

Three Years After Armenia's Velvet Revolution: What To Expect Next?

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Abstract – The article explores the reasons, process, consequences, and expectations of Armenia's political change in spring of 2018 which later was called "Velvet Revolution". After three years of this event Armenia has faced divers challenges in its internal and external politics. The brief historical overview as well as the comparative analysis of post-soviet revolutions showcased that main differences between the cases of these post-soviet republics are mostly related to their foreign policies' vectors but the Armenian revolution has had predominantly internal character.

As an external challenge, the last war in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) has had a huge negative impact on Armenia's expectations for a better future. But the only way to resolve this conflict is still OSCE Minsk group co-chairs format. As for the final positive impact of civic participation to realize the values and ideals of revolutionary modernization in Armenia the political legitimacy institutionalization as well as balancing of foreign policy are needed.

Keywords – *Civic Participation, Velvet Revolution, Internal Expectations, External Expectations, CEPA, EU, EAEU.*

I. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Revolutions encompass mobilizations aiming to rapid transformations of both the nature of political power and wider social, economic, and juridical structures. Since the 1990s different kinds of revolutionary participation have been observed in post-soviet Armenia's political life. In this period the civic activism conditioned by some events of various social and political significance and amplitude varied from low to high level and vice versa. Since the independence movement the cases of civic activism in Armenia, as an expression of participatory culture, were mainly directed against the current authorities and their policies as an opposition first to the communist and after to authoritarian regime. Particularly these protests were characteristic for post-electoral developments in 1996, 2003, 2008, 2013 and for following years. It is important to underline that some protests, as political turbulence by different frequency in Armenia, were more active during presidential elections. Nevertheless, it should be noted that over time the civic participation has become a more stable political factor in Armenia, with certain stages of development being conditioned by the transition from chaotic participation to the systemic and well organized one. An organized nature of civic participation has already been noticeable in 2013 when during the post-election period, the opposition protests continued to last for about two months. It should be noted that the civic participation in Armenia has had both violent and non-violent forms but the most violent one was on March 1st, 2008 when 10 people were killed (Democracy on Rocky Ground, February 25, 2021). Only after 10 years of these cruel events, in April 2018 the Armenian society with the opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan (the current prime minister) has launched a

real revolutionary process by using exceptionally non-violent tools and methods. The success of the Armenian revolutionary process was due to the large media coverage and citizens' involvement.

The civic participation is a component of political culture. But some researchers misinterpret that Armenia has a typical post-Soviet political culture and for that, they put forward some arguments to substantiate this statement (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2016, p. 66). However, this statement is quite superficial. There is no common post-Soviet political culture by the simple reason that post-Soviet countries are not homogeneous in this respect. There are many cultural, civilizational, ethnic, religious and other differences that are obviously sufficient not to unify all post-Soviet countries under the same political culture. And what about political subcultures? How can the experience of Baltic post-Soviet countries be identified with the political culture of East Asian post-Soviet ones? These differences are clearly emphasized by their political regimes' type (Nations in Transit by Freedom House 2018, 2019, 2020).

Some Armenian researchers argue that due to the lack of political will on the part of the authorities, people resort to peaceful resistance in the streets, hoping to win there (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2016, p. 67). But I am convinced that under the rule of Armenia's former authorities there was not a lack of political will - there was a lack of political interest to lead the democratic changes in a good way. Until April-May of 2018 all massive protests against the authorities in Armenia have not reached their final goals. However, in essence the participatory culture has shaped a more complete, organized and purposeful civic attitude that succeeded in spring of 2018 thanks to its collective and effective tactics and soft methods. This popular movement called "Velvet Revolution" was the most effective demonstration of civic participation in Armenia in terms of used political technologies and achieved results which proved that the sovereign is not the government, but the people itself.

