

THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTION

AN UNFINISHED CABLE

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Ministry
of Foreign Affairs
Republic of Poland



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WARSAW 2020

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This publication reflects the views of the author and not the official stance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.

Cover photo

Khor Virap Monastery panorama at sunrise
in front of Ararat Mountain, Armenia; Shutterstock.com

Proofreading

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Technical editor and cover designer

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ISBN 978-83-66091-58-0 (pb)

ISBN 978-83-66091-59-7 (pdf)

Publisher

Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych,

ul. Warecka 1a, 00-950 Warszawa

www.pism.pl

Print

Centrum Poligrafii Sp. z o.o.

ul. Łopuszańska 53, 02-232 Warszawa

In 2018, *The Economist* proclaimed Armenia the country of the year. What prompted the leading global weekly to put such an intense spotlight on a small and peripheral country? It was, of course, the events that had taken place in Armenia that year called the “Velvet Revolution,” or frequently “Reject Serzh,” or the “Revolution of Love,” the “Sneakers Revolution,” but definitely not a “colour” revolution. Some Armenian politicians did not call it a revolution at all even as it was happening. Others did but changed their mind later.

Two years later, it looks to be still too early to assess the revolution and its impact. Diplomats serving in Armenia at that time sent plenty of reports and analyses. In the pre-digital age, these used to be cables, telegrams, or dispatches. Now, they are simply diplomatic emails, sometimes better protected than the regular ones, and sometimes not at all.

The challenge in front of present-day diplomats is that they are no longer the primary source of information concerning events and developments in a foreign country. They no longer can compete with the speed of social media and the pace of the news cycle. If something dramatic happens, the authorities back home can view pictures and videos, listen to commentaries by everybody and judge public reactions before any diplomat is

ready to relay the message. And probably a diplomat should not feel part of the news race. Of course, there will always be space left to report on facts, views, and opinions hidden from the public eye, as well as to practice diplomatic gossip. A diplomat's judgement may still hold greater influence on the perception of events by decision-makers than the media commentators. But this role should rather be to give an assessment of the events from a strategic, distant perspective, and most importantly, to prepare the recipients of these notes for future developments, in essence to give them policy advice.

But strategic assessment takes time. And the global diplomatic roller-coaster does not allow those in charge to simply revert to past actions. Every day, they wake up to a new political theme, new political crisis, and new challenge. They live in an overextended present, an overwhelming "now."

Most of the assessment cables about the revolution remain incomplete. There is also little opportunity or zeal to complete them. Harold Wilson used to say that a week is a long time in politics. Today, in international politics a day has become a long time.

What was happening in Armenia in the spring of 2018 was quite special, even by global standards. Ordinary people in remote corners of the world were able to discover Armenia for themselves through the prism of those developments. Is any of this still in their memories? Do the events that happened in Armenia still hold any meaning for people outside the country?

Even two years after the revolution, no one can claim a final answer. The premise of this paper is that this answer still matters.

THE DIPLOMATIC CONTEXT

The author of this essay served from 2015 to 2019 as the ambassador and head of the delegation of the European Union to Armenia. He is a professional of the Polish diplomatic service. He joined the European External Action Service (EEAS) on a temporary contract for a one-time assignment.

The diplomatic service of the European Union is still, to some degree, a work in progress. The EEAS was established under the Lisbon Treaty to assist the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in implementing her/his duties. As stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty: “This service shall work in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the Member States and shall comprise officials from relevant departments of the General Secretariat of the Council and of the Commission as well as staff seconded from national diplomatic services of the Member States.” It became operational on 1 December 2010.

It is by now a solid and well-organised structure employing around 4,000 statutory and external staff in the headquarters and 140 delegations around the world. But its identity is still being developed.

A strong tendency of the past years, driven in particular by officials serving as temporary agents from national diplomatic services of the Member States was to make the EEAS look and act like a regular diplomatic service. This applied primarily to the functioning of EU diplomatic outposts—the delegations.

The delegations perform functions similar to regular embassies with some exceptions. First, they do not have consular sections and do not perform consular functions. Yet, they serve

as local platforms for coordination of Schengen countries and consular crisis-management. Second, they do not have military sections or military attaches. In some delegations, personnel with security-related expertise have been deployed.

The political role of the delegations stems from their role as the local EU presidency invested in them by the Lisbon Treaty. The routine political functions of the delegations do not differ much from regular embassies. They monitor the political situation in the country of accreditation, collect information, prepare reports, and serve as a channel of communication between Brussels and the institutions of the receiving state. The role of the presidency implies additional functions, mainly linked with the challenge of coordinating the positions of the Member States and initiating collective action. In some places, arriving at a common (and meaningful) position of all Member States is a Sisyphean task. This was not the case in Yerevan.

The EU diplomatic family in Yerevan is small and consists of altogether 11 permanent diplomatic representations, the smallest number in the wide European area. There are, of course, understandable differences in the perception of the situation among the Member States. Sometimes these views are dictated by the specificity of their bilateral relations. However, in past years the local European family of ambassadors in Yerevan maintained a quite remarkable proximity of views on the developments in and around Armenia. Any differences were ironed out in discussions and consultations. It is more than obvious that such proximity of views makes the position of the European Union only stronger.

In some ways, Yerevan can be called quite exceptional in terms of the harmony of European views. One can try to explain it by noting that for none of the Member States was the country considered a special priority. Therefore, the local diplomats had quite vast space for their own initiatives and were able to control the assessments of their headquarters. Whatever the reasons, the image of the EU as a collective player was fairly strong in Armenia.

There were times before the revolution when some Armenian officials tried to imply that the assessments delivered by the head of the EU delegation, whose normal duty is to serve as the point person when voicing collective positions, did not reflect the views of the Member States. These tactics failed. On several occasions when the officials attempted to challenge the head of delegation in public, the ambassadors of the key Member States showed strong solidarity with the voice of the EU delegation. This solidarity amplified the EU voice and made the EU a key international actor in Armenia.

The similarity of views facilitated collective action. The European Union was able to make important political statements on domestic developments in Armenia. The EU diplomatic family used to meet regularly with the top Armenian officials and deliver collective messages. The Union also jointly undertook public diplomacy initiatives and cultural diplomacy events.

One may say that this strong political unity on display in Armenia was an exception rather than a rule. Probably so. It is no secret that there are capitals worldwide where the EU family struggles to arrive at a meaningful common denominator. No

doubt about it. Another challenge sometimes is to synchronise the positions agreed in the various working parties of the Council of the European Union in Brussels with the instructions received by the diplomatic representatives in specific capitals. Once, when an ambassador of a member country in one capital was reminded of the common position elaborated in Brussels, he replied that it reflected the views just in Brussels and did not have to be extended elsewhere. Hopefully, with time similar incidents will not be repeated. Coordination and harmonisation at all levels and in all diplomatic fields are always key to effectiveness.

The common foreign policy of the EU still attracts a lot of criticism—as much as the performance of the office of its high representatives.

Big EU states are blamed for pushing their national foreign policy agenda independently and trying to use the common foreign policy mechanism mainly for pedagogical purposes—to align smaller EU states with their views. Small EU Member States are sometimes criticised for narrow-mindedness and *vetocracy*, for delaying the elaboration of a common denominator by insisting on their petty issues and egoistic interests. And indeed, any EU insider can cite good examples of both. Sometimes, such cases are simply blown out of proportion. To some extent they are justifiable. The Union is a relatively big and diversified group, and foreign policy (diplomacy) remains in the perceptions as one of the crown jewels of state sovereignty.

At the same time, common foreign policy has its undeniable achievements. One of the most difficult tests has been the

war in Ukraine and the policy towards Russia. Despite much pressure, the EU has been able to stick to its principles, maintain sanctions, and support the territorial integrity of Ukraine, a fact that deserves more than just appreciation. The high representatives have played leading roles in the Iranian nuclear deal and Kosovo-Serbia reconciliation, both examples of relevance. Yet they have been absent from the Normandy Format on Ukraine or the Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh. Some observers maintain that the presence of the EU representatives in key negotiation and mediation formats is a condition *sine qua non* for building appropriate political and diplomatic standing for the EU as a collective global actor.

Some experts say that the best catalyst for common foreign policy would be a common EU permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It is difficult to disagree even if this does not look like a realistic option in the foreseeable future. But generally, in all international setups, if the EU and its Member States are reserved only one seat and one microphone at the table, the pressure to speak with one voice is much greater. And if the leaders of EU countries are serious about their statements that they want to see the Union as a global player on par with the U.S. and China, they must become accustomed to speaking with one voice.

European security and defence policy has also seen remarkable progress. The EU since 2004 has deployed more than 20 military and civilian missions on all continents in the world. Some other pundits believe, however, that a common foreign and security policy can become solid only when the EU builds its own army and develops a detailed defence strategy.

The big political question is how far this one European voice in international politics should extend. In some way, the answer to this question derives from the different expectations of individual Member States concerning the future development of European integration. Those countries and political circles pressing for more integration will insist on strengthening common foreign policy and its institutions. Those favouring a less integrationist approach will remain cautious. Nevertheless, even with the present diversity of national policies, the potential for a common denominator is considerable.

As seen in capitals worldwide, the Member States are as a rule keen to speak with one voice and through the single EU microphone on issues pertaining to human rights, democracy, and rule of law. This relates, in particular, to places where such topics are quite inconvenient and may risk inflicting damage to the national bilateral agendas of the Member States. One may say that convenience is the biggest driver of EU collective action. When a partner hears unpleasant messages delivered under the EU banner, it is somewhat awkward for it to retaliate by using bilateral channels with individual states.

The propensity to speak with one voice is also strong on global issues like trade regimes (where the Commission has its prerogatives legally spelled out), environment and climate change, and development assistance. On these issues, acting as one bloc is a prerequisite for being at all relevant.

And sometimes, this one voice can really change the balance of power in international organisations. A good example is the Council of Europe. The European Union, if supported by some candidate countries, can command the necessary voting

majority and decide on any issue of relevance in the Committee of Ministers. No wonder that one previous Secretary-General (coming from a non-EU country) sought a promise from the leaders of the EU not to extend the Union's common foreign policy mechanisms to the Council of Europe and never to act as a bloc there. The EU speaking in unison continues to be a political nightmare to some of its partners, as evidenced by some open public statements globally.

This one voice should naturally originate in Brussels. Some national leaders will, of course, always be tempted to pose as the spokespersons for Europe in their global contacts. Some other national leaders will not, on the other hand, miss any opportunity to distance themselves publicly from Brussels even if they privately greenlight its statements. Such atavisms are natural and will not be neutralised soon. Yet, the stronger and more charismatic leadership of the Brussels-based officials and institutions, the more chances for a meaningful single European voice.

Many experts have complained that the Member States, when appointing high representatives on foreign policy, avoid heavyweight politicians. The key criterion is the balance between the political families. One result of this is that Socialist Party candidates have helmed EU diplomacy for several years now (Borrell, Mogherini, Ashton, and previously Solana). How their political affiliation has affected their foreign policy views can, if at all, only be the subject of speculation, which emerges from time to time. It is believed that so far, the most visible imprint on EU public activities as high representative was left by Javier Solana.

The job has remained outside the reach of the region of Central and Eastern Europe so far. No representative from that region has been selected for the post. Does it matter? Well, can you imagine a high representative from that region who could deliver a 45-minute programme speech at the annual conference of EU ambassadors without discussing the role of Russia or even without mentioning its name?

One can argue that without a strong and charismatic personality, the capacity of EU diplomacy to initiate common action will remain reduced. A high representative conducting political dialogue with other leading global partners limiting herself/himself to the recitation of bureaucratically cast LTTs (Lines to Take) will not generate much added-value.

Kissinger once demanded to know the phone number when he wanted to call Europe. But he would not be happy with voicemail either.

The primary responsibility for the right profile and ambitious aspirations of the high representative rests with key Member States. Without their clear commitment to strengthen the profile and the office of the high representative, all talk of more robust common policy would be treated as mere lip service.

One structural deficiency of the EEAS is the lack of a political layer of officials immediately below the post of high representative. The high representative's number of commitments makes it obviously impossible to ensure his/her presence at all events requiring this political level. Member States normally have state secretaries, undersecretaries of state, assistant secretaries, and other functions considered political whose incumbents can deputise the minister of foreign affairs.

Within the European Union, different deputization models have been tried, including ministers of foreign affairs of the country holding the rotating presidency, other commissioners, or the EEAS Secretary-General. They have been requested to speak for the high representative at political-level events. None of these options have proved to be satisfactory for various reasons. But more importantly, sometimes it is clearly visible that bureaucratic reasoning prevails over political thinking in the daily activities of the service, in particular in those areas not directly of personal interest to the high representative or his/her cabinet.

One may say, after all, why bother: Political thinking should derive from national diplomacies. The answer is they should care about the timely political guidance stemming from the EEAS, and yet there must always be a core of people inside the service capable and willing to take the risk of political thinking. Even the most talented and meritocratic bureaucracy cannot substitute for its absence.

Bureaucrats, defined in the best Weberian sense of the word, try to avoid political quagmires. Where politicians see opportunity, bureaucrats can sometimes see only risk. Not once have EEAS managers tried to defer decisions that they considered to be politically risky. This would not happen in any foreign ministry of a key Member State.

Good, professional management is essential to any diplomatic service. Sometimes, it is necessary that the role of the EEAS should extend in its ambitions beyond simple bureaucratic management—in harmony with the Member States. There are, of course, still some old hands at Rond Point Schuman in

Brussels who miss the times of the Commission DG RELEX, which gave them a sense of independence from the views of the Member States, but those times are gone forever. The EEAS cannot be detached from the Member States and at the same time show the necessary political initiative. Of all apparent circles which cannot be squared, this one is doable.

The EU possesses now more diplomatic representations than any single member country alone. There are still some structural problems affecting the efficiency of the work of the delegations. The main one is the duality of budgets, personnel, and procedures. The delegations work on two budgets: one emanating from the European Commission and the other from the EEAS; personnel are delegated by both the Commission and the EEAS. The procedures for assessing staff performance are also dual, as are the decision-making routines, too. The good thing is that heads of delegations are double-hatted and have a mandate from both the Commission and the EEAS. But sometimes this quite rigid duality may be a source of problems, in particular when it comes to special situations when flexibility and synergy are particularly required.

Whatever may be said about the changing roles of diplomatic posts nowadays, in some places the role of local EU representation is of decisive importance. It starts obviously with the post of ambassador. The selection process for this post is quite lengthy and complex. What makes it difficult is the requirement to observe all the necessary quotas and balances—institutional (30% for national diplomats), national (a fair reflection of the sizes of individual Member States), and gender. It turns the whole exercise into quite a demanding challenge, like a jigsaw puzzle. Complicating it even further is the frequent, very

intensive political lobbying of Member States for some posts. Thus, sometimes one can get the impression that what matters is good, defensible overall statistics rather than individual appointments. While the gender and institutional quotas do not generate criticism today, the national distribution nevertheless still gives rise to many questions. Some countries are considered to be over-represented in some regions. Coincidentally, three out of seven ambassadorial posts in Eastern Europe were taken by the end of 2019 by diplomats of one EU Member State.

