

Russian policy, Russian Armenians and Armenia: ethnic minority or political leverage?

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Abstract

The 2018 “Velvet revolution” in Armenia has raised numerous questions regarding its possible implications for Armenian-Russian relations. Given that there was a tendency for revolutions in post-Soviet countries to significantly influence their relations with Russia, it would be easy to jump to far-reaching conclusions about Armenia’s possible foreign policy changes. This paper explores the potential of the diasporic influence of the Armenian community in Russia over Armenian-Russian relations in the light of the Russian policy towards further consolidating its control over post-Velvet Revolution Armenia. The study is based on qualitative research methods elaborating an in-depth case analysis through process tracing. It posits that Armenia remains highly susceptible to the diasporic influence, emanating particularly from the Armenian community in Russia, that, along with other political and economic constraints, determines Armenia’s unwavering allegiance to Russia. In doing so, the paper aims to enquire into the potential for the Armenian Diaspora to influence homeland’s foreign policy.

Keywords: Armenia, Velvet Revolution, Russia, Russian Armenians, Eurasian Integration, diasporic influence

Introduction

The 2018 “Velvet revolution” in Armenia has raised a series of questions regarding both its domestic as well as foreign policy implications. Given the revolution leader’s critical stances on Armenia’s plight in the Russia-led unions, it would be easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes. This paper focuses on the diasporic influence of the Armenian community in Russia over Armenian-Russian relations in the light of the Russian policy towards further consolidating its control over post-Velvet Revolution Armenia. There is a lot of scholarship on the domestic state of affairs in Armenia and consideration of the combined effects of tough economic contexts, geopolitical fragility and other ways in which the specific ‘Armenian reality’ affects Armenia’s political and economic landscape (Kostanyan and Giragosian, 2017; Aberg and Terzyan,

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2018; Markarov and Davtyan, 2018; Delcour, 2018). Meanwhile, the issues pertaining to powerful diasporic influences on Post-Velvet Revolution' Armenia have been largely overlooked.

Remarkably, there has been a growing tendency among IR scholars to treat diaspora as a unit of analysis in the field of international relations, with a special focus on the extent of diasporic influence on homeland foreign policy. Shain and Barth (2003) suggest that diasporic influences can best be understood by situating them in the 'theoretical space' shared by constructivism and liberalism; two approaches that acknowledge the impact of identity and domestic politics on international behaviour. Essentially, diasporas' identity-based motivations should be an integral part of the constructivist effort to explain the formation of national identities (Shain and Barth, 2003). Sheffer (2006) distinguishes between "transnational communities" and "ethnonational-religious diasporas". He argues that while the identities, goals, and international activities of transnational communities are varied and can change, particularly as their members become assimilated into their host societies, ethno-national-religious diasporas persistently identify with their national homelands and, as a result, resist aspects of assimilation that might diminish either their identities or their involvements in homeland politics. Rather, ethno-national-religious diasporas seek to deepen the unity of their ethnic and national identifications with their homelands' borders and politics (De Wind and Segura, 2014, pp. 11-13). Essentially, this is the core rationale behind diasporas' desire to influence homeland domestic politics and foreign policy.

Notably, there has been a tendency among Russian scholars to treat diasporas in Russia as critical factors in maintaining and further deepening ties between former Soviet countries and Russia (Halmukhamedov, 1999; Lubsky *et al.*, 2016). Some authors put the diasporas in the framework of the "Russian World" – the narrative that has become a major factor in the development of Russia's post-Soviet national identity and its engagement with the Eurasian geopolitical landscape (Zevelev, 2016).

Admittedly, the Armenian Diaspora in Russia has significantly influenced Armenia's foreign policy, and in particular its choice of the 'Russia-led' trajectories. Russia is home to around 2.5 million Armenian migrants, whose remittances account for over 13 percent of Armenia's GDP (World Bank, 2017).

