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COMPLEX ANALYSIS OF RUSSIA – ARMENIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP (PART 2)

In the 2016 edition of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept appeared a note where the Republic of Armenia is uniquely recognized as a strategic partner of the Russian Federation. Of course, such a record would not have appeared in such an important political document without the high standard of military-political and economic cooperation between Russia and Armenia. For its part, Armenia's foreign policy doctrine unambiguously explains the Republic's aspiration to strengthen its close, strategic partnership with Russia. But as it is said, there is no relationship without a problem, as a problem – without a relationship. That is why there are some "black holes" in the bosom of Russian-Armenian relations. It should be noted, however, that none of them has been the basis for revising Armenia's foreign policy vector till today.

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As we pointed out in the first part of the research topic (European Political and Law Discourse, 2019, Volume 6, Issue 5), a note appeared in the 2016 edition of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (last issue as of today), where the Republic of Armenia is recognized as a strategic partner of the Russian Federation. Of course, such a record would not have appeared in such an important political document without the high standard of military-political and economic cooperation between Russia and Armenia. For its part, Armenia's foreign policy doctrine unambiguously explains the republic's aspiration to develop a close, strategic partnership with Russia, based on the traditional friendship between the two nations.¹ As a result, Armenia is considered one of Russia's closest allies in the post-Soviet space and the only ally in the South Caucasus. But as it is said, there is no relationship without a problem as a problem – without a relationship. That is why there are some "black holes" in the bosom of Russian-Armenian relations. It should be noted, however, that none of them has been the basis for revising Armenia's foreign policy vector till today. Strategic partnership with Russia has been the focus of Armenia's foreign policy since 1992.

At the official level, open talks on both visible and invisible problems in bilateral relations were equally avoided in Moscow and Yerevan. Moscow's point is clear: they just didn't need it. In principle, even in the case of Yerevan, it was clear: they could not dare to talk about these topics aloud. Discussions on problematic issues were mainly held in the NGO sector and various analytical centers. Discussions have shown that sensitivity to these problems is quite high in Armenian society. This means that the political problems between the two countries had some reflection on the public attitude.

For example, the Armenian community was shocked in 2015 by the horrific tragedy in Gyumri, when a military officer Valery Permyakov from the 102nd Russian military base, deployed in the same city, killed seven members of the Avetisyan family (The youngest of them was just 6 months old). However, the society was more shocked by the attitude of the Russian authorities and the Russian media towards this tragedy. During ongoing investigation and trial, the perpetrator was inaccessible to the Armenian judiciary that made the whole process just formal. Permyakov himself had been on a military base throughout this period, and despite the categorical demand of the Armenian side, his transfer was not carried out.

This particular criminal case has caused a serious crack inside Armenian society towards Russia. There was a feeling that a single soldier-killer was much more valuable to Russia than the whole Russian-Armenian Union and its future. All this resulted in large-scale protests and demands for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country. Although the authorities managed to disperse the protest at that point, however, the problem remained on the surface and still leads to the relations between the two countries as a black line.

¹ Foreign police. <<https://www.mfa.am/ru/foreign-policy/>>.

Increasing (especially in recent years) military-technical cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan caused huge outrage between the society and official specter of Armenia. Despite repeatedly publicly expressed dissatisfaction from Armenian officials, the situation has not changed. Official Moscow, however, either makes no comment or gives some vague explanations. Mostly we are familiar with the position of experts who are close to the Kremlin. In commenting on the issue, they point to the need to maintain military parity in the conflict region and explain Russia's actions by this reason (However, we do not know what is happening behind the scenes when the leaders of the two countries face each other at the negotiating table). The issue deteriorated especially after the four-day military confrontation in April 2016. In Yerevan, very severe assessments were made at both official and unofficial levels. The effectiveness of the collective security organization and the appropriateness of Armenian involvement in this format were questioned. Part of the political spectrum has even demanded a reset of the existing format of partnership with Russia.

It is no longer a secret that almost 85% of military imports of Azerbaijan come from Russia, that total value already exceeded \$ 5 billion. In September 2018, during a meeting with President Putin in the Russian city of Sochi, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev referred to Russia as its partner N1. He also emphasized the importance of increased military cooperation between the two countries and called it strategically important for Azerbaijan¹.

