and depart from acute malpractices of the former governments.

## **Conclusion**

The anatomy of Putin-led Russia's powerful grip on Armenia comes down to the following core elements: Armenia's growing economic and energy dependence on Russia; the "frozen" Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as Kremlin's special ties with Armenian incumbents and their authoritarian support.

Along with the structural constraints, the individual-level factors - related to Armenian Presidents' perceptions and preferences have considerably influenced the Russia-led foreign policy choices. Arguably, second President's penchant for monopolizing power and avoiding "colour revolutions" played a part in leading him down the path to Russian-supported regimes.

Overall, Russia's pursuit of authoritarianism promotion in CIS countries with the view to their political and economic absorption has yielded remarkable results in Armenia. Yet, in theory the "Armenian Velvet revolution" implies that owing to its vast popularity and legitimacy, new Armenian government has an opportunity to cut back the heavy reliance on Kremlin's overwhelming political and economic support. Essentially, this would reduce the ruling elite's susceptibility to Russian coercive policies.

Therefore, despite a series of structural constraints on the path to diminishing country's huge dependence on Russia, the agency-level factors should not be neglected.

Further research could focus on Pashinyan-led elite's interactions with Kremlin and the extent to which it would be capable to redefine its actorness.

**Acknowledgements:** This publication is part of my research work at the department of Global Political Studies of *Malmö* University, thanks to a Swedish Institute scholarship.

## References

- A1plus.am. (2014), *We mustn't play tricks with Russia: S. Saroyan*, retrieved from <http://en.a1plus.am/1201812.html>
- Aberg HS J. and Terzyan A. (2018), Structure of Agency? Explaining Armenia's Foreign Policy Evolution, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 9(1), pp. 151-172.
- Ambrosio, T. (2016), *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian resistance to democratization in the former Soviet Union*, Routledge.
- Asbarez, (2013), *Gas Price Reduced as Armenia Joins Customs Union*, retrieved from <http://asbarez.com/114797/gas-price-reduced-as-armenia-joins-customs-union/>.
- Astourian, S. H. (2000), From Ter-Petrosian to Kocharian: Leadership Change in Armenia, *UC Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*, retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0c2794v4>
- Azatutyun (2003), *Russian Parliament Ratifies Debt Deal With Armenia*, retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1571472.html>
- Azatutyun (2017), *Opposition Bloc May Seek Armenia's Exit From Eurasian Union*, retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/28663607.html>
- Babayan, N. (2015), The return of the empire? Russia's counteraction to transatlantic democracy promotion in its near abroad, *Democratization*, 22(3), pp. 438-458.
- Brownlee, J. (2017), The limited reach of authoritarian powers, *Democratization*, 24(7), pp. 1326-1344.
- Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K. (2015), The EU's Unexpected 'Ideal Neighbour'? The Perplexing Case of Armenia's Europeanisation, *Journal of European Integration*, 37(4), 491-507.
- Dyson, S.B. (2009), *The Blair identity: leadership and foreign policy*. Oxford University Press.

- Eurasianet (2002), *Yerevan Moscow Debt Pact Extends Russia's Caucasus Influence*, retrieved from <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav073002.shtml>
- Eurasianet (2003), *Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia With Debt Agreements*, retrieved from <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav050703.shtml>
- Eurasianet (2013), *In Baku, Putin Brings Gunboats Along With Diplomacy*, retrieved from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67392>
- Freedom House (2005), *Freedom in the World: Armenia*, retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/armenia>
- Hall, S.G. (2017), Learning from past experience: Yanukovich's implementation of authoritarianism after 2004, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(2), pp.161-171.
- Hovhannisyanyan, R. (2014), *Opposition Party Condemns Eurasian Union Entry*, retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/26642964.html>
- Kocharyan, R. (2006), *Eluytner ev harcazrucyner {Speeches and Statements}*, Yerevan, 2011.
- Kostayan, H. (2011), Spillovers from the Arab Revolts: Is Armenia Next in Line? *CEPS Policy Briefs*, retrieved from <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/spillovers-arab-revolts-armenia-next-line>
- Margaryan, H. (2015), *Armenia's Relations with Neighbours* [Interview] (19 August 2015).
- Martirosyan, A. (2014), *Heritage: Armenia's problems will deepen because of Eurasian Union*, retrieved from <https://news.am/eng/news/245840.html>
- Mediamax.am. (2016), *Armenian President: "Russia is our ally, not patron"*, retrieved from [http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/karabakh/17631/?fb\\_comment\\_id=1079724282091415\\_1079933415403835](http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/karabakh/17631/?fb_comment_id=1079724282091415_1079933415403835)
- Mirzoyan, A. (2010), *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West: Between History and Geopolitics*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- News.bbc (1998a), *Armenia: president falls victim to Nagorno Karabakh dispute*, retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/analysis/53239.stm>
- News.bbc (1998b), *Robert Kocharian - Armenia's new president?* retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/analysis/72058.stm>
- Nygren, B. (2007), *The rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's foreign policy towards the CIS countries*. Routledge.
- Panorama (2013), *The President of the Union of Armenians in Russia welcomes the decision to join the Customs Union*, retrieved from <https://life.panorama.am/hy/news/2013/10/10/ara-abrahamyan-mm/15384>
- Papazian, T. (2006), From Ter-Petrosian to Kocharian: explaining continuity in Armenian foreign policy, 1991-2003. *Demokratizatsiya*, 14(2), pp. 235-251.