This has enabled Russia to further absorb Armenia into its ranks, given Armenia's concerns that Armenian migrants would be severely mistreated by Russian authorities in case of its 'deviation' from the Russia-led trajectory. This assumption is based on the Russian authorities' large-scale crackdown on the Georgian population in Russia, following Georgia's decision to move beyond the orbit of the Russian influence and pursue deeper partnership with the EU and NATO.

The paper addresses the following research questions: 1. What are Russian policy priorities vis-à-vis Armenia, particularly, within its strategy for Eurasian integration? 2. What is the actual and potential influence of the Armenian community in Russia over Armenian-Russian relations.

This paper argues that along with other economic and political tools, Russia has consistently used the Armenian community to step up its influence over Armenia and suppress its European foreign policy aspirations. The study is based on qualitative research methods elaborating an in-depth case analysis through process tracing.

In terms of data, the research relies on two main sources. First, it relies on *open source information* websites, documents and speeches. Second, it relies on *semi-structured elite interviews*. These interviews have been conducted between February 2015 and April 2018 in Yerevan, Moscow and Brussels. The respondents for these interviews have been selected through a combination of purposive sampling (selecting respondents on the basis of their alleged knowledge or centrality in the policy process) and snowball sampling (asking each respondent for other possible interviewees).

1. New Government, old constraints: Armenia's "Russia problem"

The Russian imperial tradition has played a critical role in determining Russian relations with the newly-independent states since the break-up of the Soviet Union. More specifically, 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 regain control in its traditional 'sphere of influence' prompted Putin to renew and promote the so-called 'CIS project'. The latter was designed to step up the Russian influence in its backyard and crush CIS states' pro-Western foreign policy pursuits (Secreiru, 2006; Skak, 2011).

To this purpose, the Russian leadership embarked on increasing its economic presence and reinforcing its military presence in CIS countries. The takeover and monopolization of strategic economic and energy infrastructures in CIS countries was put at the heart of the Russian policy. (Secrieru, 2006).

The renewed 'CIS project' yielded considerable results in Armenia. 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).

Furthermore, in 2013 Armenia ceded control over all its natural gas infrastructure to the Russian energy firm Gazprom, in payment for a \$300 million debt to Gazprom, which it incurred as a result of secretly subsidizing the Russian gas price from 2011-2013. In return for writing off the debt, Gazprom was also granted 30-year exclusive rights in the Armenian energy market (Asbarez, 2014).

Russia has repeatedly used Gazprom's "energy weapon" to manipulate gas prices and thus exert political influence over the Armenian Government. Gazprom increased gas prices for Armenia by 50 percent and threatened to further increase it in case Armenia refused to join the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (Asbarez, 2013).

Remarkably, former President Serzh Sargsyan candidly admitted that Armenia was forced to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead of signing the Association Agreement with the European Union. "our choice is not civilizational. It corresponds to the economic interests of our nation. We cannot sign the Association Agreement and increase gas price and electricity fee three times?" (Terzyan, 2017, p. 191).

Ironically, Gazprom decreased gas prices as Armenia decided to join the EAEU. Yet, Russia raised the price for the gas it sells to Armenia by 10 percent in 2019. The price increase is "symptomatic of how the Kremlin is exploiting Armenia's heavy dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, using gas supply as a political instrument to put pressure on the Pashinyan-led Government," Eduard Abrahamyan, a London-based analyst of Armenia (Eurasianet, 2019). Clearly, by using Gazprom's energy weapon and increasing gas prices for Armenia, Russia strives to consolidate its influence over post-Velvet Revolution Armenia and suppress its desire to deepen partnership with the European Union and the United States (1in.am, 2018).

Notably, in an attempt to fight against Gazprom's malpractices, the new Armenian Government launched an investigation in Gazprom Armenia and which led to finding a series of irregularities and even to accusing it of tax evasion and corruption (Rferl, 2018).

Ironically, as noted earlier in response to Armenian government's bold attempt to hold Gazprom Armenia accountable, Gazprom determined to increase gas prices in 2019.

It is worth to note that 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).