We have a classic pattern of the double standard in international relations, carried out by Russia: Russia, on the one hand, points Armenia in its foreign policy doctrine as a strategic partner, and on the other hand, develops military-technical cooperation with Armenia's geopolitical rival state Azerbaijan and supplies it with modern military equipment.

The beginning of a new era in Russian-Armenian relations is linked to the Velvet Revolution of 2018. The repeated statement by the triumphant of revolution and now active Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, that the format of the strategic partnership with Russia would not be revised, seems to make some impact on Kremlin's "leadership" because the process did not develop the same way like it was in case of Ukraine. We cannot say the same about the sentiments of pro-Kremlist experts and political scientists, their reaction was quite negative.

In general, the negative attitude of the Kremlin leaders towards "The color revolutions" is the same (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and finally Armenia). Any such event caused anger and distrust between them. As for the indoor experts, they were falling into complete hysteria and discussed these events at the national security level as a Western-backed special operation against Russia.

But in this particular case, Pashinyan was calmly congratulated the Prime Minister's chair. Both President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expressed hope that the partnership between the two countries would be strengthened further. For his part, Pashinyan also expressed gratitude to Putin, at the first meeting with him in Moscow, for the balanced position that Moscow has taken during the processes in Armenia. He also noted that there was something that was not subject to discussion and that was the strategic partnership between Russia and Armenia.

It is difficult to say whether Pashinyan's words were believed in Moscow or whether he was sincere. At the same time, contrary to his statements, opponents remembered his "old sins": Pashinyan was one of the seven deputies who voted against ratifying the Eurasian Economic Union's decision about Armenia's entrance in the union, in 2014². Also, while in opposition, he often criticized the previous government for its sharply pro-Russian foreign vector. Because of this, opponents accuse him of being unprincipled and opportunistic.

On the official level, the Kremlin's reaction to the sudden change of government in Armenia was modest and self-controlled. It voiced his concern through unofficial channels. For example, a prominent journalist and TV presenter M. Shevchenko doubts that the Armenian Revolution is linked to the ongoing conflict in Syria and hints at the role of the American Armenian Association.

Political scientist S. Markov critically assesses the composition of the new Armenian government and believes that the US influence is strong (Markov's attention is drawn by the figure of American liberal economist D. Ajemoglu, who became an adviser to Pashinyan).

¹ Военное сотрудничество Азербайджана и России выходит новый уровень.
<<https://aze.az/voennoe-sotrudnichestvo-azerbaydzhana-rossii-vikhodit.html>>.

² Парламент Армении ратифицировал договор о присоединении стран К ЕАЭС.
<<https://rus.azatutun.am/a/26725173.html>>.

A former journalist and now Rosneft spokesman Mikhail Leonitev made the most noticeable and at the same time scandalous statements on the radio station "Komsomolskaya Pravda". According to him, Armenia is simply a burden for Russia and nothing more, the country doesn't need anyone other than Russia, and if the Armenian citizens do not like Russia, then they can "go to hell." The announcement sparked such a resonance that Russian President's spokesman D. Peskov deemed necessary to divide it publicly. He said that Leontiev's statement had nothing to do with Moscow's official position. Later, Leontiev apologized for his remarks.

Vladimir Yuvseev, deputy director of the Institute of CIS Countries, is discussing this issue in the global context and assessing it as a US planned conspiracy. In his opinion, in post-revolutionary Armenia, the activation of the United States and Great Britain is noticed, which considers a negative event. "Negative, not because our interests in Armenia clash, but any weakening of military cooperation with Russia is undermining Armenia's territorial integrity" (end of the quotation)¹.

Alexander Dugin, the main ideologist of the Russian Eurasian Union, is most dramatically evaluating the events in Armenia. His assessment, along with his usual frankness and rigidity, is quite scandalous. He discusses developments in Armenia in a geopolitical context and considers the Armenian Revolution as a major threat to regional stability. Besides, he makes a rather sensational statement: "During the presidency of Serge Sargsyan, with the direct participation of Russia, serious agreements were reached on the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the agreement, five occupied regions around Nagorno-Karabakh should be transferred to the Azerbaijani side. Such a move would automatically reduce tensions in the conflict zone." (end of quotation). He says Pashinyan doesn't intend to fulfill that promise, which seriously aggravates the situation. He emphasizes Moscow's dissatisfaction with Armenia and says that Foreign Minister Lavrov has warned official Yerevan that geopolitical agreements cannot be violated².