One outcome of the procedure is that every year quite a number of ambassadorial posts are taken by Commission, Council, or EEAS officials who have not had previous ambassadorial experience or have no diplomatic experience at all. One may say that it is no different to at least some national diplomatic services in which political appointees and non-MFA officials at ambassadorial posts are a matter of course. But it can become problematic when one expects from a local EU ambassador more than just a managerial role and his/her political skills are not well-tested. The issue is not where candidates for ambassadorial posts come from, after all, it's just another profession without any gnosis involved. It is about developing and testing some special qualities that any ambassador in a political leadership role should have.

Managerial capacity and knowledge are considered in Brussels to be essential. Rightly so. The Commission specifically expects the heads of delegation to play a hands-on role in managing huge development assistance programmes. But sometimes these qualities are not enough when the EU ambassador has to operate in a politically sensitive environment and must become a true local leader for the EU diplomatic family.

Political skills are sometimes less relevant in countries where the ambassador does not have any working contacts with the leadership of the country, meets at most once a year with the foreign minister, but otherwise circles around at ceremonial gatherings, or accompanies visitors from Brussels. They are not so relevant when the public diplomacy functions are restricted by the receiving state. But if one expects the EU ambassador to be a collective leader, a *primus inter pares* among the EU national ambassadors, these political competences are decisive for a meaningful performance.

Some of those candidates who are disappointed (not selected for posts for which they applied) or strong (in their diplomatic experience) from national services have not once complained that in the vast majority of cases the selection settles on a mid-managerial (head of division-level) candidate. It was probably a safe bet when the delegations were DG RELEX outposts, but today it can look quite anachronistic.

On the other hand, it is true that in some Member State capitals, strong and charismatic EU ambassadors are not particularly favoured. In some places, this or that national ambassador would even wish to control the contacts and messages of the EU ambassador, obviously in vain.

But one of the most pedestrian of all obstacles to the elevation of the EU delegations to a more politically consequential role are their understaffed political sections worldwide. The delegation in Armenia is one of many such examples. The Political Section, operating with two diplomatic officers and two local staff positions responsible for the preparation of numerous reports (political, thematic, end-of-the-year, and

so on), initiating local political action on many small issues, maintaining contacts with a vast array of partners, including international ones (also organisations), monitoring press and liaising with media, can barely cope with the tasks. This is especially the case since national Member State embassies expect the EU delegation to be always better informed and act on their collective behalf. There was no budget for employing local analysts or political or security experts. The comparison of the size of the EU political section with the political sections of other big players like the U.S. or China, not to mention Russia, leads always to a sad conclusion.

Without a solid number of competent “foot soldiers,” you cannot go into any diplomatic battle for global relevance for the long term. But occasional successes are still possible.

LEVERAGE

Armenia is one country where the main leverage the EU has had at its disposal is development assistance. Together with its Member States, the Union has accounted for roughly 60% of all foreign assistance to Armenia in recent years. In those eastern neighbourhood countries where the declared ultimate policy goal of the ruling circles is integration with the European Union, as in the case of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the political “carrots” may sometimes be more valued than economic ones in the daily activities of the European Union. Those countries care a lot about a good political image justifying the credibility of their aspirations. Too strong criticism from the side of the EU about their reform performance undermines

the political position of the elites on the domestic front. This factor gives the Union a strong voice on such issues as the fight against corruption, the state of democracy and free media, independence of the judiciary, and the neutrality and effectiveness of the civil service.

Armenia has never stated that it sees its future in the European Union; however, it has declared on many occasions, before and after the revolution, that it shares common values with the EU. It has attached importance to having a good image in the West, also as part of its balancing act, considering its strong security dependence on the alliance with Russia. As well, before the revolution, it needed positive assessments from the West for the sake of its domestic propaganda. As one Armenian civil-society activist observed before the revolution, “because of weak internal legitimacy, the regime needed strong external legitimacy.”

Yet, due to the country’s economic vulnerability over the years, successive Armenian governments have been interested in receiving foreign development assistance.

In 2019, annual bilateral development assistance to Armenia from the EU was projected to exceed €70 million. This was roughly double the amount allocated annually just a couple of years before. Overall, the EU has provided more than half a billion euros to Armenia since its independence.

EU assistance is not meant to be charity. It is not about alleviating the hardships experienced by a poor country even if Armenia for many years has been categorised as the second-poorest country in the wider European area (after Moldova,

with Ukraine since 2014 dropping below Armenia due to the obvious events).

EU assistance is meant to promote modernisation and foster reforms. One of the priority challenges for any EU ambassador in a country like Armenia has been to make the assistance more effective.

The model of EU development assistance has some inherent systemic peculiarities that must be considered in the process of optimising its effectiveness. First, there is a natural tendency among the local operations staff to think big. The limited staff resources make it practically very difficult to manage small but numerous projects. In Armenia, the doubling of the financial envelope has corresponded with an effective freeze on staff, which has meant a considerable additional burden on individual project managers. There were among them some who had to manage more than 20 projects simultaneously.

The defensive reflex, especially on the part of managers, is to go for big projects. In Armenia, this meant a preference for large infrastructure projects or large comprehensive contracts. And large projects, especially in infrastructure, in particular, if they are blended with big development loans, have had the tendency to become stuck for various reasons, be delayed or postponed. This resulted by 2019 in more than €150 million in frozen or unused funds mainly because of the postponement of the implementation of signed contracts in Armenia.

Big projects can make a lot of impact and provide a lot of visibility, yet in terms of the modernisation effect, sometimes much better results are achieved by smaller grants tailored to transformational projects.

Second, a field staff is under pressure to spend the allocated financial envelope. Money not committed to concrete projects must be returned to the central budget (and ultimately to the Member States). No Commission DG feels comfortable reporting unused allocations. The big paradox is that sometimes in some countries, not spending money brings more political and transformational impact than spending it.

Third, the assessment of the work of operations is based on technocratic criteria rather than political. Some call it the “tyranny of KPIs” (key performance indicators). These technocratic criteria do not leave much space for political turbulence (like the revolution in Armenia) and other “black swan” events or externalities. But as a rule, it is simply impossible to predict such developments in the planning process. In recent years, the Commission has put firm emphasis on the policy impact of projects. Yet, managers sometimes believe that areas where the EU does not invest money in its projects can be left out of the policy review.

Fourth, the EU does not have its own implementation agency. It funnels its money through the national development agencies of its Member States (German GIZ, French AFD, Swedish SIDA, Danish DANIDA, and others), as well as international development institutions (UNDP), banks (the World Bank), or international organisations (Council of Europe). Sometimes, these organizations have their own specific policy goals in a given area which do not mirror exactly the objectives of the European Union. They certainly have their own visibility priorities that do not have to harmonise with the EU’s expectations. Sometimes, such discrepancies can be combined in a cooperative way. Other times, however,

they can lead to very practical problems limiting the expected impact of the EU funds. The calls for establishing a proper EU development agency re-emerge from time to time, but they have no chance to succeed at the moment.

Fifth, the natural rotation of expat staff (including the head of delegation) makes it difficult to ensure long-term continuity. Project managers spend four to six years in one place. They work on projects that sometimes come to fruition after their departure. The successors come with their own ideas, sometimes deriving from their personal experience in previous assignments. Of course, this gives a big advantage to the local staff who are employed on contracts with indefinite duration and who become the natural continuity factor. This is not without risk. The normal timespan for project implementation is three years, but not once it became evident in Armenia that any lasting impact requires continuity of engagement much longer than a single project or the stint of one project manager. Armenia offers plenty of examples where some good ideas needed follow-up projects ensuring multi-year continuity.

Sixth, EU grants through the so-called budget support channel should require much more stringent conditionalities. Armenia used to be quite an active beneficiary of budget support transfers. The idea behind them is that the government receives the money, which is sent directly to its accounts, in exchange for the implementation of agreed benchmarks related to reforms (adoption of legislation, capacity-building, the establishment of institutions, etc.). Every government prefers to have these benchmarks defined in a way that gives it freedom in interpreting them. The EU has a strict procedure for reviewing the performance of the partner government. If, however, the

benchmarks are too numerous and trivial, the impact of their implementation is very symbolic. Likewise, the government agencies responsible for their implementation have practically no direct stake in pursuing them since the money awarded for the implementation does not go to them but to the Ministry of Finance.

Seventh, the planning and implementation process is long and complex. As already mentioned, it takes several years to make things happen, and the process involves local EU staff, managers in Brussels, the Member States, the partner government and its agencies, and implementation partners. And once something is launched, it is not so simple to change it. The financial agreements are amendable but, if substantial, the changes must get the approval of the Member States. If something extraordinary happens that necessitates the redirection of the money, it takes a lot of prophetic capabilities and creativity on the part of the managers. The story of mobilising EU money to support the Armenian elections in 2017 and 2018 is a good example. Only thanks to the extraordinary mobilisation of EU staff both in Yerevan and Brussels was the necessary funding ensured. The Union does not have any serious discretionary, reserve, or war-chest funds that can be released locally in time of need.

The EU in recent years has been involved in supporting areas that inevitably have political connotations, for example, reform of the judiciary. By 2018, the Union had invested more than €50 million in reforming the Armenian judiciary. The money was generally spent well in projects related to, for instance, e-governance projects dealing with legal services. However, the Armenian judiciary continued to suffer from the lack of public

trust, mismanagement of justice, and clear cases of politically motivated sentences. In short, without a political approach to the issue, the European Union's public image would become quite vulnerable. The EU local representatives, including the ambassador, had to embark on a path of open dialogue with the authorities and the society to communicate the Union's concerns, preoccupations, and even its defensive narrative.

Take another sensitive issue—the fight against corruption. By 2018, of the more than €30 million allocated to Armenia to help it fight corruption, only about half of it could be spent because of the unsatisfactory performance on the part of the government. Could the EU be silent on this issue?

From 2016, the Armenian side was supposed to implement quite an innovative instrument—the Human Rights Budget Support Agreement. The Armenian partners sometimes had difficulty in carrying out some of its benchmarks, such as those relating to the conduct of elections or preventing domestic violence. The EU was contractually obliged to share its concerns on these issues with its Armenian counterparts. It had not only the right but the obligation to speak about it, also in public.

Consequently, the time and energy of the EU ambassador were dominated by Armenian domestic issues. In retrospect, the usual foreign relations agenda, including the engagement in the negotiations of the CEPA agreement and monitoring developments related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, did not consume more than 20% of the ambassador's time during his tenure. The remaining 80% was spent on domestic issues. In a bilateral national ambassadorial role, this proportion is normally quite reversed.

WALKING A TIGHTROPE

No host country likes foreign ambassadors who are publicly visible and talkative, unless, of course, they constantly praise the performance of the authorities. When they start to sound critical, they may be seen as a nuisance.

In good old times of classic diplomacy, ambassadors rarely engaged in public speaking activities. Even now, many ambassadors open their mouth in public not more often than once a year just to read out a speech at a reception marking their country's independence or some other nationally significant day. But that is rapidly changing. Public diplomacy has become the core of daily ambassadorial duties.

Host countries must choose how they manage the increased public activities of the resident ambassadors. Sometimes they try to restrict them, even in quite democratic countries. One country not so long ago decided to require foreign diplomats to give prior notice of their public speeches (with the written text of speeches attached). This policy was, however, quickly abandoned.

When the host country does not like something said by a foreign diplomat, it reacts. It can be a friendly rebuke but sometimes even bitter public polemics. A diplomat can be summoned to provide explanations. At worst, he/she can be declared *persona non grata* and be ejected from the country. But that is by then already a serious diplomatic spat that normally prompts retaliation. Sometimes he/she can be treated as a *de facto persona non grata* when the officials of the host country politely refuse to have any contact with him/her. It is no secret

that even an EU ambassador can experience this. Sometimes, the ambassador must resign because of it, even if the statements used as a pretext for the diplomatic ostracism were made in very private meetings.

Nonetheless, the tendency seems unstoppable—foreign diplomats will increasingly engage in public diplomacy activities, with all the risks involved. This tendency is further proof of the growing importance of soft power. An ambassador's duty is not only to ensure a good climate with the authorities of the country but increasingly to promote a good image of his/her country among the widest circles of the population of the host country. This good image can be a powerful instrument that can be used in daily dealings of an official nature. Digital channels, including social media, give vast new possibilities of communicating directly with the people of the host country or even when needed, to bypass the authorities.

Sometimes, such public activities can build very high public personal recognition and standing for the ambassador. When this happens, he/she can become quite an inconvenient player to the authorities on the domestic scene. When the authorities, in a country where they experience a considerable deficit of popular legitimacy, try controlling the situation when the genie is already out of the bottle, it becomes virtually impossible. Even if they may sometimes hear complaints from other foreign ambassadors and encouragement to do something with a too-talkative ambassador, their hands are quite tied. They simply risk not only the deterioration of relations with the sending country but also the public's anger, which may only aggravate their unpopularity.

There are, of course, certain rules that any diplomat in public diplomacy should observe. Those imply never engaging in current, purely partisan politics, never showing any particular attachment to a party or ideology, never speaking names (only policies), never engaging in explicit polemics with government officials' concrete statements, never saying in public what the officials have not heard before in private, never advising what the government should do but rather share the experience of other countries, never hurting feelings of national pride and sovereignty of the host country, anchoring all comments on domestic issues on bilateral and multilateral commitments that the host country has acceded to, etc.

All countries, but especially the smaller ones, are particularly sensitive to pride and sovereignty. When they detect condescension and arrogance from a foreign diplomat, he/she will never be listened to, in particular by the public. And to sound credible, he/she must genuinely like and respect the people of the country of his/her posting, their culture, traditions, and history. If a diplomat does not feel comfortable in a country, he/she should apply for a posting somewhere else.

Such trivial observations as the ones above sometimes become essential for diplomatic success. But the most valuable tip for a diplomat exploring the public diplomacy field is to concentrate on the vast space that exists between the lines of one's speeches. And if speaking through an interpreter, work with him/her in tandem to help craft a creative translation. And don't forget about working on body language messages. Sometimes a smile can be a powerful message.

Talking about domestic issues without interfering in the internal affairs of a country is indeed tightrope acrobatics—to perform it with grace, the acrobat needs a reliable safety net, or in battlefield terms, good air cover. In practical terms, this means unwavering political and moral support from headquarters. If the host state discovers that the ambassador is detached from the political powerhouse where the instructions are written, it is much easier to pressure him/her.

In a country with disrupted communication lines between the authorities and the public, the voice of a friendly foreigner can become a channel of articulating the concerns and expectations of ordinary people.