Alongside the economic leverage, security linkage and leverage also comprise a significant aspect of the Armenia-Russia relationship. The Russian 102nd Military Base is located in the Armenian city of Gyumri, while the Russian 3624th airbase is located at Erebuni Airport, near Yerevan. Russian troops also patrol both the Armenia-Iran and Armenia-Turkey borders (Roberts and Ziemer, 2018, pp. 155-156).

Studies show that the turbulent landscape of the South Caucasus region, fraught with Armenia's troubled relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan and Turkey has significantly contributed to Russia's treatment as strategic security ally in Armenian political thinking.

More specifically, the core argument dominating the Armenian discourse has centred on the irreplaceability of the Armenian-Russian security alliance as a critical bulwark against security threats stemming from neighbouring Azerbaijan and Turkey (Terzyan, 2016, p 158). There has been a broad consensus among the Armenian political leadership on the vital importance of Armenia-Russia security partnership and the fact that Russian troops located across the Armenian-Turkish border significantly shield Armenia from Turkish-Azerbaijani hostilities and thus lead to treat Russia as 'security provider' (Terzyan, 2018, pp. 159-160).

Remarkably, to describe Armenia's plight in the hostile neighbourhood with Turkey, the former Chairman of the permanent commission on external relations of the Armenian Parliament Armen Ashotyan referred to the quote "Poor Mexico, so far from God, and so close to the United States" and added that this image of the US could be completely projected to Turkey. In doing so he justified the choice of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and framed it as indispensable to Armenia's security in the face of the Turkish menace (Aravot, 2017).

Given the newly-elected prime minister Nikol Pashinyan's critical stances on Armenia's plight in Russia-led unions, it would be easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes and Armenia's advancement towards the EU. Notably, in the fall of 2017 Pashinyan-led "Yelk" parliamentary faction submitted a bill proposing Armenia's withdrawal from the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union – framed as a dormant union detrimental to country's interests (Azatutyun, 2017).

Yet, from the very beginning of his prime ministership Pashinyan fundamentally reframed the portrayal of the EAEU and the Armenian-Russian partnership.

During the first meeting with the Russian President Pashinyan particularly noted: “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). Moreover, he confirmed Armenia’s commitment to deepening further integration in the Eurasian Economic Union, framing it as beneficial to the country: “Armenia is eager to see the furtherance of integration processes in the Eurasian Economic Union. We are ready to do our best to further develop the integration-targeted institutions and find new ways and mechanisms for cooperation” (Prime Minister, 2018).

The dramatic changes of Pashinyan’s discourse suggest that the power transition in Armenia has not led to revising Armenian-Russian relations and, more precisely, Armenia’s membership in the Russia-led EAEU.

2. Russian policy priorities in Armenia within the Eurasian strategy

Within its strategy of promoting the Eurasian integration within the Eurasian Economic Union and beyond, Russia has embarked on consolidating its influence over Armenia’s NGO sector given NGOs prominent role in mobilising protestors and organizing anti-Government protests that led to revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

In May 2014 the Russian ambassador Ivan Volynkin framed Western- funded NGOs as threats to Armenian-Russian relations and called for them to be ‘neutralised’ through information campaigns and other methods (ArmeniaHow, 2015). These methods included legal moves to regulate the activities of NGOs, in what was widely interpreted as a call for Armenia to adopt Russian-style legislation (Roberts and Ziemer, 2018, pp. 157-158). Consistent with this rhetoric in February 2015 the Head of the Russian Federation Council’s International Committee, Konstantin Kosachev subjected the Armenian NGOs to fierce criticism and claimed that around 350 Armenian NGOs were actively agitating against Eurasian integration in favour of the EU (Eurasianet, 2015).

Russian mounting pressure yielded desired results and led to amendments to existing NGO legislation (2017) in Armenia, enabling Russia to further push for policy convergence.