- Parsons, C. (2010), *How To Map Arguments in Political Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Payaslian, S. (2011), *The political economy of human rights in Armenia: Authoritarianism and democracy in a former Soviet republic* (Vol. 75). London: IB Tauris.
- Reuters (2018), *New Armenian PM tells Putin he wants closer ties with Russia*, retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-armenia-putin-pashinyan/new-armenian-pm-tells-putin-he-wants-closer-ties-with-russia-idUSKCN11F1A3>
- Sargsyan, S. (2011), *Statement by the President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*, retrieved from <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2011/06/22/news-91/> [Accessed 13 Aug. 2017].
- Sargsyan, S. (2017), *Presidents of Armenia and Russia recapped the results of negotiations*, retrieved from <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2017/03/15/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-met-with-representatives-of-Mass-Media-with-Vladimir-Putin/> [Accessed 20 Sep. 2017].
- Sargsyan, S. (2016a), *President Serzh Sargsyan's remarks at the joint press conference with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel*, retrieved from <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2016/04/06/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-meeting-with-German-Chancellor-Angela-Merkel/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2017].
- Sargsyan, S. (2016b), *Statement of President Serzh Sargsyan for the Mass Media on the Results of the Meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin*, retrieved from <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2016/08/10/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-statement-in-Russia-10-08/> [Accessed 13 Apr. 2017].
- Secrieru, S. (2006), *Russia's Foreign Policy under Putin: CIS Project. UNISCI Discussion Papers*, (10), retrieved from <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76701018.pdf>
- Skak, M. (2011), *Russia's New "Monroe Doctrine"*, In *Russian foreign policy in the 21st century*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 138-154.
- Ter-Matevosyan, V., Drnoian, A., Mkrtchyan, N. and Yepremyan, T. (2017), *Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: reasons for joining and its consequences*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 58:3, pp. 340-360.
- Ter-Petrosyan, L. (2006), *Yntrani: Eluytner, Hodvacner, Harcazruycner* {Selected Speeches, Articles, Interviews, Archives of the First President of the Republic of Armenia}, Erevan.
- Terzyan, A. (2016), *The Evolution of Armenia's Foreign Policy Identity: The Conception of Identity Driven Paths. Friends and Foes in Armenian Foreign Policy Discourse* In: Kakachia, K. and Markarov, A. (ed.), *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Universal, pp. 145-183.



- Terzyan, A., (2016b), The Evolution of the European Union's Conception in the Foreign Policy Discourse of Armenia: Implications for U-turn and the Path beyond the Association Agreement, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 7(2), pp.165-184.
- Terzyan, A. (2017), The EU vs. Russia in the Foreign Policy Discourse of Armenia: the Fragility of Normative Power or the Power of Russian coercion?, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 8(2), pp. 185-203.
- Thorun, C. (2008), *Explaining change in Russian foreign policy: the role of ideas in post-Soviet Russia's conduct towards the West*, Springer.
- Vanderhill, R. (2013), *Promoting authoritarianism abroad*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Worldbank (2015), *Armenia Monthly Economic Update, World Bank Group 2015*, retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/armenia/armenia-economic-update.pdf>