In a polarised country, any public statement by a recognisable foreign diplomat may provoke different reactions—the government can be irritated if not angry when it hears criticism, while the opposition is disappointed when the government is praised. That's another tightrope to walk.

Yet, if a diplomat wants to be listened to by all sides, he/she must be fair all the time to the greatest extent possible.

In Armenia, the authorities did not like it when EU diplomats were talking about corruption, but the public, on the other hand, appreciated the critical voice of the EU. This voice has earned public sympathy for the European Union. When the EU was praising the government's determination to get a new agreement with the EU or when they adopted legislation on illicit enrichment or domestic violence, the opposition was visibly disappointed.

It is obvious that momentary tactical cuteness to please everybody is always tempting, but it may damage the

diplomat's credibility and long-term interests. For the EU, these long-term interests have always been very transparent. It has treated Armenia as an integral part of the wider European family, a European neighbour who should be helped to build a democratic, modern state based on European values. There has never been a hidden agenda nor geopolitical undertones.

It is no secret that Armenia as such was not high on the list of external relations priorities of the European Union, even in the Eastern European context. The regional agenda in recent years has been dominated (for different reasons) by Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia. But there was not indifference, either. Every success in reforming the country and building regional peace has been genuinely rejoiced, not least because in some other post-Soviet countries, democracy went into retreat, the social fabric disintegrating, producing real and potential instabilities and migration risks that threaten the stability of the European Union proper.

The revolution in Armenia in 2018 could be seen as a miraculous act producing a ray of hope in times of mounting pessimism. Suddenly, all the transformational talk and reform assistance started making sense. The EU could see its modernisation impact amplified if Armenia appreciated the chance offered.

And for a diplomat stationed in Armenia, witnessing this revolution was a lifetime professional experience, even if the country is small and the events fortunately peaceful, and even if there are still plenty of facts and reflections that cannot be shared openly.

THE SURPRISE

Revolutions as a rule come by surprise. After all, Louis XVI noted “*rien*,” or “nothing,” in his diary on the day the people of Paris stormed the Bastille. Nobody expected it to have a serious consequence.

Obviously, it is difficult to predict revolutions. Paradoxically, it is quite easy to explain why they had to happen. Our minds are skilful in reconstructing the logic of the past. In retrospect, we can see revolutionary developments coming naturally. We can see them fermenting for months or years. In our analysis, their eruption is explained by objective and long-term processes—economic, social, cultural, and political. No revolution, even the most surprising, is thus accidental.

The 2018 Armenian Revolution, like others, appeared at the time as a big surprise to everybody—the authorities, the foreign partners, the people and even to the leaders of the revolution themselves.

The situation in the Armenian society was visibly tense at that time. The level of dissatisfaction was high. In a country where the official poverty rate was higher than 30%, the level of unemployment higher than 40%, and the level of emigration higher than 10% of the population in the last 10 years—frustration is more than legitimate.

The anger periodically reached the level of condensation. Now and then, the people of Armenia went to the streets to manifest their emotions. In the years 2015–2018, it happened more than once.

In the summer of 2015, thousands of young Armenians staged the Electric Yerevan protests. As in every revolt, the spark was very pedestrian. That time it was the price of electricity. The protests marked the unknown before the rise of social media and internet mobilisation. This also helped to make the protests (unlike some previous civic disobedience initiatives) more known internationally. For a few days, the youth blocked one of the main streets of the capital and they succeeded in invalidating the price hike. The authorities were quite slick in playing for time and allowing the anger to dissipate. Few of the men in power understood, however, that the reasons that brought the youth to the streets were much deeper than the price of energy. It was a voice of protest of an anti-systemic nature. The young people were saying “no” to a system in which the authorities could decide important issues affecting the lives of people without caring at all about listening to their concerns.

During that period as well, the opposition parties at the time tried to mobilise the society against planned constitutional changes put up for referendum in December 2015. The demonstrations, even though the vote was surrounded by outright rigging, did not draw big crowds, and not only because of the harsh winter weather.

The April 2016 war in Nagorno-Karabakh had a shocking effect on the mindset of Armenians. First, the widely held view, not only among the ruling elite, that Armenia could cope by itself with any Azeri threat was put into question. Western diplomats had heard this view as a near mantra, complemented by the explanation that the alliance with Russia was motivated exclusively by the Turkish factor in any regional conflict scenario.

Suddenly, the concern became real that the Azerbaijanis were winning the arms race and time might be on their side. Second, the perception of Russia was put in a new light. Armenians were greatly disturbed by the fact that the Azeri side was using military equipment supplied to Azerbaijan by Russia. Quite sizeable crowds of protesters gathered not once in front of the Russian Embassy in Yerevan to complain. Third, the crowning argument claimed by the then authorities that although they had failed to deliver economic prosperity, they were solid in delivering security, became quite shaky. The people of Armenia were stunned by the news that their soldiers were not equipped properly because the money allocated for the army was lost to corruption schemes. Armenians realised that corruption had become a matter of national security.

The Sasna Tsrer attack on a Yerevan police station in July 2016 was motivated by the feeling of betrayal of the security interests on the part of the ruling elite compounded by rumours of a possible deal implying serious territorial and other sacrifices concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. For some opposition leaders, supposedly for Nikol Pashinyan himself, the crisis confirmed the ultimate level of disappointment and anger of the people towards the regime. The vast majority of Armenians considered the Sasna Tsrer attack and hostage-taking as a criminal act, if not even a totally unacceptable terrorist attack. And yet, thousands of Armenians who condemned the act as such went to the streets to express their solidarity with the motives of the attackers. Pashinyan tried to mediate with Zhirayr Sefilyan, the imprisoned leader of the Founding Parliament movement, but his efforts were blocked by the authorities. It was then when

Pashinyan reportedly developed his plan to start peaceful and legal mass action against the rule of Serzh Sargsyan.

The hostage crisis resulted in regretful casualties but also in excessive use of force towards demonstrators outside the police station. However, the authorities could claim that they defused it with minimal political costs. They were quite bitter that the West, including the European Union, expressed concern about the disproportionate use of force. A sign of their nervousness was some politically motivated arrests, including that of Andrias Ghukasyan, an intellectual and former presidential candidate. His case attracted very close attention from the EU and the U.S.

The normal display of popular wrath in Armenia is during presidential and parliamentary elections. Some related demonstrations earlier in the history of Armenia had turned into quite tragic and violent events, such as the events of 1 March 2008. Many observers, including foreign ones, feared a possible angry popular reaction to the April 2017 parliamentary elections. The authorities must have feared the same, judging by the number of police forces discretely deployed (away from the eyes of foreign observers) in some central quarters of the city. The opposition cried foul again, accusing the ruling party of manipulations.

Against all fears, despite the quite poor results of the opposition, the streets were quiet. For the first time since the mid-1990s, there was no “street action” after the elections. Most of the so-called colour revolutions elsewhere were provoked by unfair elections. The calm after the 2017 elections in Armenia may have sent a misleading signal to the ruling elite that they

were now fully capable of controlling the political emotions of the people.

Technically, the elections were held to a much better standard than before. Thanks to the technology employed, some of the traditional skulduggery like ballot-box stuffing, carousel voting, and tabulation falsification were much more difficult to repeat. Yet, their overall perception was full of distaste. They were heavily stained by massive vote-buying practices. To some extent, the new electoral code with its so-called ranking system encouraged dirty methods among candidates, including primarily within the same party. But the main reason was mobilisation at any costs by the local leaders of the Republican Party who, a few days before the election, began to panic that they might have to face a run-off in the so-called second round of the election where the outcome would be unpredictable. Rumours were spreading that Prosperous Armenia (led by local oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan) might even come in first. “If we lose, you will all go to jail” was reportedly told to the Republican activists in a message from the top at one closed local meeting. Whether justified or not, the fears pushed the party activists to use all possible ways, including bribes and administrative pressure or direct blackmail, to win votes. And they did. The price of a vote was never too unaffordable in Armenia—\$20 or so per vote.

The signs that the ruling party was not prepared at all to accept a possible vote of no-confidence by the population became clear already in the autumn of 2016 when the new electoral code was tested in the local elections in Gyumri and Vanadzor. The Republican Party (or its candidates for mayors) did not get the absolute majority, it even lost combined to

the opposition lists, yet it manipulated itself into the winning position by a controversial interpretation of the electoral code in Gyumri and by “assisted” defections from the opposition camp in Vanadzor.

The electoral victory of 2017 resulted in natural hubris by the Republican Party top brass. They pushed out of their memory even the important positive effect of putting Karen Karapetyan as the lead candidate on the party list (while shoving the actual leader of the party, the then president, to the shadows). Some people cast their vote for the ruling party while sincerely detesting it only because Karapetyan aroused some new hope for a positive change. The arrogance of the party leaders led them to believe that they indeed had the majority of Armenians behind them. And they interpreted the elections as a mandate to prolong Serzh Sargsyan’s rule while dismissing Karapetyan as a succession option for 2018.

After the 2017 parliamentary elections, the mood of the society was even gloomier than before. “We behaved like zombies,” confessed one civil society member to a Western diplomat. The gap between the self-confidence of the ruling party and the depressive emotions of the society grew bigger. It was only a matter of time when this gap would produce turbulence.

Hubris is a professional condition of successful politicians. The hubris of the Republican Party became a catalyst of the public anger in the following months.

When one Western diplomat made a benign remark in June 2017 that the electoral process in Armenia should be made more credible, an organised media attack by some functionaries

of the Republican Party revealed that the party officials must have lost touch with all aspects of reality.

REVOLUTION'S ONTOLOGY

When can you call a change a revolution? The term comes from Latin but its first definition we owe to Aristotle. "Revolution" meant either a complete or partial change of political constitution. In the Western political vocabulary, the term "revolution" came into wide use with the English Glorious Revolution of 1688.

What constitutes a revolution divides scholars, politicians, and ideological torrents even today. Beyond any controversy, one can list among conventional revolutions the French Revolution of 1789 or the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Among the contemporary developments, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and other revolutions of 1989 seem to be quite safe bets. Likewise, there are some of the so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space.

Not every change of political power can claim the title. First, it seems that there must be a popular movement that stands behind the change, a crowd that imposes change. But even a large crowd may not be enough. It may qualify as a revolt, or if particularly violent and divisive, a civil war. Thus, there is a second requirement, that the change brought about by the popular action against the sitting authorities must be politically significant, systemic.

The power transfer can come violently, yet without the masses and without systemic change. Normally, we call it a *coup d'état*. In some ideological schools, the change must be very deep, involving the economic system, social relations, political regime, or even moral norms. In some other schools, the prerequisite is that the change must be seen as progressive. Yet, few people in the West question the right of the Iranians to call the 1979 change a revolution (even if qualified as Islamic). Whether the imposition of a theocratic state is generally seen as a measure of progress, is another story.

People's discontent can find many manifestations. Revolutions come when the existing political system of managing it fails. In modern times, we tacitly assume that revolutions do not happen in democracies. There may be protests, even quite violent (e.g., the Yellow Vests), there may be movements of discontent and frustration (Indignados), but change works its way there through democratic procedures and institutions.

Revolutions happen when the wrath reaches the point of saturation. The masses cannot tolerate their fate any more. Going against the authorities, their machinery of repression involves, as a rule, an existential risk. People put their very lives at stake. It requires real courage. They do it normally when they have nothing to lose.

Some people believe that we live now, at least in Europe, in post-heroic times. People en masse do not want to put too much at risk when demanding a change. They have families, they have savings, they have flats, cars, even if they consider their lives frustrating. The rift between frustration and despair has grown bigger. Frustration is today discharged mainly by

protest votes at the elections, flash-mob protest gatherings, but mostly by political passivity, civic indifference, and parallel private life far away from politics.

For centuries, professional politicians (professional revolutionaries) were trying to exploit frustration, stir up a revolutionary mood, and use a revolution to grab power. Today's discontent is not controlled by politics. The protests are led by anonymous people; the crowds are headless. Sometimes a strong and charismatic leader emerges. But the leader's main quality is not management competences or political shrewdness but crowd-control skills.

GEOPOLITICS OF REVOLUTION

Conventional wisdom says revolutions do not happen in democratic systems. If they happen there, its colour is more societal and cultural than political. The student revolt of 1968 may be rightly called a revolution, even if it did not affect the political system of France. Not because of the abundance of Trotskyist or Maoist phraseology used at that time. But because by many today it is seen as a turning point in transforming the Western European societies, liberating them from patriarchal, *petit-bourgeois*, taboo-ridden customs and rules. Likewise, today's technological revolution with artificial intelligence, big data, virtual space, and social networks is deeply transforming Western societies in a revolutionary, but so far rather quiet way. But probably deeper than any other technological revolution before it.

Revolutions of politics in the past years have become associated with the eastern part of the continent. If the end of the '80s/beginning of the '90s in Central-Eastern Europe brought about the fall of communism, in the Western Balkans, communism essentially fell by itself with the collapse of Yugoslavia. The communists were rooted from power in Albania in a rout in the elections in 1992. The democratic transition took quite long in Serbia where it could celebrate triumph only with the Bulldozer Revolution of 2000. Some call the protests of 2016 in North Macedonia a colour revolution, but to others they were simply an element of a political crisis, which was defused by a deal on a technical government and postponed elections.

As it happened in Central-Eastern Europe, it became obvious that the dismantlement of the communist system should result, as predicted in Fukuyama's "End of History" vision, in the establishment of a Western model of liberal democracy. In Central-Eastern European states, this transformation to liberal democracy was facilitated by geopolitical aspirations. The important engine of change was the aspiration to join the Western family of nations, be anchored in the West, enter the Western institutions like NATO and/or the European Union. Central Europeans wanted to look like Westerners. They wanted to follow their model of success and replicate their institutions and political culture. Thus, democracy in Central-Eastern Europe has been built by imitation.

The post-communist transformation took a different course in the post-Soviet space. Almost everywhere the elites tried to preserve the essence of the Soviet system of power while adapting it to the canons of democracy. Elections, parliaments,

political parties, and the media had to be put in place to satisfy the formal requirements as formulated by the guardians of democracy and human rights—the Council of Europe or the OSCE. In most post-Soviet states, the transformation was administered by former Communist Party (Komsomol) apparatchiks, former KGB officers, and other members of the old system. Even if in some places the former outcasts and dissidents were elevated to the top (as it happened in South Caucasus countries), they did not survive long and were ousted by the strongmen of the previous old system. And the old/new elites did not have the slightest intention to expose themselves to the risks and hazards of democracy. They wanted to stay in charge. Thus, a new system—a post-Soviet system emerged. Its philosophy was simple: control was more important than legitimacy. Elections were held but the choice was limited mostly to the ruling party and the licensed opposition. Power was centralised. Print media were relatively free but television was tightly controlled. The judiciary served the interests of the political rulers. Law enforcement was by no means politically neutral. The power structures (military, political police, prosecutors, police) constituted a parallel control channel. Politics and business were interwoven, sometimes allowing oligarchs to control politics, sometimes allowing strong leaders to control the oligarchs. Neofeudal dependencies permeated the society with the new elites standing above the law while the masses remained in fear of it.