In essence, the new legislation is indicative of Russia’s authoritarianism promotion and projection of repressive policies onto CIS countries. Along with other amendments, the updated NGO law allows the government to rescind the registration of any non-profit that twice failed to comply with the requirements. The most controversial provision of the legislation gives Justice Ministry officials the right to attend non-profits’ board meetings. Human Right observer Armine Sahakyan

notes that Russia's push for Armenia to adopt anti-NGO legislation is just the latest sign of its determination to mould Armenia into a loyal vassal that does its bidding with no questions asked: "Russia sees Armenian anti-NGO legislation as a way to ensure that its neighbor toes the Kremlin line" (Euractiv, 2015).

Moreover, within its strategy for Eurasian integration Russia has routinely pushed for Russian language adoption as official language in Armenia. This policy is consistent with Russian President Vladimir Putin's discourse on "Russian world" (Zevelev, 2016) – Russian - dominated union of post-Soviet countries, where the promotion of Russian language is a way to step up Russian cultural, economic and political influence over those countries.

During his visit to Armenia in 2014 the Kremlin's outstanding media personality D. Kiselyov noted that 'if Armenians want to feel safe, they have got to speak Russian...Russian culture is becoming of secondary importance. Russia, in the Collective Security Treaty Organization framework, took upon itself providing security for Armenia. And what is happening to the Russian language in Armenia? It is simply disappearing.... The question is what is Armenia doing not to let this happen" (Eurasianet, 2014). Similarly, former Russian ambassador to Armenia V. Kovalenko noted "You can't choose one union for security-related integration and another one for cultural purposes" (Eurasianet, 2014). It follows, that Armenia is forced to put aside its own identity and preferences and abide by Russian economic, political and cultural rules.

No wonder, in 2017 Russian officials suggested that it might be a good idea for Armenia to adopt Russian as an official language. The suggestion emerged after the Russian Duma adopted a law, on July 12, 2017 allowing drivers from Eurasian Union countries to work as commercial drivers in Russia, but only if those countries recognize Russian as an official language. "In this way we're providing encouragement to governments which respect the Russian language and enshrine it in their constitutions and recognize it officially," said Leonid Kalashnikov, a Duma member and one of the law's authors (Eurasianet, 2017). In practice that means that to avoid further inconvenience, Armenia would have to follow the paths of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan -- all of which recognize Russian as an official language. Thus, by putting constraints on Armenian drivers, Russia pushed for Armenia's smooth absorption into the 'Russian club'.

Yet, Russian imperial policy towards forcing Armenia to adopt Russian as official language Armenia has not resonated with the Armenian society. Huge public resistance prevented the proposal from passing into a law. Notably, Russian imperial policies have triggered anxieties across the Armenian population and sparked a series of anti-Russian protests. Anti-Russian protests came to a head in 2016, following the 'April War' eruption between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The supply of Russian military hardware to Azerbaijan engendered enormous antipathy

towards Russia and led to protests in Armenia. More precisely, hundreds of Armenians demonstrated in Yerevan against Russian weapon sales to Azerbaijan, claiming the sales led to the outbreak of fighting (Armenianweekly, 2016). The protesters, mostly young activists, marched to the Russian Embassy in Yerevan chanting "Shame!" and "Free, independent Armenia!" A petition read out by a protest organizer demanded an immediate end to all deliveries of Russian weapons to Azerbaijan (Rferl, 2016).

The prevalence of anti-Russian attitudes in Armenia prompted Russia into action. Attributing the protests against Russia's policy to Western-funded NGOs, Russia put immense pressure on Armenia to pass its above-mentioned notorious anti-NGO legislation. Besides, Russia would use its propaganda machine to intimidate the Armenian population, by threatening to punish Armenia, in the form of increasing Russian gas prices, further arming Azerbaijan and even mistreating Russian Armenians (Terzyan, 2017, p.192).

Russian interferences in Armenia's domestic affairs are nothing new. Notably, during his first meeting with Russian President, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan gave credit to the 'balanced position' that Russia took during the internal political crisis, predating the revolution in Armenia, meaning that Russia did not back incumbents' 'right' to crush protests (Eurasianet, 2018).