During assessing the Armenian Revolution, the opinions of the Western political and public circles diametrically differ from the opinions of Russian political circles. Some experts and officials could not hide their delight when commenting on developments in Armenia. Among them, the solid magazine "Kommersant" named Armenia as a country of the year. However, along with the positive, some were skeptical about the event. For example, analyst of "Jamestown" fund, Vladimir Socor, believes that nothing has changed much for Armenia with this revolution, as the country remains committed to its geopolitical choice, which means continuing to live in Russian captivity³.

It seems that the events of spring 2018, developed in Armenia, came as a surprise to a group of pro-kremlin political experts. Obviously, they do not believe in Pashinyan's sincerity and consider him and his cabinet as a Western project that aims to explode Eurasian unity from inside.

It is difficult to say whether the Armenian Revolution and Prime Minister Pashinyan will become a barrel of gunfire in Putin's Eurasian space, but one thing is clear: Pashinyan does not look like a compliant vassal like Serge Sargsyan or even his predecessor Robert Kocharyan. During a meeting with President Putin on September 8, 2018, he expressed confidence that relations between the two countries would be based on mutual respect, and also emphasized the safeguard sovereignty and the importance of non-interference in the country's internal affairs⁴.

Moreover, in many cases, Pashinyan is also provocative in his statements and actions, which the Kremlin has not been accustomed to before. Moscow was shocked by his statement that Armenia could buy weapons from the US. He explained that Armenia was not limited in this matter and in case of a profitable proposal from the US it would be considered. In this form, he reacted to the statement of John Bolton, US National Security Adviser, during his official visit to Yerevan where he offered Armenia to buy American armaments⁵.

His statement was quite provocative towards Aliyev in the interview with "Al Jazeera": "I think Ilham Aliyev fears that the Armenian revolution may become a source of inspiration for the Azeri people and give them the desire to make similar changes in Azerbaijan as well. This is why his aggressive rhetoric

¹ Политолог нарисовал будущее Армении и Грузии (2019). <<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/01/09/politolog-armenii-i-gruzii.htm>>.

² Дугин, А. (2018). Пашинян дразнит русского медведя. <<https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180803/242902173.html>>.

³ Сокоп, В. Пашинян как и Саргсян – пленник России. <<https://haqqin.az/investigations/129182>>.

⁴ Путин провел переговоры с Пашиняном (2018). <<https://rg.ru/2018/09/08/putin-provel-peregovory-s-pashinianom.html>>.

⁵ Слова Болтона о продаже оружия вызвали неоднозначную реакцию в Армении. <<https://regnum.ru/news/2508704.html>>.

reinforced.”¹ (End of quotation)

The election of Pashinyan to the post of prime minister followed the arrest of ex-president Robert Kocharyan, and the arrest of then-secretary-general of the Collective Security Organization Yuri Khachaturov was no less scandalous.

One important nuance here is that Kocharyan is considered to be a close ally of President Putin and his closest friend. Also in August, at the first stage of the criminal prosecution, Putin personally called Kocharyan and congratulated him on his birthday.² And after detention, on December 28, he sent a New Year’s greetings and wished him spiritual strength. This fact was confirmed by Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.³ Kocharyan himself views the criminal prosecution against him as politically motivated and targeted by the new authorities against him and his family. He also accused the new government of incompetence and of trying to discredit the army.

Kocharyan’s statement about personal revenge on Pashinyan is motivated by the fact that Pashinyan himself was one of the leaders during the March 2008 events. He was then arrested and only released in 2011 by amnesty.

The arrest of Yuri Khachaturov (because of the same case as Kocharyan) also caused a different reaction. Moscow described the case as an act against the Collective Security Treaty Organization and as a weakening of its authority as an international institution.

And yet, why did Putin do this and why he allowed the development of events in Armenia autonomously?