The introduction of the market economy opened the door for illicit enrichment. Political rulers in some countries unable to cope with market transformation resorted to the model of state capitalism. Thus, quite a peculiar form of the post-Soviet

economic system emerged. The economic workings of the post-Soviet system proved, however, with time totally ineffective. They survive only on high income stemming from natural resources or external direct or indirect subsidies (or remittances). And on fears that things may get only worse if the economy is made again liberal and open.

The old/new political elites, and in particular the strongmen at the top, used everything to discredit the very notion of a revolution. They were helped by the fact that the spontaneous democratisation of the beginning of the '90s coincided with a period of economic chaos and the fall in the wellbeing levels in the society. Liberal prescriptions became equivalent to chaos, predatory economy and daily deprivations. In some post-Soviet countries like Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine, the dissatisfaction grew high enough to see the Western model of democracy, economy, and society as the preferred alternative to a system which lived on nepotism, corruption, oppression, and fake propaganda. With Russia putting itself on an increasingly anti-Western course, any attack on the post-Soviet system inside these countries acquired geopolitical colour.

The term “post-Soviet” very early obtained a geopolitical connotation. Many pro-Western politicians in these countries and many experts in the West wanted to get rid of the term in the public discourse. And rightly so. The term is misleading. It distorts the increasingly diversified geopolitical landscape in what used to be the Soviet Union. Take the region of South Caucasus—one country is trying to gravitate towards the EU and NATO, another participates in almost all Russia-led integrationist projects like the Eurasian Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and a third, while trying

to stay on close terms with Russia, is not part of these projects but at the same time has no aspiration of getting closer to the EU or NATO either. What a diversity of policy strategies! Putting all these eggs into one basket has become increasingly deceptive.

Automatic use of the term “post-Soviet space” serves only the interests of those who want to legitimise the existence of an area where Russia has privileged claims, like in the case of the “near abroad” or the “Russian world” concept.

What makes it difficult to bury the term “post-Soviet space” altogether is not only the still-living legacy of *Homo Sovieticus*. Till recently, these countries were bundled together by the existence of this hybrid, dysfunctional political and economic, even societal, model that has emerged almost everywhere in the states born on the rubble of the Soviet Union. Ukraine now, and Georgia and Moldova frantically trying to get rid of it. And it proves to be quite painstaking.

POWER CORRUPTS

According to some opinion polls a few years ago, Armenia was the most nostalgic about the Soviet Union—more than Russia, more than Belarus. In some respects, it cannot be surprising. During the Soviet times, Armenia was relatively prosperous. Huge industrial enterprises were built, even whole new industrial towns. Armenia, a republic at its peak of some 4 million people, even had its own car factory manufacturing a vehicle called the “Yeraz” (meaning poetically “Dream” in

Armenian but deriving from the acronym of the Yerevan car factory), although it was quite frugal (even by Soviet standards). The first Soviet semiconductor computers (“Hrazdan-2”) were built in Armenia, and Yerevan was the place where the most widely used Soviet computer, the “Nairi,” was produced.

From today’s perspective, most of the heavy industry plants were environmentally disastrous. It is enough to visit the Mad Max scenery of today’s Alaverdi (an industrial town in the north of Armenia), read the stories of the polluted mines around Kapan and other places, and learn about the hazards still present at the Nairit Chemical Plant. Heavy industry, even if it gave people jobs at the time, was a symptom of misdevelopment. At the start of the Armenian independence, it was already a burden, definitely not an asset to be used as an economic foundation for Armenia’s future. It had to be dismantled whether the Soviet Union collapsed or not. In some way, the crumbling of the Soviet Union was a blessing to get rid of that burdensome industrial legacy.

The Soviet past was of course never rosy. Armenians, in particular its intelligentsia, suffered quite a lot from political persecution, purges, terror, and immediately after the fall of the first Armenian Republic in December 1920.

When the Soviet Union started disintegrating, the Armenians were quite united around the cause of independence. They wanted it. More than some other Soviet republics.

Thus, today’s nostalgia about the Soviet Union is hardly political. Very few Armenians today would subscribe to a view that the collapse of the Soviet Union constituted the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century. But they have the right

to feel nostalgic about their youth and past happiness. And some legitimately want to make use of this right. The snag is that these personal nostalgic feelings are cynically misused by others for political ends.

The collapse of the Soviet Union coincided for Armenia with war sacrifices and an economic meltdown. The tragic 1988 earthquake killed some 35,000 people and razed to the ground the second-biggest Armenian city—Gyumri, as well as other towns and villages. The poor economic policy of the leaders of the disintegrating Soviet Union disrupted previous economic ties, led to the temporary closure of the Metsamor power plant, and provoked galloping inflation. The beginning of the '90s marked a period of hardship in the life of the population—food shortages, a few hours of electricity per day, heating problems. In 1991–1994, the GDP fell to the level constituting 60% of the level at the final days of the Soviet Union, more than 500,000 Armenians left the country to look for jobs, half of the arable land was abandoned. The Armenian economy went into survival mode. The survival philosophy has had a deep impact on the economic policies of successive governments. The priority has been to ensure enough public income and efficient enough management of the state to sustain the military effort. Nothing more, nothing less.

The bitter memories of the '90s have been a point of reference for today's older generation when assessing their wellbeing. Not so much so for the young generation. For the old people, everything better than the '90s, even if very imperfect, deserved at least minimum appreciation.

The system of extreme scarcity has a demoralising effect everywhere. People turn to whatever means are available to ensure a decent life for themselves. It opens the space for nepotism and corruption. Petty corruption was commonplace as part of the Soviet system. Yet, the huge Communist Party and Soviet state apparatus could deploy some of the oppressive machinery to suppress it at least from taking excessive forms. These ideologically motivated checks disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Getting rich became the way to show higher social status, whatever the means.

In a malfunctioning economic system, petty corruption becomes the indispensable lubricant to get things done. But in Armenia, the worst happened at the top. Many Armenians believe that the political elite that took over the reins of the state in the late '90s is responsible for the plague of meta-corruption. Meta-corruption means the transfer of big money between the political and the economic elites in exchange for mutual favours.

Ruling a state gives huge leverage in controlling businesses and extracting personal wealth. Public tender procedures alone, if not put under proper scrutiny and judicial control, creates a sea of opportunity to build business empires and amass wealth. The Armenian opposition believed that the main impediment to economic progress in Armenia was the system of mini monopolies everywhere, even a small segment of the market was controlled by a designated oligarch. Those bigger or smaller monopolists had to support the political power, at least to prove loyalty in exchange for the political umbrella.

Such a skewed system can work only when the economic growth is dynamic enough to let everybody profit from it. However, when it slows to the level of stagnation, social tension naturally arrives. The disparities started irking Armenians. In a small country, gossip thrives. Every day brought stories about huge money extorted from foreign business people, including from the diaspora, forced takeovers of profitable businesses by people connected with the authorities, and big money stolen by top officials from the state budget. The lack of transparency and accountability magnified the rumours. The post-revolutionary investigations revealed at least some of these corrupt practices even if sometimes it was difficult to retrieve the evidence.

Corruption is one of the topics where perception matters more than the facts. Armenia has slipped quite significantly on the corruption perception index. By 2017, it was 110th on the Transparency International list (in 2019, after the revolution it was already up to 77).

What was, however, the most frustrating, was the policy of the staunch denial pursued by the leaders of Armenia before 2018. For the local population, the statements of officials denying the spread of corruption were just another manifestation of the arrogance and detachment from reality by the ruling Republican Party. For foreign partners, this policy became the main stumbling block in development assistance. Because of the level of corruption, Armenia could not benefit fully from the potential of relations with the West.

Some Western ambassadors in the period 2015–2018 tried to make corruption a central issue in their public diplomacy activities. Their statements were accompanied by offers

of assistance programmes to fight corruption. This public activity was met with a quite neurotic rebuttal on the part of some officials. Some of these diplomats did not, however, feel discouraged to stay on course with the anti-corruption crusade even if others abandoned it. They continued their both public and diplomatic commitment to help Armenia deal with corruption. Sometimes in private conversations, the functionaries tried to maintain that the authorities were more than ready to combat corruption, yet the ordinary people were not prepared. However, it was exactly the ordinary people who had pressed the foreign donors to do something about corruption.

After the 2018 revolution, some of the new leaders went on bashing Western donors for contributing to corruption. The truth was that if Armenia were able to record any improvement, even sectoral, against corruption, it happened thanks to the foreign assistance and insistence. The introduction of an e-governance system in Armenia, worth millions of euro, resulted in closing the opportunities for “bureaucratic” corruption when dealing with the government administration or judiciary. The foreign donors were behind the mass (and only) public campaigns and efforts. Most importantly, they put the issue at the centre of their political dialogue with the authorities and were very vocal in public (sometimes more visible, for obvious reasons, than the political opposition). It may be worth mentioning that since 2016 the European Union decided not to launch any new so-called budget support programmes in Armenia. Budget support comprise programmes where the funds are directly transferred to government coffers in exchange for the implementation of agreed benchmarks. They had to be stopped.

Most Armenians associated the growing corruption with humiliating personal enslavement. Like in many, if not most, countries today, corruption has become the main trigger for discontent. Political freedoms are important, economic worries count a lot, but there is nothing else hurting the sense of human dignity more than corruption. Therefore, revolutions today so often are about dignity. Not so much about the lack of democracy. Not so much about economic deprivation. Not so much about class exploitation. Fukuyama would say that they are revolutions of thymos.

Thymotic revolutions are the signs of our time. The Arab Spring and most of the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space can be clearly defined as thymotic. They were driven by emotional motives. They were spontaneous. They did not have a clear ideological flavour. They were the expression of the people's simple need for recognition (isothymia in Fukuyama's parlance).

The thymotic revolutions are probably not the last chapter of the story of human rage (as Sloterdijk would probably call it). The growing challenge is that even in democratic societies, the functioning of today's political institutions shows disparity with the societal changes produced by the technological revolution. The technological revolution has accelerated exponentially. A thousand years ago, when technological innovations happened it took two to three generations to adapt. In recent times, we have shortened the adaptation time to 10 to 15 years. But, as described by Thomas Friedman, technological progress is now outpacing our societal and individual capacity to absorb change. This growing mismatch will inevitably produce tensions in our societies. Traditional, rigid institutions may become ineffective

in handling them. The underlying rage may erupt from time to time, and anywhere.

STATE CAPTURE

In a society where only state institutions and structures are functioning, they protect and feed (because they are able to collect and distribute money), but there is no decent life if you are not connected to power.

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe left the old economic system in ruins, the social fabric torn, and values in disarray. The state became the only beacon of stability in a reality full of both potential and real chaos. The best political recipe for survival was to remain close to the machinery of the state, profit under its protection, reap economic benefits, and upgrade one's social status. The new elite who emerged on the remnants of communism quickly made stability the keyword of their political programme. They paid lip service to democratic values but at the same time developed a system that ensured their continuous control of power. This included elaborate mechanisms of rigging elections. But most regrettably it meant the destruction of important pillars of democracy: the independent judiciary, free media, and politically neutral law enforcement.

In any democratic system, if one party wields power too long it acquires special leverage on appointments in key areas of public life. But in a young democracy, the absence of political rotation devastates the public life to the core.

Armenia was quite a vibrant and genuine democracy the first years after independence. The Third Republic was in fact born on mass civic activism. The Karabakh Movement is considered the cradle of Armenian civic activism. The period of forming the independent state is associated with what some analysts called “carnival civil society.” The first elections in Armenia, though, were very transparent and fair.

From the second half of the 1990s, Armenia gradually became a democracy in name only. Everything looked good on paper. Constitutional norms were upheld and state institutions followed constitutional prescriptions. But people did not trust the outcome of elections, nor the officials, courts, or media. They knew that these institutions participated in a kind of puppet theatre in which, although the characters and the scenery were real, somebody somewhere else—a political leader or an oligarch—was manipulating invisible strings.

The political system of Armenia from the mid-’90s became more and more centralised. This was justified by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the tough economic situation, and social challenges. The centralisation of power inevitably led to the oligarchisation of politics, the emergence of political cronyism and limitations on the room for political freedom and activism. Stability became the keyword of the rulers. Underneath, the political power was expanding to take control of all relevant public institutions, the economy, media, and other spheres of daily life.

Some people, quite many of them sometimes, convinced themselves that it was the best way forward, for the society and them personally. The state, they argued, must be strong,

cacophony in public debate disastrous for a strong state, collective wisdom does not exist, and one person may know best what is good for the society, and so on, and so forth. True, there are even serious Western scholars who contend that chaos is always more destructive than tyranny. The manipulation is in associating democracy with inevitable chaos. Even in young and weak states, this does not have to be the case.

The post-Soviet states developed a particular model of state capture. The process of state capture exploited the public frustration with the first years of transformation, the fear of a weak state not capable of providing basic social services (payment of pensions, provision of healthcare, etc.) and the lack of a tradition of democratic culture. The individual post-Soviet states differed on the modalities of the model but the essence everywhere remained the same. In some countries, the model was inscribed into quite a dictatorial or autocratic regime. In other places, the autocracy became relatively mild.

The Rose Revolution of 2003 in Georgia, the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution of 2005 (and the Melon Revolution of 2010) in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2009 Twitter Revolution in Moldova were the first serious disruptions in the process of state capture by the post-Soviet elites. But as follow-on processes in these countries showed, the temptations and risks of reprisal remained very high even there.

Repatriationalisation is, as Fukuyama described, a genetic weakness of humans. State capture is the most extreme form of it. A political tribe forming a kind of extended family takes over the state. This distorts the role of the state and inevitably leads

to its decay. The challenge to combat these genetic instincts remains eternal.

CLASH OF GENERATIONS

The tension that was growing prior to the 2018 Armenian revolution was not political, ideological, or geopolitical in nature. It was way intergenerational. Armenia became the stage for the clash of generations.

The tension between generations is a global phenomenon. The demographic processes had a distinct impact on the world. The West started ageing, affected by low birth rates below the reproduction rate. The East, and Africa in particular, was characterised by rapid population growth. A political prophecy at the beginning of the millennium suggested that the world would be split between the old Western societies, prudent, reluctant to take risks, and hesitant to change things, and the frustrated, energetic, angry, venturous societies of the Middle East and Africa. We are lucky enough today to see that demographic processes in the long term reveal quite strong similarities. The birth rates in the East will probably start falling, too.

The dividing lines within societies also have a destabilising character, but as it turned out in the post-2008 crisis years, they can be politically managed. In the post-Soviet space, also in Armenia, intergenerational differences have a special meaning.