To give an idea about Russia's influence over Armenia's domestic politics, it is worth noting that Armenian former Defence Minister Mikael Harutyunyan has held Russian citizenship since 2002. Based on this, Russian law enforcement authorities canceled an arrest warrant issued by Armenia for its former defense minister who is under investigation in Armenia on charges of breaching the country's constitutional order during the March 1, 2008 post-election protest standoff that resulted in the deaths of eight civilians and two police officers (Asbarez, 2018).

Overall, as the next section suggests along with other economic and political factors, the one of the large Armenian community has been critical to increasing Russian influence over Armenia.

3. The 'Georgian Lesson' of Russian Armenians and Armenia

Russia possesses the largest Armenian population outside of Armenia proper, making it home to the largest community in the Armenian diaspora. Essentially, irregular migration and large-scale brain-drain remains one of the most harrowing challenges facing Armenia. The economic disarray has inflicted severe hardships on the Armenian population, forcing them to flee the country. Studies show that in the intracensus period of 2001 and 2011, the resident population fell from 3.2 to 3.0 million persons. The annual net migration balance passed instead from -23,100 in 1995-2001 to -32,000 in 2002- 2011 (Migration Policy Centre, 2013). Not surprisingly, today the Armenian

population of Russia estimates around 2.5 million according to various surveys, and Russia ranks as the first country in terms of labour migration from Armenia (Aleksanyan, 2015). More specifically, seasonal labour migration to particularly Russia has constituted a crucial survival strategy for many Armenian households to this day. Russia is most popular destination for Armenian migrants and according to the official data, more than 95 per cent of seasonal and 75 per cent of long-term migrants work in Russia (Terzyan, 2019, p. 105). Annually, more than 200,000 Armenians go to Russia for seasonal employment (Emerging-Europe, 2018). Remittances sent to Armenia from Russia by individuals increased by 14.6% in 2017 (Intellinews, 2017). Meanwhile, the 2016 World Bank data suggests that Armenia Armenia was in 21st place worldwide among the most remittance-dependent countries, with personal remittances received accounting for 13.1% of GDP (World Bank, 2017).

Given that Armenia's membership in the EAEU eliminates visa-related-barriers and thus facilitates the free movement of Armenian labour force, massive outflow of Armenian population to Russia seems bound to continue. Remarkably, the Armenian officials deem country's membership in the EAEU conducive to facilitating labor migration to Russia (Terzyan, 2019, p. 105). Essentially, Russia, has not tended to oppose to the influxes of the Armenian population. Rather it has skillfully used large Armenian community to further drive Armenia into the orbit of its economic and political influence.

Notably, in 2012 during a meeting with Russian President, in response to the President of the Union of Armenians in Russia Ara Abrahamyan's contention that around two million Russian Armenians support Vladimir Putin, the latter sarcastically asked: "how many Armenians are living in Armenia?...according to Russian estimates their number is less than 3.2 million" (Aravot, 2013). Clearly, Putin's irony stems from growing number of Armenians in Russia, leading to a situation where Russia may become home to the largest Armenian population.

Unsurprisingly, there was a tendency among the EU officials from the External Action Service, to treat the large Armenian community in Russia as a major driving force behind Armenia's unwavering commitment to the strategic alliance with Russia. This contention comes down to the point that Russian Armenians would be safer with Armenia consistently playing by the Kremlin rules and thus avoiding to anger Russia and Russians.¹

Similarly, Armenia's Parliament Members tended to regard the Armenian community as one of the most sensitive issues in Armenian-Russian relations, which if neglected, could impose heavy costs on the Armenian population. No wonder, some Parliament Members were quick to cite the "Georgian lesson."² Meanwhile, Russian Armenian community members would contend that the

¹ Interviews with EEAS – related officials from September 2015 to February 2016.