II. A COMPARISON OF POST-SOVIET REVOLUTIONS

In the post-Soviet period, the reasons of revolutionary processes are largely related to the logic to renounce the Soviet heritage and to ensure a democratic modernization. It is no coincidence that post-Soviet transformation was never seen as a continuation of the third wave of democratization (Torosyan & Sukiasyan, 2014, pp. 51-61) but was introduced as a totally different, independent process by the logic of its special political developments. And in the early 2000s, a number of post-Soviet countries began to experience revolutionary processes, which in some cases (in particular, in Ukraine) were held in several stages. So-called "Color Revolutions" (Mitchell Lincoln, A., 2012) in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan have resulted in the regime change in all three countries. However, from a decade-long perspective one may notice that the revolutionary changes in the political systems of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan did not actually take place (Kozłowski, 2016, p. 135). It is important to understand that the final effect of the post-Soviet transformation was neither a Western democracy nor a Soviet or Asian authoritarian state. The post-Soviet political reality is not a straightforward reference to an absolute rupture with the past. It is an inherently new reality based on an innovative combination of the Western standards, local traditions and the Soviet heritage (Kozłowski, 2016, p. 140).

Despite the revolutionary processes in post-Soviet space that have been called "Color revolutions" (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 mainly because of external factors and geopolitical orientations), however, the Armenian revolution of 2018 did not receive any "colored" qualification because of the absence of an external element and a geopolitical shift. The Armenian revolution has had predominantly internal character and included: *crystallization of the oligarchic politico-economic system, lack of perspectives for the improvement in the economic sphere and last but not least – constantly rising potential for civic disobedience outbreak*. At the same time it can be argued that external factors (e.g. growing animosity towards Russian Federation) did play minor role in the process, resulting in the fact that 2018 protests agenda lacked slogans which would relate to the geopolitical orientation of the country (Kubiak, 2018, p. 127). But even after the revolutionary process the Armenia's foreign policy needs some tactical adjustments.

From a European perspective, the Velvet Revolution represents a vindication of core European values thanks to the successful application of non-violent tactics and unusually disciplined and coordinated "people power" rallies and demonstrations. Protesters mobilizing against years of entrenched corruption and a serious lack of democracy represented a refreshing display of civic activism over apathy. This affirmation of European ideals also deepened as protest leaders took care to follow the constitutional path to political change (Giragosyan, 2019).

III. ARMENIA'S REVOLUTION PROCESS

Mass protests which erupted in Armenia in April 2018 were the biggest demonstrations in this country since the nineties of the XX century. With the dismissal of prime minister Serzh Sargsyan and appointment of the "temporary" government, the so called "*RejectSerzh*" movement has been quickly proclaimed as another *Velvet Revolution* (Foster, 2019). The 2018 protests led to such an unexpected outcome because of the number of factors: their well-thought organization based on the civil disobedience methods, simultaneous decentralization of the protesters and clearly defined aim – ousting the incumbent prime minister embodying corrupted, oligarchic political system. At the same time it seems that the "*RejectSerzh*" movement would not achieve such a success without the "legacy" of the civic, grassroots initiatives taking place in Armenia since 2008 and especially since 2013. All of these movements were highly interlinked and constituted continuous (however still incomplete) *creeping revolution* leading to the change of the oligarchic political system in Armenia (Kubiak, 2018, p. 125).

The civic protests against authorities in spring of 2018 were giving evidence that the political order in Armenia was not able to operate with efficiency. "A weak government, a government which lacks authority, fails to perform its function and is immoral in the same sense in which a corrupt judge, a cowardly soldier, or an ignorant teacher is immoral. The moral basis of political institutions is rooted in the needs of men in complex societies" (Huntington, 1968, p. 28). "The faster the enlightenment of the population, the more frequent the overthrow of the government. How high is the education level of unemployed, displeased and alienated, their destabilizing behavior gets more extreme form. The university alienated students make revolution, alienated graduates of technicians and secondary schools plan subversions, and alienated people with elementary education take part in less important political protesting forms" ((Huntington, 1968, p. 47). Nobody can deny that in Armenia enormous information flows have formed informed (enlightened) citizens. But the unemployed level was also high, and the number of alienated people between those who had different educational level, became politically extra active in April-May of 2018. If this issues have been considered in time, the authorities confidently could avoid the revolutionary political development. As manifestation of nonviolent civic participation, the Armenia's Velvet Revolution was a confrontation between the stereotyped and free minds, it was a conflict of values between the old (soviet) and new (independent) generations' socialization. That was a conflict between denying the old regime and striving the new.