The old generation looked to the past to compare with their current reality. They saw the better life had passed. They

were—to use Bauman’s neologism—a *retrotopian* generation. They believed that the way forward is to try recreating some good things from the past. They embodied the notion of *Homo Sovieticus* (or rather *post-Sovieticus*).

The new generation, in turn, looked to the West. They cared little about the past. They wanted a better future, which they associated with the Western level of wellbeing, freedom, and social welfare. They wanted to be seen as *Homo Occidentalis*.

Some people say that in April 2018 in Armenia, *Homo Occidentalis* prevailed over *Homo Sovieticus*.

Indeed, the crowd filling the streets and the squares of Armenia was very young. These were mainly students or well-educated professionals (though some jobless) who understood that it was their last opportunity to prevent stagnation and a rigid system that offered them little hope for a better future. Most of them were born after Armenia acquired independence. They had no recollection of the Soviet time. They carried no stigma of the Soviet mentality.

As Albert Hirschman once explained, faced with a political institution in stagnation or decay, we have the choice of three options: loyalty, exit, or voice.

Quite a sizeable chunk of bright Armenians had opted in the past for loyalty. Some of them climbed to very responsible positions in the previous system. Not always were they driven by personal cynicism. Although, as always, even the highest IQ could not protect young people from becoming politically blind and turning into zealous sycophants. For some of the young, the revolution struck a blow to their carefully planned

life careers, in particular in politics. Some of them have not yet recovered from the shock of it.

A lot of talented Armenians took the exit option. The country became one of the most affected globally by “brain drain.” The presence of a well-organised diaspora across the globe made migration easier. Armenians have been for several centuries a nation of diaspora. Today, out of more than 10 million Armenians worldwide, only 3 million live in the Republic of Armenia. At the same time, Armenians developed a brand of being able to adapt themselves quickly and fully to local culture. They integrate well and, at the same time, preserve their identity.

The official net migration during the ‘90s exceeded -10 per 1,000, and remained negative till 2019. The population of Armenia has declined in the last 30 years from 3.7 million to 3 million. Demography became an existential challenge for the country.

The boldest of young Armenians went for the voice option. This generation was behind the civil society activism. The Electric Yerevan of 2015 was the expression of the frustration of young, well-educated Armenians. Not accidentally, Pashinyan, after arriving from his march to Yerevan, tried immediately to connect with young people. And the young, not only students and young professionals, joined the protests in mass.

One of the remarkable features of the Armenian revolution was the participation of many adolescents, including children. Some school principals tried to prevent it by locking the school doors to keep them in, to no avail. Teenagers and students visibly took part, in particular, on 2 May 2018, blocking major streets

in Yerevan and paralysing traffic. The youth participation was met with indignation by some of the old guard in Armenian politics. They were clearly ignorant of the fact that European jurisprudence, of which Armenia is a part, strongly recognises that children are citizens and they can make use of their civic rights.

The Armenian youth have their own identity. According to PEW Research studies, together with the Georgians, they are the most conservative in terms of social and cultural values, including religion. Some foreign centres tried to utilise it by mobilising youth against Europe, in particular the European Union. The stories and methods are well known from the experiences of other post-Soviet countries. That narrative boils down to primitive propaganda that Europe is about liberalism, decadence, permissivism—presented as everything that runs counter to traditional Armenian values. Most Armenian youth did not buy this narrative at all.

Not surprisingly, the Armenian revolution resulted in elevating to high offices a lot of young Armenians. Yet, some of the structural problems hampering the tapping of the potential of the Armenian youth are still in place.

The main challenge remains reform of the educational system. Armenians value very high-quality education. They learned through centuries of hardships that they can be deprived of everything, including their material belongings, homes, and means of making a living. But what remains in their brains is unalienable, not even the most oppressive ruler can take it away from them. And Armenians, as observed once jokingly by a foreign diplomat, are born with high IQs. The

educational system of Armenia degenerated for decades since independence. One high EU official visiting Armenia, when asked by local IT businessmen what the main impediment to development of the country is, had a straightforward answer: “poor education!”

Scarcity of financial means and dilapidated infrastructure do not facilitate reforms. Yet, without undertaking comprehensive educational reform, the youth of Armenia will not enjoy better prospects for their life even if so many of them are now running public institutions.

WOMEN

Besides youth, the other pillar of the Armenian revolution was women. The images of demonstrations typically are dominated by the faces of angry men. The pictures from the Armenian revolution are full of smiling women. Some observers called the revolution the “sneakers revolution.” Indeed, so many Armenian women changed from the high heels they usually wear to work for comfortable trainers and joined the marches and demonstrations.

Some diplomats for quite some time described Armenian women as the most untapped potential in the country, in all aspects—political, economic, and social.

The Soviet period contributed to the emancipation of women in Armenia. It removed all formal restrictions and promoted non-discrimination. Culturally, the Armenian society still adhered in some circles of the society to quite a patriarchal

form of the family. One local activist observed once that an Armenian woman has to practice a schizophrenic lifestyle: look and act fully emancipated outside the home and accept a subservient position at home. Where true, it wasn't going to last for long.

Some still young, educated Armenian male politicians can sound quite misogynistic to their European partners. Therefore, they are silent on these issues when they meet their Western political partners.

What is remarkable of the revolution is that the misogynistic notes have disappeared from the mainstream of public discourse nowadays. Only some of the politicians now removed from power think they can improve their electoral standings by appealing to atavistic instincts.

The Sargsyan administration deserved credit for passing a law against domestic violence. Some forces inside the country tried to use this opportunity to foment anti-Western and anti-European propaganda. Some inspiration from abroad was visible to everybody. There were rumours that the domestic violence law was put up in June 2017 for consideration by the National Security Council (when the official press report for that meeting mentioned the situation in Syria as the topic of discussions). Although the prevailing number of Council members were against it, the leadership decided to go ahead with the law's adoption. It was considered a test of the credibility of the Armenian claim of commonality of values with the European Union.

The revolution brought some new women to politics. For the first time in Armenian history, a lady became a mayor of

a sizeable town (Ejmiatsin/ Vagharshapat). Indeed, Armenian women are very creative, energetic, and full of managerial skills and entrepreneurship. The task of tapping this potential remains. It was quite encouraging when Prime Minister Pashinyan presented in 2019 his 12 priority projects to the leaders of the European Union; the empowerment of women was on the list. More deeds are nevertheless necessary.

All the same, the issue of non-discrimination remains to be tackled responsibly. The prejudice towards the LGBTI community cannot be explained solely by so-called traditional family values because non-discrimination is about protecting the rights and dignity of all and having a society without second-class citizens. Unfortunately, attacks on the LGBTI community happen everywhere, including in EU countries. What matters is how the elites react and what the government says and does, in particular those officials who have spent most of their lives in open and tolerant societies. They like to live there and make money there, yet they believe that Armenians at home are not ready for that. Quite a cynical belief.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Before the revolution, Armenia was known for active and credible civil society life. The activist part of the NGO archipelago was indeed professionally competent and courageous. The human-rights defenders, the anti-corruption groups, the free-media advocates, the justice reformers were at the forefront of efforts to promote democratic values in Armenia. Organisations such as the Helsinki Committee of Armenia–Human Rights

Defender, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor, "Asparez" Journalists' Club, Transparency International Anti-Corruption Centre, Open Society Foundation–Armenia, Europe in Law Association, Union of Informed Citizens, Protection of Rights Without Borders, Armenian Progressive Youth, and many others played an important role in fighting for the defence of European standards in Armenia.

The new element that emerged in the past years leading to the revolution were broad grassroots movements formed around environmental and local issues. Initiatives like the Teghut Civic Initiative, Protect Trchkan Waterfall Movement, and Mashtots Park Initiative were able in the years of 2012–2014 to mobilise relatively broad public support. They demonstrated to the society that when speaking with a strong voice, society could make the ruling elite change their decisions. These protest actions were non-political, not managed by political parties or other organised groups, very open, transparent and egalitarian. Armenia became one of the few post-Soviet societies where mass civil disobedience movements were staged ("We will not pay 150 drams," "I am against/Dem em" movement). These mass protests and civil disobedience movements showed the limits of arbitrary power on the part of the ruling elite. They involved ordinary people who were far from politics, and they helped cure people of their fear.

The ruling group left quite a decent amount of space for free speech and advocacy, yet it was hardly genuine. It looked as if they considered their attitude towards civil society as part of the effort to present a positive image in their relations with the West. The civil society activists complained that the ruling elites treated them like a nuisance and that the government

before the revolution never had any intention of listening to them.

Sometimes the government did listen and responded with quite neurotic irritation. In November 2016, the Armenian civil society platform within the Eastern Partnership drafted a resolution on political prisoners in Armenia. Armenian officials went very far to prevent it from adoption, threatening even to put the country's membership in the Eastern Partnership on hold. They expected the EU institutions to exert influence on the civil society, showing total ignorance of the spirit in which the EU builds its relationships with civil society. Another attempt at political intervention came in July 2017 when civil society organisations were preparing a statement in defence of the EU stance on elections.

In several situations, the West had to act as an intermediary between the government and civil society. On all occasions the West encouraged the government to talk directly to civil society, with little impact, unfortunately. In a sign of the systemic prejudice of the government at the time towards civil society, some high-level Armenian officials did not want to count EU money allocated to civil society projects as part of the EU-Armenian bilateral assistance. The money spent by Armenian civil society organisations in Armenia was not considered support to Armenia by its government. And most of this money in 2015–2019 went into various social projects, social entrepreneurship initiatives, and real efforts for the benefit of ordinary Armenians. At some point, civil society organisations feared that Armenia would follow the pattern of introducing restrictions on civil society, including by imposing

anti-“foreign agent” laws. To the credit of that government, it never happened.

Civil society activists were an essential factor in shaping the mood of Armenian society. The opposition political parties had to reckon with it. One Western diplomat, when he asked one of the leaders of the opposition “what can we do for you,” heard only one request: “Help us connect with civil society.”

Some insiders point out that the pattern of protests of the 2018 revolution was elaborated from the experience of other civil disobedience and protest movements. The idea of making Republic Square the central stage of the protests, blocking the main streets of the city centre and paralysing the work of the central administration were presumably born from those movements. The civic activists believed that the protests should be taken out of the electoral context. They should not be about the repeatedly rigged elections but about changing the system.

Some civil society activists played a visible role in the revolution. Their support for Pashinyan is believed to be the decisive factor in its success. That made the revolution the logical culmination of all previous attempts to challenge the system of power prevailing in Armenia.

Some civil society activists were subject to detainment and persecution. Some stayed on the sidelines but genuinely supported the demonstrations. Some government officials tried ridiculous methods in private conversations to use the civil society factor to accuse the EU of backing the demonstrations. “People whom you support financially speak from the stage to the demonstrators,” they would claim. These officials did not want to admit that the EU does not financially support

individuals, rather projects selected on a competitive basis. By the way, the project that in the paranoid eyes of some officials linked the EU to the stage at Republic Square where the protests were centred supported people with disabilities.

Whereas civic advocacy was strong in Armenia, civic activism at the local, community level was visibly weak. Some observers attributed this passivity to the legacy of the Soviet Union. The Soviet system discouraged free initiatives and self-reliance. People learned that if a small local problem arose, it was expected that the state or the party should solve it. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these reflexes were revealed as a syndrome of “learned helplessness.” It was quite upsetting to see that in most villages people simply accepted that nothing could be done to improve their community life. This image contrasted with the very high reputation of Armenians in the diaspora who are known for very high levels of community activism. And indeed, for centuries Armenians learned that when they had no real state, they had to rely on themselves.

The big challenge for Armenia after the revolution is to make Armenians believe that activism at the local level is one of the key components of prosperous development and strong democracy. People should develop a habit of taking things into their own hands (with the support and encouragement of government institutions). Without crushing the mentality of *Homo Sovieticus* in all its incarnations, Armenia will not be able to move forward in a new, dynamic way.

After the revolution, many civil society activists assumed public offices and civil society groups provided moral and political support for the changes and new government policies.

It put their credibility as a civil society to a severe test. In several instances, neither the pace of reforms nor their content satisfied various civil society groups, in particular, the reform of the transitional justice and operational justice systems, anti-discrimination legislation and policies, police reform (or the lack of it), and the establishment of anti-corruption institutions. The activists faced a real dilemma: how to express criticism without undermining the government, which embodied their hopes and aspirations, and not siding with the groups of the ancient regime. Some of these civil society activists tried to organise themselves into political parties, but without visible success so far (e.g., the “Citizen’s Decision” party). If, however, Armenia is to reform its political scene and party politics, civic movements should play a catalyst role.

For foreign observers, it was challenging to understand that the leaders of the Armenian revolution did not have any ambition to build a mass movement in support of its goals and reforms, uniting all the groups and individuals that had confronted the authorities in the past, including civil society organisations, personalities, and celebrities, but above all to engage all the anonymous demonstrators who had filled the square and were never before associated with any form civic activism. Many talented people, including some former opposition activists with stunning political curricula and indisputable competences, roamed idly without any offers of engagement. Their views and opinions not sought after. It was as if Armenia suffered from a surplus of wisdom and energy.

The leaders let their “Civil Contract” party expand to the point that they started fearing that it might attract too many of the kind of people who always gravitate towards the party in

power, no matter its ideological line or colour. With time, they can turn even the most decent party into another “trade union of functionaries,” as has been the case elsewhere. The party leaders stopped the process of rapid expansion. But the general question remained how to maintain not only public support but also civic engagement in the face of difficult challenges.

The strategy to appeal directly to the people and make them come to the streets in times of political tests worked quite well in October 2018 during the National Assembly crisis (when some Republican Party and other parliamentarians tried to block the possibility of early elections). However, some observers opined that this method showed exhaustion already in May 2019 during the court blockade called by Prime Minister Pashinyan after a ruling releasing former President Robert Kocharyan from pre-trial detention, in connection with his presumed role in the 2008 use of force against demonstrators.

ASSESSMENT BY PARTNERS

It is quite obvious that the situation in Armenia before, during, and after the revolution was evaluated differently by its international partners, even within the Western circle.

Some Western ambassadors, while critically assessing Sargsyan’s policies, believed that any alternative would be only worse. They soberly judged and criticised the level of corruption, patronage, mismanagement of the economy, the political control over the judiciary and media, the limits to the exercise of human rights, including political persecution. But

they argued that if compared with some other post-Soviet states, Armenia was quite a liveable place. After all, the opposition sat in parliament, media were quite pluralistic, civil society was functioning and supported from abroad, and demonstrations and civil disobedience actions were not repressed. Sargsyan quite skilfully used the membership of the Republican Party in the European People's Party to plead for a better understanding of the various circumstances surrounding the internal situation in Armenia.

But there were voices in the Western diplomatic circle that the continuation of Sargsyan's rule would imply only further stagnation, which would hurt the national fabric of Armenia. Armenians even more than some other nations in the region had strong aspirations to live in a Western-type state, which Sargsyan could never ensure.