² Interviews with Armenian Parliament Members from February 2015 to April 2018.

growing number of the Armenian population in Russia positively affects Armenian –Russian comprehensive partnership and further feeds the sense of “brotherhood.”³ This is considerably consistent with Russian scholars’ mainstream treatment of diasporas in Russia as critical factors in maintaining and further deepening ties between former Soviet countries and Russia (Halmukhamedov, 1999; Lubsky *et al.* 2016). Some authors put the diasporas in the framework of the “Russian World” – the narrative that has become a major factor in the development of Russia’s post-Soviet national identity and its engagement with the Eurasian geopolitical landscape (Zevelev, 2016).

Interestingly, research shows that Russia has encouraged powerful Russian Armenian tycoons to expand their economic presence in Armenia as a way to step up its influence over the Armenian economy. Armenian-born billionaire Samvel Karapetyan’s growing economic presence in Armenia could therefore be attributed to Russian policy. David Petrosian, a Yerevan-based analyst who closely monitors Russian-Armenian dealings, suggested the Russian government is “encouraging” such investments out of a belief that they will bolster the Kremlin’s strong position in Armenia (Eurasianet, 2017). Karapetyan’s Tashir group bought Armenia’s power distribution network in 2015. In August 2017, the Armenian government announced that the national electricity transmission company would also be managed by Tashir (Eurasianet, 2017).

Notably, the discourse on Armenia’s membership in the EAEU – has been characterized by a strong emphasis on the large Armenian community in Russia as a major factor for Armenia’s decision to join the EAEU.

There are concerns that Armenian migrants might be severely mistreated by Russian authorities in case of Armenia’s “deviation” from the Russian-led foreign policy trajectory. This assumption is based on the Russian authorities’ massive crackdown on the Georgian population in Russia, in response to Georgia’s mounting rapprochement with the EU and NATO (Terzyan 2016b, pp 172-173). It is perhaps for this reason that Ara Abrahamyan gave credit to Armenia’s decision to join the EAEU, emphasizing its security implications for the Armenian community in Russia (Terzyan, 2018b, p. 237).

In fact, the Armenian leadership and Russian Armenians have well learned the ‘Georgian lesson’, i.e Russian response to Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. More specifically, in October and November of 2006, under the banner of ‘fight against irregular migration and organized crime’ Russian authorities detained thousands of Georgians and expelled more than 2,300 of them to Georgia, including many Georgians residing legally in Russia. Credible reports suggest that detentions occurred with blatant disregard for basic human rights and decency. Georgians were

³ Interviews with Armenian community members in Moscow in August 2017.

held in appalling conditions and were subjected to a wide range of abuses amounting to torture. Two Georgians died in custody awaiting expulsion (HRW, 2007).

The Russian Government's campaign against ethnic Georgians occurred in the context of Georgia's growing attempts to redefine inherently asymmetric relations with Russia and thus pull the country out of the Russian authoritarian influence.

In an attempt to punish Georgia's 'deviant behaviour', along with other measures, targeted Georgian population in Russia. Russian officials made repeated public statements framing Georgians as illegal immigrants, criminals, and calling for measures to be taken against them. Russian television stations, the largest of which are owned or controlled by people close to the Russian Government, actively supported and justified the latter's discrimination against Georgians through daily news programs and other programming, and often quoted senior officials making strong anti-Georgian statements (HRW, 2007).

Concurrently, Moscow police began to conduct widespread "document inspections" of ethnic Georgians. Some police officers targeted locations where Georgians were likely to assemble, such as the entrance to the Georgian embassy and to the Georgian Orthodox Church in Moscow. In several districts of Moscow, police demanded that schools produce lists of names of all ethnic Georgian children and their parents (Humanrightshouse, 2006). The crackdown spilled over into other parts of Russia and resulted in unlawful detention of thousands of ethnic Georgians.

All this prompted Georgian President Micheil Saakashvili to posit that Russia cannot simply tolerate Georgia's transformation into a European democratic and prosperous state, which would no longer be susceptible to Russian coercive policy. Georgia's experience of successful reforms and the path to European democracies angered Russia and prompted to 'correct its deviant behaviour' with the view to hinder democracy promotion throughout the post-Soviet region. 'This is why the Georgian nation has suffered an embargo, a war, an invasion, and an occupation — all since 2006' (Saakashviliarchive, 2013).