Armenia's revolution methodology was soft but the context of it should be founded on values. The revolution of values should demolish nepotism, tribalism, clientelism and become a trampoline for meritocracy and democracy as the principal purpose of political modernization because "In democracy we get the government we deserve. If we find that our representatives are doing things that we consider wrong, we have to accept that we've set the game up this way. We can either allow it continue, get another player to play for us, or try and be a player ourselves (Tocqueville, 2002). The unprecedented civic activism and participation confirm that in Armenia the population has preferred to become a key player and change its representatives according to its will.

In post-revolutionary period, Armenia has to fight certain internal obstacles. One of them is so called "deep state" which plays a key role on destabilization of social and political life. The "Deep State" resists in all possible ways to the revolutionary modernization. It strives *de facto* to use a latent impact on authorities' decision making. In essence, it is harder to fight this phenomenon than to change the ruling elite representatives by a revolutionary way. However, the Deep State's breakdown is possible by structural and systemic changes and high level personnel's optimization.

IV. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXPECTATIONS

The *expectations* from the Velvet Revolution are subdivided into *internal* and *external* ones.

In sense of *internal expectations*, in line with the successful and efficient modernization it is necessary *to boost the party system institutionalization* because none of regimes can really become democratic without party system development. Even free and without frauds elections can only provide short-term political stability. From this perspective the regime in Armenia is particularly vulnerable. In this case, autocrats are especially susceptible to defection by allies due to the weakness of the ruling parties. At the same time, the regime's grounding in a loose coalition of competing ruling parties makes it more vulnerable to high-level defections (Way, 2008, pp. 66-67).

The legitimacy institutionalization is another expected results from the Velvet Revolution because in the information society it is impossible to be a charismatic leader for a long time. Information flows are so massive that the charisma can gradually weaken. This explains why in developed countries the leaders are qualified with an institutional legitimacy. The same problem exists also in

Armenia. Consequently, how fast but without haste the charisma turns into institutional legitimacy, so faster the crisis is restrained, and the country relies not on individuals but institutions.

The next expectation is related to the **technical expertise** because after the revolution the Armenian government has a pronounced lack of experience, meaning that it has an immediate need for technical expertise.

We need also an **administrative and regulatory reform**. In order to deepen and expand political reform, especially in the critical areas of legal and judicial reform, there needs to be more of an emphasis on administrative and regulatory reform.

The **legislative training** is another urgency. As three-quarters of the new parliament are first-time legislators, they should benefit from parliamentary exchanges, study visits, and legislative training in the areas of parliamentary oversight, the role of committees, and the drafting of legislation.

We have to strengthen the **anti-corruption activity**. Domestic security organs handle anti-corruption cases with little or no oversight, the weak role of the judiciary creates serious concern. To address this, we need to create new anti-corruption bodies and share the experience of western countries to train investigators in best practice.

We also need to deepen the **institutional accountability**. In the wake of Armenia's move to a parliamentary system, and with no significant opposition party in parliament, there is an absence of institutional accountability and checks and balances capable of introducing a degree of constructive discourse and competition.

The next challenge for us is **to innovate domestic technologies**. The Armenian government should introduce a new policy initiative to offer incentives for innovation, especially for the country's stagnant science and technology sector.

As for the **external expectations** they are related to our relationship not only with eastern but also with western partners to achieve more balanced cooperation with both sides. But while Armenia remains heavily dependent on Russia, the possibility of fundamental democratic reforms across the country is clearly conditional on effective implementation of the European Union's policies and practices.

The Armenian economy remains extremely vulnerable with huge dependence on the remittances sent particularly from Russia and other countries. Indeed, the EU's support for economic reforms would have yielded more tangible results in Armenia, had not the latter been bound by constraints determined by the Russia-led EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union). Armenia is considerably constrained to boost trade and broader economic cooperation with the EU (Terzyan, 2019, p. 34).