There was strong consensus on one issue, that the West should in no way force Armenia to make a geopolitical choice. This message in some other post-Soviet states was sometimes countered with the remark: "But we would like the West to make us take a geopolitical choice." Never in Armenia. Sometimes, of course, there were misunderstandings about how to perceive certain developments. The best example could be the question of the aborted Association Agreement negotiated between the EU and Armenia. When European officials were saying in 2013 that the AA is incompatible with Armenia's possible membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU), they proceeded from a purely technical point of view. It was simply about the impossibility of a country being a member of two different trade regimes simultaneously. Armenians, though, interpreted the incompatibility statement from a geopolitical

perspective, a view, somehow imposed on them from the outside.

The West naturally encouraged Armenia to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy as declared by all Armenian post-independence governments. The West consequently waited constantly for initiatives on the part of Armenia, for how it wanted to manage its freedom of manoeuvre. At the same time, the West rejected the concept of exclusive zones of influence or similar notions.

The lack of any geopolitical undertones made the policies of the West towards Armenia very transparent and free from any hidden agenda, even if some proponents of conspiracy theories say otherwise today.

Another unifying pillar of the Western attitude was that everything should be done to avoid violence and destabilisation in Armenia. This was the main point in all the demarches, statements, and conversations delivered and conducted by Western diplomats during the revolution. The main policy line of the West was to avoid a repeat of the 1 March 2008 events.

Let's recall that in the wake of the presidential elections in February 2008 that brought Sargsyan to power, a series of mass protests took place in Armenia, spurred by the opposition's claims that the authorities had committed election fraud. The ensuing violence led to the death of 10 people and about 200 were injured. More than 100 opposition activists were arrested and thousands subjected to harassment.

For many Armenians, the events of 2008 were a defining moment in building their civic identity. They were a traumatic event, and for ordinary Armenians they were something that

should not and could not be repeated. They had consequences, as some Armenians put it, on the “behavioural syndrome” of the ruling elite. The rulers knew in 2018 that they could not repeat the same forceful solution they did in 2008. As one wise Armenian observed: “In 2008, Serzh shot his last bullet.” Some see an organic link between the 2008 and 2018 events. Indeed, some of the key figures from both sides in 2008 were key figures in the 2018 standoff, including Sargsyan and Pashinyan. But it would be a simplification to see the 2018 revolution as mere retribution for the 2008 bloodshed. In 2008, the opposition activists still believed that contesting the results of elections could send a signal to the authorities, forcing them—like a few years earlier in Ukraine—to allow for a fair contest. In 2018, the feeling of all those lost years when the authorities learnt nothing from the public emotions made the people demand a total makeover of the country.

Quite soon after his re-election in 2013 (again heavily disputed), Sargsyan hinted about the need to move from the presidential system of governance to a parliamentary one. The opposition fiercely rejected his plans, claiming that their only objective was to perpetuate Sargsyan’s rule and turn Armenia into a one-party state. The opposition was able to show a high degree of unity on this issue, yet after some initial success it was unable to use the case to mobilise a mass movement against the authorities. The ruling camp has rushed constitutional amendments through parliament and put them up in December 2015 for a popular vote.

The constitutional reform in Armenia provoked some different opinions in the West. Some were quite sceptical about the plan to switch to the parliamentary model from

the presidential one. They feared that it would become merely a disguise for even more centralised and authoritarian rule. Others, while not disputing the harmful short-term consequences, claimed that the parliamentary mode might help bring in a long-term new dynamic to the internal politics and, in particular, help defuse possible crises without “all-or-nothing” solutions. Some contended that the new constitutional amendments were passable, even if they concentrated power excessively in the hands of the prime minister. Others bashed the new constitution for being too visibly tailored to suit one political personality. All were equally appalled by some outright irregularities during the constitutional referendum of 2015. The foreign observers made known their critical observations, which were supported by the Western embassies. Yet, the prevailing view was to let the ruling party prove that the reform would bring more democracy in Armenia.

Quite soon thereafter the West was approached with the request to help Armenia improve its election standards. The first reactions were divergent. Some saw it as a chance to introduce some technical measures that would eliminate the room for manipulation and make the outcome of elections more legitimate. Others believed that the international community should stay away from any, even small, implicit responsibility for the management of elections. The challenge for the EU was that it was never involved in election-related issues in the wide Europe area. The final policy decision was to be constructive, but to use financial involvement to push for a more democratic process. Thus, some concrete conditions were put forward. The main one among them was that any arrangement should receive the consent of both the government

coalition and the opposition. This insistence led to the opening of an unprecedented platform for negotiations between the government and some opposition parties. They were conducted in two phases. The first ended in June 2016 in an agreement to go for a procedure (entailing pre-registration of voters) which would essentially eliminate multiple- or proxy-voting and other dirty techniques. However, the government side declared in July that the agreed option was not implementable. It was unwilling to consider other options at that time.

To the surprise of potential donors, the government in mid-August 2016 made another offer to the opposition, which was keen to explore it because it included the possibility of making the list of voters public. This time, the opposition conditioned its participation on the involvement of civil society representatives as a party to the negotiations. A group of civil society experts actively joined the dialogue yet at the end decided not to become a signatory to the final deal. The final compromise reached in early October related only to technical aspects of elections. The government side, for example, did not want to accept the demand to relinquish the system of ranking lists. The Western partners did their best to persuade the authorities to drop the concept. They feared that it would become the source of smears and unfair attacks that would spoil the image of the elections. The authorities were very unwilling to do that, and in fact, the Republican Party viewed the ranking lists as a vehicle for amassing the necessary financial means to buy voters. Their candidates, even if competing with each other, would nevertheless on aggregate bring money into the common treasury of the Republican Party.

Based on the agreement between the government and the opposition, the international donors decided to support financially the installation of new technology. Some opposition activists had every right to question this constructive line of the West in light of the 2017 elections. However, from the very beginning, the motives of the West were long-term, and they were proven right in December 2018 when the same technology helped to ensure the best standard of elections in Armenia since the beginning of the 1990s.

In September 2016, Karapetyan was appointed the prime minister. The April War somewhat delayed his appointment (and terminated the succession aspirations of his predecessor, Hovik Abrahamyan, however illusionary they were). Karapetyan made a solid impression on the international community. One high-level official from Europe after meeting the prime minister in November 2016 confessed: “the guy makes the best impression among all the Eastern Partnership prime ministers.” Karapetyan was probably the first prime minister of Armenia who was bold enough to express a very realistic assessment of the (quite dreadful) situation inherited by his government. His ministerial team was, from a technocratic point of view, very professional. International donors felt a positive change in the working style of the new government quite quickly. He openly declared the goal of promoting the European style of management in Armenia. He wanted to start by simplifying and speeding up the government decision-making process.

He must have felt that the international partners appreciated his efforts. They had no illusions that he wasn't a product of the old system and was an integral part of it. Totally dependent on Sargsyan, he had no power base of his own and could prove to

be just another “marionette” in Sargsyan’s hands, one to discard when inconvenient. Some recalled his desertion in 2011 after only several months as the mayor of Yerevan, predicting that when faced with real dilemmas, he would again quit instead of fighting.

Some local commentators dismissed Karapetyan as a man both from Russia and controlled by Russia, yet it was readily apparent that his appointment infused a new hope and energy. But he had to operate within a system of power that restricted the space for reform. The best he could do was tinker at the edges, improving small things without touching upon the core of the system of power of the elite at the time. He could theoretically enlarge his impact on governance through small steps, slowly like a spiral around the nucleus. Whether he would succeed in this process and how long it would take is pure speculation today.

The revolution changed the logic. Then it became possible to hit the nail on the head, attack the core of the malfunctioning political and economic system, extirpate the root causes and then move to the edges.

The appointment of Karapetyan and some other figures in the central administration (like Armen Gevorgyan, who became head of the presidential administration) in early autumn of 2016 produced much speculation in Armenian social media about the rise of influence of the second president, Kocharyan. Some of these appointments were linked to him. Some observers saw it as an attempt to consolidate the camp of power in the face of emerging instability of which the Sasna Tsrer attack was the harbinger.

Yet, by the summer of 2017, some cracks in the ruling camp came into view. Analysts were talking about the growing tension between the old camarilla of Sargsyan, his Republican Party *hongweibings* on the one side, and the technocrats around Karapetyan, on the other. Indeed, some of the critical voices directed against Karapetyan were clearly coming from the side of the old camarilla. It was assessed that Sargsyan was nevertheless able to quash the rifts and most importantly fend off successfully the challenge from Kocharyan. Some analysts explain that the signing of the CEPA agreement and the signals of readiness for the deal on Nagorno-Karabakh helped him to use the international factor aptly to consolidate his political position inside the elite. At the advent of the 2018 revolution, he was very much the man in charge.

For most Armenian commentators, it was clear that if in 2018 Karapetyan had been appointed prime minister instead of Sargsyan, the revolution would not have happened. However, already by summer 2017 some comments made by the officials of the Republican Party hinted that succession was probably not in the cards. By November 2017 it became clear that Karapetyan must have understood it and, willingly or not, accepted it. There were rumours later on that some emissaries of the disappointed Karapetyan were trying to connect with the opposition—and with Pashinyan personally—at the end of 2017 to sound out the intentions of the opposition to prevent Sargsyan from continuing his rule. There are only very few people who can confirm or deny such rumours but there are thousands willing to believe them.

The revolution that erupted was purely indigenous. No external force, be it from the West or from the East, was in

any way involved. Some officials from Sargsyan's circle were indeed trying to accuse some Western diplomats in the pre-revolutionary period that they were trying to foment another colour revolution. They would retort that it was the Armenian leadership that, by tolerating corruption, dispensing policies of patronage, and promoting impunity, was the chief architect of a possible revolution.

Many diplomats were quite afraid that any attempt to dethrone Sargsyan would be met with fierce resistance and would inevitably result in a more oppressive regime with fewer freedoms and liberties. Such a scenario would cut off Armenia from the West even more. Some diplomats shared this belief even throughout the revolution. Some did not. They trusted that Armenians could show enough wisdom and unity. And they were proven right.

TIMING

Timing is the key to politics. It is about saying and doing the right things at the right time. History is full of cases when politicians were saying the right things and trying to do the right things but at the wrong moment. None of these politicians achieved much success in their career.

Revolutionary theoreticians, in particular the Marxist-Leninist school, link timing to the concept of a revolutionary moment. Nothing in the spring of 2018 indicated that anybody had a premonition of what was going to happen.

Some opposition groups tried to mobilise society against the prolongation of Sargsyan's rule, but the assemblies and marches did not attract big crowds. Fewer than 1,000 people were on Azatutyun Square (where many political demonstrations were held after independence), not more than 200 people gathered on Melik-Adamyan Street (near the headquarters of the Republican Party) in March and the beginning of April 2018. To foreign observers, these demonstrations did not capture the attention of ordinary Armenians, who appeared to be immersed in deep apathy.

These observers learned quite early that Pashinyan was planning a days-long march to protest against Sargsyan at the end of March/beginning of April 2018. They heard that the opposition bloc of Yelk was divided on this issue. The other two formations (Bright Armenia and Republic) within the bloc declined to join Civil Contract. They explained that they feared that street action would result in the use of force, with unpredictable consequences. Reportedly, Pashinyan was determined to go ahead with his plan regardless, out of a moral duty even if there were no signs on the horizon that he had any chance to succeed. It was simply imperative for him. If the attempt failed, he would be prepared to quit politics altogether, but he would not quit without trying. Foreign diplomats would probably agree with him that it was for him the only opportunity to spectacularly show his opposition to the extension of Sargsyan's rule.

Social media reports reaching Yerevan from the start of the walk in Gyumri on 31 March 2018 and from the route did not augur any success—a few people and a dog, facing chilly

weather along the road. No sign of exerting any political wake-up for ordinary people.

The demonstration after the arrival of Pashinyan in Yerevan on 13 April was quite sizeable but not one that showed any potential for the future. Only about 100 demonstrators decided to camp overnight in tents on France Square. The authorities did not seem to pay any heed to Pashinyan's movements.

The foreign observers witnessed on 14 April Pashinyan trying to call on people across Armenia to support his cause. His entry into the public radio building was seen as a sign of desperation to try to stir the conscience of the public, who at that point did not seem to appreciate the stakes involved in extending Sargsyan's rule.

At the weekend came indeed a real push for an awakening. Armenians saw on 14 April a grotesquely staged Republican Party convention nominating Sargsyan as its candidate for prime minister. They saw a promise being broken. They felt fooled—again. But they also spotted fear in the eyes of the rulers. The party gathering was held in Tsaghkadzor, which by some people was interpreted as a sign of authorities' vulnerability. On the surface, the authorities seemed to be ignoring Pashinyan's actions, but, on the other hand, they had gathered outside of Yerevan to avoid disruption.

On 16 April, the events crossed a threshold. Thousands were now willing to join Pashinyan. The streets around parliament became blocked and several cases of injuries were reported. Pashinyan himself had to be taken to the hospital to tend to wounds. Baghramyan Street (where the National Assembly is

located and where the vote on the appointment of the prime minister would take place) became a place of a real showdown.

Despite the growing tension, on 17 April, as planned, Sargsyan was elected prime minister (77 MPs voted in favour, 17 against). That day, Pashinyan proclaimed a Velvet Revolution.

The authorities still denied that Pashinyan was a real force but started blaming him for actions deemed illegal. They began detaining protesters in big numbers and intimidating civil society and the opposition.

THE PROCESS

The foreign observers in Yerevan got the impression that the authorities wanted to follow their recent tactics of dealing with discontent by procrastinating, tiring people out, exhausting them to the point of losing hope in the success of the protests. Some people tried to advise the authorities to take the anger of the people seriously, but without much success. Definitely, the authorities did not have any wish at that stage to talk to Pashinyan at all. Yet, it was strange to find them completely ignoring the growing size of the crowd following Pashinyan. For any bystander, the snowball effect of the protest was already visible by 16 April. But the authorities were still in a state of denial. In private, they rejected the idea of Sargsyan going for new elections as subversive. When they started thinking of this a few days later, it was too late.

On 20 April, it became clear to foreign observers that the demonstrations would grow into something politically big and

strong. It was a day of particularly bad weather. The temperature had dropped by a few degrees and it was wet and windy. And yet, the crowd in Republic Square exceeded 20,000 even by the most conservative estimate. Pashinyan started employing quite a few successful tactics. Instead of directly calling people to the square, he marched through Yerevan encouraging potential supporters to join him. He brought the protest to every part of the city. And indeed, on 21 April the rally in Republic Square surpassed 50,000. His protest had a straightforward and understandable agenda—to reject Serzh Sargsyan. The simpler the agenda of any revolution and the more it is emotionally appealing, the more people it can unite and attract.