The situation came to head in 2008, fraught with the war incited against 'disobedient' Georgia, with all ensuing consequences. In Saakashvili's words, Russian aggression came as no surprise given its resolution to crush the young democracy "After a long embargo, economic blockades, provocations, bombardments, threats, boycotts and other rough but finally not successful pressures of the old KGB followers decided to finish the so-called "Georgian project", our common attempt to create a modern, European, democratic, successful state in Caucasus" (Saakashviliarchive, 2009).

Overall, along with other issues, the mistreatment of Georgian population in Russia sent ripples of apprehension into Armenia and alarmed the repercussions of 'angering' Russia. No wonder, the Armenian leadership framed the decision to join the EAEU as inevitable, repeatedly citing its

positive implications for the Armenian community (Terzyan, 2017, p. 191). There has been a broad consensus among the representatives of Armenia's political leadership* that despite the resentment that Russian policy may generate, Armenia should avoid 'provoking' Russia. Otherwise, the latter would severely punish Armenia's 'disobedience', by arming Armenia's fiercest enemy Azerbaijan, increasing gas prices or even cracking down on the Armenian community in Russia (Aberg and Terzyan, 2018, p. 168).

In an attempt to avoid the spill over of 'colour revolutions' into Armenia, that eventually resulted in revising relations with Russia, the Russian propaganda launched a large-scale campaign against the rise of civic activism in Armenia. Clearly, the opposition to Russian coercive policies has been at the heart of major protests and demonstrations in Armenia, ranging from "Electric Yerevan" – mass protests over electricity price hikes of Russian-dominated Electric Network of Armenia in 2015, to mass demonstrations against devastatingly harmful supply of the Russian military hardware to Azerbaijan, in the wake of the 2016 April war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Notably, the Kremlin propaganda would feed the narrative that in line with Georgia and Ukraine, the unrests in Armenia might have been incited by the United States to pull the country out of the Russian influence. Namely, Igor Morozov, a Russian Parliament Member from the Federation Council's International Relations Committee, linked Yerevan protests to the pro-European demonstrations in Ukraine that eventually swelled into a revolution leading to the current crisis (The Guardian, 2015). "The US Embassy in Armenia is actively involved in the current events in Yerevan...Armenia is now close to a coup d'état with use of firearms" (The Guardian, 2015).

Moreover, in an attempt to obstruct EU-Armenia further rapprochement, the Russian propaganda launched a large-scale campaign against the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) inaugurated in March 2017. More specifically, Armenia's decision to develop the partnership with the EU in the form of CEPA was regarded as a 'betrayal' and outright defiance of Russian interests. Some propagandists compared Armenia's behaviour to that of a cheating wife: "Armenia is the wife, and Russia is the husband, who covers wife's all expenses... Yet the wife is not that happy and has decided to have an affair with another man" (Azatutyun, 2017b).

Essentially, such an imperial rhetoric was meant to put pressure on Armenia, not least through the large Armenian community in Russia.

Yet, the Kremlin did not overreact to mass anti-Government protests in April 2018 predating the 'Velvet Revolution'. Rather, the Russian propaganda machine would portray Armenia as a weak and powerless state, which irrespective of the power transition would stick to its allegiance to Russia (The Moscow Times 2018). These claims would frequently emphasize the factors that make Armenia

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

irreversibly compliant with Russia, ranging from the influential and large Armenian community to country's heavy energy, economic and political dependence on Russia. According to some reports the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Zohrab Mnatsakanian, announced during a visit to Moscow that the change of power in Armenia was "a deeply internal political process with no geopolitical aspects whatsoever" (The Moscow Times 2018).