However, the revolution has had little effect on Armenia's foreign policy challenges. Armenia's immediate geopolitical context is still a difficult one for the country. Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Iran are our only direct neighbors; and Armenia, being involved in a long-simmering war with Azerbaijan (Giragosyan, 2019), has become weaker aftermath the war in 2020. The war in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) has had a huge negative impact on Armenia's expectations for a better future that we are able to build up (Kramer, 2021). In the sense of external expectations the **CEPA has a very important role for Armenia**. The post-revolution Armenia's consistent compliance with the CEPA provisions may produce considerable positive effects on the consolidation of democracy and country's significant rapprochement with the EU. And we have to state that CEPA already entered into force on March 1st, 2021.¹ This is a huge and sustainable step forward for the consolidation of EU-Armenia relations.

Actively putting resources and energy into assisting Armenia in its democratic transition would showcase the impact that EU efforts can have. Armenia could become an exemplar within the Eastern Partnership. Were the EU-Armenia relationship to strengthen, this would likely also support Armenia's efforts to achieve greater strategic balance. The EU can help sustain Armenia's democratic transition by encouraging a vibrant and diverse political scene to flourish (Giragosyan, R., 2019). The next external expectation is related to the ability of Armenia in becoming a **bridge between EU and EAEU**.

After the Velvet Revolution Armenia is in the phase of pivotal changes. Notably, Armenia is the unique EAEU member country that has signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with EU. We need to state that Armenia has the highest score of democracy in the EAEU. This fact is interesting because Armenia as EAEU member has one of lowest GDP (per capita - \$ 4.53 thousand) (Avanesov, 2020). It is very difficult to keep a high indicator of democracy when the country is in a deep

¹ **The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force.** Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_782, (April 13, 2021).

economic crisis. It showcases that the Armenian society, on its cultural and civilizational roots, is predisposed to democracy. The comparison of these two indicators (the index of democracy and GDP) proves the high democratic potential of the Armenian society. From this viewpoint Armenia has a real chance to become a mediator or a bridge between EU and EAEU. We have to be optimistic about the future of Armenia-EU-EAEU relations. We have a considerable potential to expand economic and cultural cooperation. Only in this way Armenia, being a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, has a real chance to become a sustainable bridge between EU and EAEU, opening up new opportunities for businessmen and investors.

Considering the current regional developments in South Caucasus and its near abroad it is important to underline the role of **regional communications and state borders unblocking**. This project will be effective if neighboring countries can build reliable relations in this after war hard time. Without restoring the balance of forces between Armenia and Azerbaijan and without a real will from both sides for a peaceful conflict settlement in the framework of OSCE Minsk group² co-chairs: USA, France and Russia, the new risks of regional destabilization will become more realistic, taking into account the Azerbaijanis recent bellicose rhetoric and ambitions to Armenia's territorial integrity (Syunik region) even in post-war period. Without a peace treaty the sustainable conflict settlement is impossible.

V. CONCLUSION

Summarizing the analysis of all above mentioned issues we can conclude that the Armenia's Velvet Revolution was a kind of revolutionary modernization with public large-scale support and civic participation based on expressive political behavior. Aftermath this process the civic engagement in Armenia has raised to more stable level by becoming a key factor for a political change. As for Armenia's Velvet Revolution, even after three years it is still early to assess it completely because this political process is not yet over. In the framework of reasons for such kind of political developments in spring of 2018 we have to highlight *the fall of management degree; the authorities' gradually delegitimization; the dominance of nepotistic links in administration circles; the periodical growth of criminocrats' influence on governing system; the corruption of rich and poor people* when the first was changing money with power and the second was changing power with money. Necessarily the consolidation of civic participation must become the most important and sustainable precondition for political modernization and civic culture development in Armenia. To realize the values and ideals of revolutionary modernization in Armenia the political legitimacy institutionalization as well as balancing of foreign policy are needed. In this regard the constructive political discourse with harmonious political activities must become the milestone for political system stability in Armenia.

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