The organisers of the protests followed quite a decentralised model of management. While Pashinyan remained the face and leader of the revolution, whose calls and instructions were implemented with unreserved support, many decisions on technical issues were delegated to people on the spot. Sometimes, especially as far as developments in other cities and districts of Yerevan were concerned, he was sincerely not aware of the actions taken. This decentralised model proved to be a strong asset of the revolution. The protests resembled a network of networks. Niall Ferguson, when writing his *The Square and the Tower* could have used the Armenian Revolution as an excellent example of a successful “networked” revolution. In hierarchical structures (“towers”), when the top leadership is paralysed and eliminated, the whole structure suffers distress. In a network, the paralysed connections are quickly replaced. Thus, later on, when the authorities detained the three revolution “leaders,” the protests did not lose any of their vigour and strength. Likewise, most of the blockades on 2 May looked locally improvised like

in a network, yet they were very effective and orderly, without any trait of chaos. The Armenian Revolution could be described as a showdown of strength between a popular network and a hierarchical regime. The power of the network prevailed.

By 21 April, Pashinyan had become the talk of the town. His outspokenness, courage and determination inspired the people. And they liked his sincerity. One courageous leader can stir courage among ordinary people. And he did.

Only at this point, more than a week after the crisis started unravelling the regime, the authorities realised that it was time to share their assessment of the situation with foreign diplomats officially. It was interpreted that they grudgingly accepted that the demonstrations had become a political fact to be reckoned with, but their narrative was quite uninspiring. They saw the protests as an illegal disruption. Some ambassadors—very few and from countries with authoritarian colours—decided to agree with the authorities. The Western diplomats were quite unanimous in calling for non-use of force and for negotiations, even if one of them clumsily acquiesced that the protests were technically illegal. However, for the European diplomats, the interpretation based on the Strasbourg court's jurisprudence was clear: even unauthorised demonstrations require protection from the authorities as long they are peaceful and meet other standards of the right of assembly. Unauthorised does not mean illegal.

Nothing arouses the imagination of people holding power than the size of a crowd. The experience of other revolutions shows that there is always a tipping point in any protest. The Armenian authorities underestimated the importance of this

point. The only person among them who made the impression of having a realistic assessment of the developments was President Armen Sarkisyan. Unlike some other members of the establishment, he never questioned in his contacts with diplomats either the size or the honesty of the protests. His visit to the square to meet Pashinyan on 21 April was regarded as an act of political responsibility and courage, although the rumour was that he was sent there by Sargsyan himself just to lure Pashinyan to a meeting the next day. Definitely, Sarkisyan would not have gone without the consent of Sargsyan. The president was reportedly ready to accept all the conditions put forward for the meeting by Pashinyan, including (to the latter's surprise) that the meeting would be about Sargsyan's resignation.

Some Western politicians were very appreciative of the stabilising role of Sarkisyan throughout the process, even if there was no doubt that he was part of the old system.

The initiative for the meeting between Sargsyan and Pashinyan came very late. The authorities had started to worry that the crisis would spill over to 24 April, Genocide Remembrance Day. This day occupies a special place on the Armenian calendar; being a day of grief and remembrance, it symbolises the unity and solidarity of the nation. The authorities feared that hundreds of thousands of Armenians who normally march to the Tsitsernakaberd (the Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex) on that day would turn their emotions against the authorities.

Foreign diplomats had a different view about the 22 April meeting between Sargsyan and Pashinyan. Most of them argued

that it would be part of a show staged by the former to discredit the latter and prove his lack of negotiating credibility. Some however, at least when the meeting was announced, put some hopes in the possibility of a prompt settlement of the crisis. For any sober observer, it became clear that Armenians were quite annoyed with Sargsyan's performance at that meeting. His reference to the lessons of 1 March 2008 were interpreted as an open threat. Pashinyan unquestionably took the upper hand. The support among the population grew immediately, even if not yet visibly, through action.

It was very worrying for foreigners to see that just a while after the aborted meeting, Pashinyan and his two closest partners, Ararat Mirzoyan and Sasun Mikaelyan, were detained. The fears that the authorities were preparing an all-out confrontation with the protesters rose dramatically. Rumours were reaching diplomats that laws on a state of emergency were being drafted, members of the National Assembly called back from their foreign trips for an urgent meeting, and police units were being reinforced. Probably, the pressure to use force to disperse the protests was quite real, but at that point, the consequences of following that path would be more than disastrous.

Just a few hours after the detention, the EU signalled "grave concern" and explicitly called for the release of illegally detained protesters. The authorities preferred to pretend that this was not about the release of Pashinyan. But it was. The fact that just a few hours after the detention on Sunday afternoon the EU had sent a strong signal was quite unprecedented in the practice of European common foreign policy. But the fear of using force to quash the protests was very high. Some local activists thought that the EU had learnt its lesson from the

2008 events. They recalled that at that time, it took the Union nine days to react with a public statement. This time, the EU reaction was timely throughout the crisis.

Perhaps the authorities thought that by detaining the leaders of the protests, they would deprive the demonstrations of the driving force. However, the rally on 22 April attracted an unprecedented number of participants, probably more than 120,000, and more than double the figure on the previous day. To any observer, it was a stunning show. It must have been a shock to the authorities as well. The people of Armenia had lost their fear. They would not let themselves feel intimidated any more.

It must have been a long and tormenting night for the decision-makers. The next day started with new marches with the participation of regular soldiers from the peacekeeping battalion and war veterans. In a matter of hours, Pashinyan was released and Sargsyan resigned. Whatever the motives of his resignation and whether any advice came from outside, Western diplomats interpreted his resignation as an act of patriotism. He declined to follow the option of resorting to force. He took the courage to state explicitly that he was wrong. The tensions immediately started to deflate. The political crisis in Armenia went into the settlement stage.

Immediately after the resignation, some rumours started circulating that the act was a tactical move. Like in chess, sometimes you must sacrifice even the queen to win the game. And after all, Sargsyan was an avid chess player. The plan of the Republicans allegedly was to preserve power while removing Sargsyan as the target of public rage. He would continue to

pull strings from behind the scenes. Karapetyan would take the post of prime minister while Pashinyan would be offered the position of his first deputy. As proof of this plan, it was widely circulated that Karapetyan would be invited to join the stage with Pashinyan on Republic Square. Whether there was any grain of truth in these rumours or not became irrelevant on the evening of 23 April. With more than 200,000 joyful participants, the crowd would not allow sharing its victory with anyone from the establishment. Pashinyan understood this very well. By that time, he had fiercely rejected any possibility of a Republican Party prime minister. He knew that the revolution was not about removing one person from power but about destroying the whole previous system of power.

The ruling camp put all its hopes in Karapetyan. He was considered the best option of guaranteeing continuity while defusing public anger. However, the ruling camp resorted to this option at least two weeks too late.

Only very few people inside the circle of the authorities understood on 24 April that pushing for Karapetyan was a no-go, but some did anyway. They mused about the possibility of a third person, neither Karapetyan nor Pashinyan, a so-called neutral candidate. And some foreign observers were quite susceptible to the idea of a neutral personality.

Such thinking was reinforced by an understandable enigma that surrounded the personality of Pashinyan. The activists of the Republican Party were not shy sometimes in sharing very negative characteristics of the leader of the revolution. A lot of fake news concerning his biography and personality started to be circulated. Many observers, including Western diplomats,

knew Pashinyan too little to verify the credibility of this information. And some of them were quite receptive to the bad gossip.

Pashinyan needed to try to connect with the diplomatic community and directly deliver his messages concerning the revolution and dissipate the fears, suspicion, and prejudice disseminated by his opponents. He did it by meeting the ambassadors of the European Union, Russia, and the United States beginning on 25 April. These meetings were essential in preparing the political ground for the recognition of the results of the revolution.

Next, political allies started defecting from the Republican Party. The Republicans were left alone but still were supposedly clinging to the idea of Karapetyan as prime minister. They were even willing to consider early elections with him as a caretaker. They engaged in contacts abroad and sent two emissaries to Moscow. President Vladimir Putin made a phone call to Karapetyan, which was interpreted locally as a clear political signal of support. But again, it came too late. There was very little that could be achieved from abroad at that stage of the revolution. The sentiments on Republic Square on 26 April were clear—the Republicans had to relinquish power altogether. It then became impossible for Pashinyan to consider any other option than himself becoming the prime minister. He would be judged irresponsible if he told the crowd that he led the revolution but now somebody else would take the responsibility. The option of a neutral candidate was dead and buried.

By that time, it also became clear that the only possibility of ending the political crisis in Armenia was to appoint Pashinyan as prime minister. For it to happen, this elementary truth had to be recognised by the Republican Party, which had the majority in the National Assembly and held the key to the solution.

The election of a new prime minister was scheduled for 1 May. The Republican Party had significant difficulty realising that prolonging the crisis by denying the necessary votes to Pashinyan worked against their interests. Some of the Republican parliamentarians were quite sincere in their emotional rejection of Pashinyan. Some made the impression that they still believed that the process could be reversed. Some worshipped delusions that the option of Karapetyan (with some foreign pressure) could be galvanised. Some perhaps thought that a decent deal could be negotiated with Pashinyan concerning the transfer of power. The rumours of a possible deal surfaced quite early.

Whatever the considerations for their delay, they led the Republican Party to commit collective *seppuku* in front of the whole nation on 1 May. The day was beautiful, cafés, restaurants, gardens were full of people all watching live the parliamentary debate on TV screens. Just passing by, any observer would realise how the Armenians reacted to the anti-Pashinyan speeches of the Republicans. The defeat of Pashinyan's candidacy (he received 45 votes in favour while 55 MPs voted against him, including all but one member of the Republican Party) was met with real fury directed against the Republicans.

The next day, Armenia came to a standstill. The city of Yerevan was totally blocked. By late afternoon, the Republican Party realized that they indeed had no other option but to allow

the election of Pashinyan as prime minister. To confess, some circles, even in Western capitals, still did not want to take the revolution for granted, believing that the authorities were still controlling all the law enforcement machinery and branches of power and could reverse it. Sometimes, even if you have all the information, you cannot make the right predictions from a distance. You must be inside the events to understand and predict their logic. You must feel the emotions. In short, you must have good diplomats deployed on the ground. And trust their instincts.

The vote on 8 May became a formality (Pashinyan received 59 votes and 42 against). The revolution had triumphed.

REACTIONS

The revolution generated a lot of sympathy for Armenia throughout the world. That is the advantage of living in a single global information space. The images from Republic Square reached even places where ordinary people had never heard of Armenia. For a small country, such publicity can be a strong asset. After all, the importance of soft power is progressing in world politics.

There were, of course countries, including some in close proximity, where the Armenian events sowed some anxiety. A few leaders feared that there might be a spillover effect and the opposition in their countries might feel encouraged to stir up something similar. Some of these leaders had no particular

sympathy for Sargsyan but were still scared by the prospect of sharing his fate.

Some countries in the post-Soviet space, including some quite important for Armenia, were watching the developments with caution. After all, Pashinyan was one of the few Armenian parliamentarians who voted against Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Some foreign media attacked Pashinyan for staffing his team with former employees of Western-sponsored NGOs and development agencies. Some outlets even composed a list of "Russophobes" inside the administration. One of the NGOs (the Open Society Foundation) became a particular subject of vicious attacks, including by groups in Armenia proper.

Pashinyan made it very clear that the revolution had no geopolitical context. He stressed on every occasion that there would be no changes in the foreign policy line. In the perception of Western observers, he went very far, also in concrete decisions, to placate any concerns that he might deviate from the previous Armenian foreign and security policy azimuths. Sometimes, so far that even some former Western diplomats in their publications developed conspiracy theories according to which there must have been a geopolitical deal between some great powers concerning the orientation of the new government, and Pashinyan would deepen the level of the previous links of integration, if not dependence. Entirely untrue but not without reason.

The West rejoiced instinctively at the triumph of the Armenian revolution. After all, the revolution was about the values that the West has tried to promote in the wider European

area. The politicians in the West seemed to understand that for geopolitical reasons, they could not be too conspicuous about it. They thought that cosyng up to Pashinyan too strongly would make his life more difficult. Some of them let out a big sigh of relief when they heard about the lack of geopolitical objectives in the revolution. Ukraine and Georgia already weighed down the geopolitical agenda and they did not want to add another item to it. Yet, quite quickly some Western politicians seemed to lose the clarity of judgement about the post-revolutionary situation. There were several reasons for that.

First, the leaders of post-revolutionary Armenia seemed to have taken for granted that they did not have to explain to the West what happened in Armenia and where the post-revolutionary reforms were leading. They probably believed that it was all so obvious and needed no explanation whatsoever. This left the stage open to some politicians of the Republican Party who became very active in their connections with Western politicians to persuade them that no revolution had taken place in Armenia, just a change of power, and the new authorities were less pro-Western, less competent, and less responsible than the previous ones.

The Armenian diplomatic corps in the West was practically unchanged and sometimes did not feel any pressure to be active in explaining the developments. To make things even worse, even for the Western diplomats in Yerevan after the revolution, it became more difficult to learn from the new authorities how to interpret this or that development in post-revolutionary Armenia. Since its independence, Armenia has had a tradition of hospitality and openness to foreign diplomats. Armenian officials have always been very accessible to their contacts.

For any diplomat working in Armenia, it was—due to the accessibility of officials and politicians—a professional pleasure. All doors were always open; issues of protocol were sometimes quite secondary. After the revolution, some Western diplomats were quite puzzled why so little effort was made on the part of the authorities to explain the post-revolutionary situation. Sometimes they even suspected a subversive attitude on the part of some of the bureaucratic middlemen. Sometimes they attributed merely to the lack of awareness on the part of the new leaders why communication of their message to the outside world was so important, in particular if the leaders had high expectations concerning future assistance from the West. The post-revolutionary government lacked a clear communication strategy towards the West.

Second, it was very unfortunate that immediately after the revolution the new leaders tried to link the West with the misdeeds of the previous regime. The most ridiculous step was to imply that the West shared responsibility for the corruption flourishing in Armenia. Looking with suspicion at the previous investments of Western companies did not encourage more interest on the part of potential Western investors after the revolution. Some Western politicians and diplomats were afraid that such a distrustful approach towards foreign investments made before the revolution would create a precedent, allowing any new government of Armenia to backtrack on previous commitments.

Third, the West had at that time quite a lot of other bigger worries. The case of Armenia has always been looked at from a broader political perspective. It was quite telling that one of the European politicians visiting Armenia had a lot of supportive

words to say to his local interlocutors. Yet, when he published a book of his most recent memoirs, he did not mention his opinion about the Armenian Revolution and his encounters with Pashinyan. The entries in his diaries from March to May 2018 do not contain any reference to the events in Armenia. The name “Pashinyan” is not mentioned at all despite several consecutive encounters between the two politicians. In the age of communication, a country like Armenia cannot assume *a priori* that it earns the support and esteem of its partners by default; effort is required.