This question has not lost its relevance until today, and there are various versions. First of all, the reason was probably that neither EU nor NATO flags were flying at the demonstrations in Yerevan. This meant that Armenia did not choose the same way as Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, Pashinyan stated from the stands that he was in favor of maintaining the status quo in relations with Russia. The fact is, no authority can pull off Armenia from Russian orbit because of its vulnerability to the international arena and its strong reliance on Russian military support. Besides, there are other important factors (private remittances, the political price of gas, etc.) unforeseen of them would be unreasonable for Pashinyan. All this was well felt in Moscow, and so they congratulated him calmly.

Another reason why the Kremlin did not risk it might have been that the chances of the Sargsian regime surviving, because of his unpopularity, were very low. It can be said that the regime could not be rehabilitated. That is why the Kremlin might have thought that the intervention was useless and preferred to keep the political face.

The fact that Kremlin’s imaginary calmness would not bring anything good emerged soon: Meanwhile, Pashinyan "even received the first yellow card for violating the rules of the game" – on January 1, 2019, Russian gas prices for Armenia rose to \$ 165 instead of the previous \$ 150.

In this field, Russia is a complete monopolist, and the picture is as follows: The gas supplier, the distributor and the owner of the gas pipeline is the same entity – the Russian Gazprom. If the price of natural gas for Armenia on the Georgian-Armenian border was \$ 150, for some reason it would almost double for consumers, which raised questions in public. However, the answer of Gazprom-Armenia, a subsidiary of Russian Gazprom, has always been that the company was working on a loss.

After the rise in prices for Russian gas, the government has spoken about the need to diversify its energy sector and has hinted at importing Iranian gas, but as it seems, this case is not simple as well. According to energy expert – Vage Davtyan, the option of importing Iranian gas is unprofitable, as, on the one hand, its price is around \$ 180-185 on the border, while on the other hand, Iranian gas has significantly lower quality than the Russian one. According to him, if Iranian gas is imported, its price will rise again, because the gas pipeline through which gas will flow to Armenia is owned by the same Gazprom and the Russian company will set the price accordingly⁴.

According to Arthur Gazinyan, director of the Center for European Studies at Yerevan State

¹ Никол Пашинян – Я готов к переговорам с Ильхамом Алиевым. <<https://1tv.ge/ru/news/nikol-pashinjan-ja-gotov-k-peregovoram>>.

² Путин поздравил Кочаряна с днем рождения. Разбираемся, что бы это Значило“? <newsarmenia.am/.../putin-pozdravil-kocharyana-s-dn>.

³ Путин пожелал «крепости духа» повторно арестованному экс-Президенту Армении. <<https://news.rambler.ru/caucasus/41501140/?utm>>.

⁴ Россия подняла цену на газ для Армении. <<https://jam-news.net/россия-подняла-цену-на-газ-для-армении/>>.

University, there is no longer any positive expectation in Armenian society in terms of relations with Russia¹. Some experts have also questioned the possible existence of Armenia's "Abkhazetisation" plan from Russia. If this is reality, then the philosophy of Russian-Armenian relations should automatically be revised. It is worth examining and analyzing whether it is compatible with the principles of sovereignty of the country. But is the Armenian government ready for it? This is a very difficult question, and it depends on many factors, including the appropriate resource base existing in the foreign policy. However, the Armenian assets in this regard, as we have already mentioned, are modest.

Recent developments in Armenia have shown that the order of the majority of society is in the fundamental reshaping of the country's domestic and foreign policy. That was the purpose of the Velvet Revolution of 2018. This means that the new government of the country, along with the young democracy, is facing a difficult test. Naturally, by focusing only on the country's internal problems, the degradation of government is inevitable, as the society is well aware that the country's main challenge is foreign policy and security issues. The latter is directly linked to the Karabakh conflict and the problem of foreign isolation coming from it. Therefore, the new Armenian authorities will have to take some effective steps to break the enchanted arc that has been holding the country's development perspectives for nearly three decades.

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¹ Армяно-российские отношения после "бархатной революции": новые возможности или новые проблемы. <<http://newsarmenia.am/news/analytics/armyano-rossiyskie-otnosheniya->>.