In effect, the Kremlin conveyed its warnings to Armenia through Mikhail Leontyev, well-known Russian journalist and TV anchor, vice president and spokesman for Rosneft oil company: "Historically, politically, physically and financially Armenia is a burden for Russia," he said. "Who needs Armenia? No one needs Armenia except us. Armenians, existing thanks to Russia's support... There would not be any Armenians and Armenia, if not for Russia" (ICDS, 2018).

Studies show that in recent years, violent racially-motivated attacks and murders, often perpetrated by ultranationalist and neo-Nazi groups have become common occurrences, especially in large cities (Shnirelman, 2014; Herrera and Butkovich Kraus, 2016). Although there have been some convictions in recent years for violent hate-related crimes, the Russian government has done little to effectively combat these dangerous trends (Neely, 2015). Armenians in Russia would not feel safe amid hatred, pervasive racism and xenophobia and thus would encourage the Armenian Government to avoid angering Russia. No wonder Pashinyan did not cross the 'red line' and shortly after being put at the helm of Armenia, confirmed the country's allegiance to Russia.

Further research could provide in-depth insights into how the Armenian community in Russia affects the way that Russian policies are received and implemented in post- velvet revolution Armenia.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was twofold: (1) To trace back empirically the impact of Russian policy on Armenia (2) To explore the potential of the Armenian community in Russia to influence Armenian-Russian relations. The findings suggest that the Russian new imperial policies towards CIS countries have yielded considerable results in Armenia. To give an idea about the Russian influence over Armenia, it is worth to note that Russian state-run companies have taken over 90 percent of Armenia's energy generating capacities, coupled with gradual takeover of country's transport and communication sectors. Russia has repeatedly used Gazprom's "energy weapon" to manipulate gas prices and thus exert pressure on the Armenian Government. Notably, in response to the new Armenian Government's attempts of fighting against Gazprom's malpractices in Armenia, the latter further increased the gas price for Armenia.

Russian efforts at stepping up its influence over Armenia have significantly intensified within its strategy for the Eurasian integration. To ensure Armenia's smooth absorption into the ranks of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Kremlin has selectively targeted the Armenian NGO sector, with the goal of suppressing Western funded NGOs and thus nipping in the bud public support for European integration and opposition to the Eurasian one. Ironically, as a result of Russia's mounting pressure, Armenia's NGO legislation was subjected to controversial amendments in 2017, thus creating unprecedented opportunities for Russia to push for policy convergence. In essence, the new legislation is indicative of Russia's authoritarianism promotion and projection of its repressive policies onto CIS countries. Russia has consistently used its large Armenian community to step up its influence over Armenia and achieve its policy goals.

The fact that Russia is home to around 2.5 million Armenians, whose remittances account for over 13 percent of Armenia's GDP, make the country increasingly susceptible to the diasporic influence emanating from Russian Armenians.

Russia's large scale crackdown on the Georgian population in Russia, following Georgia's resolve to shift away from Russia and advance towards the EU and NATO, sent ripples of apprehension into Russian Armenians. The latter would strongly oppose to Armenia's non-Russian foreign policy choices to avoid angering Russia and thus provoking to mistreat their community. No wonder, the leadership of the Armenian community in Russia gave credit to Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, emphasizing its security implications for Russian Armenians.

Essentially, the 'Georgian lesson'- i.e Russian authorities' massive crackdown on Georgian community in Russia in response to Georgia's mounting rapprochement with the EU and NATO, coupled with the rise of nationalism in Russia, have reinforced Russian Armenians' fears about their safety and security. They would not feel safe amid hatred, pervasive racism and xenophobia and thus would encourage the Armenian Government to abstain from provoking Russia. No wonder Nikol Pashinyan did not cross the 'red line' and shortly after being put at the helm of Armenia, confirmed country's allegiance to Russia.

Overall, the analysis of the Russian Armenian community's impact on homeland politics is important in furthering our understanding of Armenia, where the Russian-led foreign policy choices significantly owe to the diasporic influence of Russian Armenians. Further research could provide in-depth insights into how the Armenian community in Russia affects the way that Russian policies are received and implemented in Post- Velvet Revolution Armenia.

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