Fourth, for years in the policies of some Western states, a system of symmetry concerning their attitudes to Armenia and Azerbaijan acquired the status of an axiom. In order to show neutrality in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, they believed they had to show equal distance to Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular in international forums. The Armenian Revolution became a factor that made the simple continuation of this policy more complicated. Some of these politicians still believed that the absolute priority was settlement of the conflict. Other issues, including the assessment of the domestic situation, should remain secondary. Sometimes, they could not make up their mind whether the success of the Armenian Revolution facilitates the settlement or complicates it. The adversaries of the Armenian Revolution had in such instances an easy job to devalue its meaning.

There were a lot of trivial stereotypes that were circulated in the West concerning the post-revolutionary situation. One of them was about the government being young and inexperienced. The truth was that some members of the Cabinet were more than experienced, just to mention a few, including the ministers

of foreign affairs (Zorab Mnatsakanyan), defence (Davit Tonoyan), and emergency situations (Feliks Tsolakyan). They knew their subject matter very well, and they were well versed in how the state machinery worked. In fact, in these ministries, as well as the Ministry of Justice and in law enforcement agencies, the personnel changes were only symbolic, perhaps even too symbolic to be positively appreciated by civil society. The basic cadre of managers remained the same.

There were, of course, some new faces among the ministers, their deputies, and special advisers. They brought a lot of new energy and enthusiasm. Foreign partners saw in the development assistance channels unbelievable surge of positive energy. These young people spoke foreign languages well and had quite Western mindsets. It was a pity to see some of them leaving the government machinery after just a few months, whatever the reasons for their departure. But for many civil-society activists, the government well into 2019 was still a mixture of old and new Armenia. The spirit of new Armenia, by assessments of civil society, was visible in the ministries of Labour, Health, Environment, and (from mid-2019) Justice.

Another stereotype circulating in the West was that the revolution resulted in an ever-growing concentration of power. Indeed, Armenia has had a political system in which power is concentrated in one office. Before the revolution, whatever the titular roles of other functionaries, including those in separate branches of power like the judiciary, all the cardinal decisions were taken in one office—the president's. Everybody knew that all major, and sometimes very petty decisions, were made there. These were related to court proceedings, prosecution activities, media messages, or procurement preferences, you name it.

The constitutional amendments approved in 2015 centralised the power even more, and the revolution inherited this system of concentrated power. There were some voices, including in essential roles, that post-revolutionary Armenia needed to develop a system of checks and balances. It has not happened so far. The opponents of the revolution were quite shrewd in portraying some critical issues as an attempt of the executive to subordinate the other branches, in particular the judiciary. In defence of keeping the inherited system, some argued that going through the transition required strict leadership. But the view has been influencing the outside perception of developments that Armenia is increasingly a one-man show. In the West, this smells inevitably of voluntarism, and voluntarism does not sell well there. Some revolutionary leaders from other post-Soviet states gave a clear example of that in the not-so-distant past.

The opponents of Pashinyan were using his comments related to the case of Kocharyan and others involved in the 1 March 2008 events that sometimes sounded quite emotional (like his speech in August 2018 at a rally dedicated to his first 100 days in office) to accuse him of concentrating all his energy on political retribution. They purported that the revolution was driven by a personal agenda of sending Kocharyan to jail and reaping previous corrupt figures. Rumours were circulated in abundance that the case of Kocharyan was spoiling the chemistry of the relationship between Pashinyan and some other foreign leaders—one in particular (Putin). In democratic societies, even leading politicians have the right to express their personal views on court verdicts. Nonetheless, the less vocal they are when making use of their right, the better for

democracy. And in high-profile cases, they should bite their tongue before saying anything.

The policy of Europe concerning the reform plans of the new government continued the pattern of a demand-driven approach. Europe expected Armenia to define its needs and expectations. The EU increased the level of assistance almost twofold in a period of a few years. It afforded general political support to the direction of reforms undertaken by Pashinyan. As expressed more than once by high officials of the European Union, they fully believed in the good intentions of the new government and trusted its leader.

Obviously, Armenia can and should have high expectations concerning the attitude of the West. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible, despite the supportive position of the previous European Commission leaders, to open the visa-liberalisation dialogue. Some of the reasons for that have nothing to do with Armenia, but it is difficult to disagree with the then-President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker when he implied that visa liberalisation is a test of the credibility of the European Union concerning its policy of openness and a good neighbourhood to a friendly country like Armenia. Europe should also be more visible as an investor and trade partner. A lot depends, however, on how active Armenia is in attracting European capital and trade.

In the overall picture, the relations with the European Union have been clearly the smoothest of all the foreign partners of Armenia. The EU has shown a full understanding of the priorities of Armenia, its other commitments and obligations. For years, the EU has been the biggest donor, and at times, the most significant

investor and trade partner of Armenia, yet before the revolution it was listed quite low among the partners in official foreign policy documents of Armenia. Russia has always been number one, followed by the United States. The European Union, for unknown reasons, was separated from its Member States on the list of priorities, and quite far down the list, reaching in the official programme of Karapetyan's government position number 17. This was interpreted as revealing ignorance on the part of some officials as to what the European Union was about. Maybe it was even inspired by some reasoning imported from other capitals. It looked so ridiculous that it could not generate any serious, even if negative, feelings in Brussels. The programme speeches of Pashinyan on 1 and 8 May 2018 marked a visible change, and the European Union was mentioned in them quite high among the foreign policy priorities. But it has been taking some time for lower-ranking officials in some ministries, one in particular, to tune into his thinking.

The revolution took place only a few days after Armenia ratified the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the European Union. The National Assembly did this unanimously, which was something quite unprecedented. The negotiations on the agreement were conducted quite dynamically. The EU negotiators showed a relatively high degree of flexibility. There were fears in Brussels that the situation of 2013 might repeat and that Armenia again would back out of the agreement. The story of 2013 was very disappointing since Armenia had always been ahead in terms of the negotiating pace of other EU eastern partners. It gave the impression that they wanted it very much and would sign it without much ado. The refusal to ratify and the turnaround to join the Eurasian Economic Union

was to Brussels a colossal shock. Later on, some people close to the office of the president of Armenia tried to explain that the country knew a year before that it could not go ahead with the EU agreement. Strangely enough, their negotiators did not know anything about it. The EU diplomats, however, did not know either at that time that there were some strong divisions in the ruling circles concerning whether to go for an agreement with the European Union at all. Some Armenian officials believed by Brussels to be of a pro-European orientation were in private quite in favour of joining the EEAU instead.

The spectre of Armenia abandoning the EU agreement for a second time resurfaced every time a difficult issue emerged on the negotiation agenda. This neuralgic reflex was not justified. For any diplomat residing in Yerevan, it was clear that Sargsyan wanted the agreement. He instructed his negotiating team to take a constructive approach, and he was ready to engage personally with Armenia's foreign closest partners to drop their reservations, even if formulated this time only in very narrow and specific quarters.

The negotiations were generally smooth, although their pace was uneven. Sometimes, like in May 2016, the slow-down (after a very dynamic start) was difficult for the European negotiators to understand. Yet, at the right moment, proper impulses were generated on the Armenian side.

In the final hour, the compromise had to be found on the two most important issues—for the EU side it was cognac/brandy as a priority (European Union policy is to insist that its trade partners accept so-called geographical indications reserving the right to call *cognac* only the liquor produced in the

region of Cognac); for Armenia, the precedence of Armenia's "other commitments and obligations" (meaning chiefly those stemming from membership in the Eurasian Union) over the EU agreement. And then the deal was done.

It was finalised on 27 February 2017 during the visit of President Sargsyan to Brussels, and the agreement was signed on 24 November 2017 on the margins of the Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels.

The CEPA agreement has now become a handy point of reference defining the relationship between the European Union and Armenia. It is politically lighter than an Association Agreement, and it does not include free trade provisions. But technically, the various benchmarks and standards listed in the annexes to it look very challenging and sometimes more demanding than the Association Agreements with Georgia or Ukraine. Their implementation would help to modernise Armenia dramatically. But the cost of implementation by Armenian calculations looks high—more than €1.3 billion. However, money is not the hardest hurdle to clear. The implementation of the agreement requires the mobilisation and competence on the part of the bureaucratic apparatus in several of the line ministries and public institutions. It took the Armenian side quite long to elaborate the roadmap for implementation. But more important is that the Armenian government appropriately monitors the Roadmap in its implementation. Action plans cannot serve as a substitute for real action.

The European Union declared its readiness to help with advice and capacity-building. Unfortunately, it has been taking quite a long time to translate this declaration into operational

arrangements on the Armenian side. Taking advice from the West became paradoxically more politically sensitive for Armenia than during Sargsyan's time. Yet, for many European Union members, the implementation of CEPA will be a yardstick of the credibility of Armenia's reform declarations in the years to come—a reality check.

Living by European norms and standards can sometimes be very tough. The European model of modernisation is probably the only viable model for Armenia. One can only hope that it would be reconcilable with Armenia's "other commitments and obligations."

After the revolution, some politicians and experts in Armenia asked whether the agreement should have been finalised after the revolution. Strangely enough, the prevailing view was that CEPA was the maximum that could be negotiated with the European Union in the present geopolitical context. But, as one Western diplomat used to advise the Armenian friends: "look at CEPA as the floor and not as the ceiling."

The Armenian public appreciates now more than ever the value of a close relationship with the European Union. This capital of trust should not be squandered. But this would require more imaginative policies by Brussels. And also, by some national capitals.

THE IMPACT

The value of any revolution can be assessed merely by its impact on the lives of the people. Armenians went to

Republic Square with high expectations, even if the original agenda was quite simple—to get rid of Sargsyan. This agenda was expanded during the revolution to include the goal of sidelining the Republican Party, and later with the objective of crushing the old corrupt system altogether. But the people of Armenia had even higher expectations than that. They wanted a free and prosperous country, Western living standards, new jobs, increasing salaries, fulfilling careers, and so on. Any revolution has a significant difficulty in delivering on such high expectations and doing it fast.

The new team that assumed power was small though. There weren't hundreds of specialists behind them whom they could trust and immediately deploy to run the administration. There were no ready-made blueprints for reforms hidden in drawers. The revolution's leaders soon realised that to protect it from the outside (and from the populism of the losers on the inside) they had to stick strictly to constitutional limitations, even if the people of Armenia would not care about those restrictions.

Pashinyan showed almost religious devotion to some basic principles. First, he displayed a total intolerance of corruption. Several prominent people who embezzled state money were put in jail. Even people who assumed office after the revolution and were caught up in fraud were brought to justice. As mentioned by the prime minister on 26 February 2020, some \$150 million has been recovered in corruption cases since the 2018 revolution. This vigorous assault on corruption constituted a Copernican revolution in Armenia. Yes, it was naïve to think that these surgical strikes were enough to make the Armenian economy work properly and remove the systemic threats of corruption. Armenia needed anti-corruption laws and anti-corruption

institutions. It has been taking pains to create them, sometimes to the great bemusement of civil society and foreign observers.

Second, Pashinyan has shown sincere devotion to building a rule-of-law state. He ended impunity in Armenia; he refrained from remote-control-like methods of influencing the judiciary. It was another Copernican upheaval. Before the revolution, certain people behaved as if they were above any law; they (their relatives) were spared from responsibility for even petty criminal offences. Pashinyan put an end to this impunity. While devoted to the principle of fair justice, the new authorities delayed for a long time any attempt to reform the judiciary. The Armenian public heard *ex-post* that the authorities waited for the judiciary to do the cleaning by themselves. The talk on reform started in 2019 in a context tainted by a particular personal case that was very unfortunate (after Kocharyan's release from pre-trial detention in May 2019 and the blockade of the courts called for by Pashinyan at that time). For any person living in Armenia, reforming the judiciary should have started immediately after the revolution. It turned out that transitional justice became one of the controversial issues. Civil society activists were of the view that the absence of practical steps was motivated by some external considerations. The transitional justice mechanisms would expose certain links and connections to some external partners existing before the revolution. But many people who really suffered under the previous regime—who went to jail, who lost their jobs, lost their property—for what they believed were political reasons started developing a sense of disappointment.

Third, Pashinyan has proven his devotion to the principle of free elections. The elections conducted in Armenia in December 2018 were the most credible in years. As further

proof of fairness, the candidates supported by Pashinyan lost in some local elections. The leaders of the ruling party declared that they could accept defeat at the next elections. Unlike their predecessors, they are not planning to cling to power at any price. That's laudable, but some local analysts maintain that they should not be indifferent to the issue of who takes power from the incumbents and what they will do with it.

Some people expected the revolutionary camp to quite quickly build a modern system of democracy built on the principles of checks and balances, separation of powers, subsidiarity of the levels of government, and the political neutrality of law enforcement institutions, including the police, special services, prosecutors, and investigative bodies. Some hoped that the first elements of these reforms would be put in place before the next elections. They are increasingly disappointed now.

Some insiders hint that the revolutionary camp underestimated the resistance of the old structures (and people in them). No doubt, the process of state capture practised in Armenia resulted in a tightly wound network of people and interests, sometimes with a criminal flavour. That network saw the change proclaimed by Pashinyan as an existential threat. The experience of other countries shows that at first, these people try to wait out the impact of the change—they try to absorb it. When the change becomes real and sustained, they try to resist it. If they have money, access to professional resources, they can be quite effective in their resistance. As long as they are there, the risk that the old order will return to Armenia is real.

That Pashinyan essentially kept in their positions the law enforcement personnel, including top brass, was interpreted as

a forced move for fear of a revolt that might originate from these quarters. Their close connections with allied foreign structures made the challenge of the transition even more complicated. Further, he maintained the old model of direct supervision by the prime minister of these services, suiting very well Sargsyan, which was interpreted as necessary for Pashinyan to maintain their loyalty on constant watch and instruct them directly what to do. Pashinyan's admission in 2020 that these services, instead of catching corrupt people from previous regimes were instead sending them warnings to destroy evidence and hide money, was interpreted as a confession of wrong policy. Some of the former opposition activists contend that Pashinyan should have started cleaning up law enforcement, reforming it, and introducing a Western system of democratic control much earlier. What remains clear is that the new Armenia will not be built without deep reform of these services.

The supporters of the revolution criticise the ruling “My Step” coalition for a disappointing and ever-slower pace of reforms. They mock the ruling party's philosophy as moderate progress within the bounds of the law. Indeed, the bounds of the law are a definite factor. When the ruling party tries to change them, like in the case of the reform of the judiciary or the Constitutional Court, their opponents cry foul and try to mobilise international structures against the changes, and some of those structures sometimes really view it as a loss—they let themselves be manipulated.

As proof of their sometimes puzzling political ignorance, they equate the reform efforts in Armenia with the changes in the judiciary branch undertaken by the governments in Poland or Hungary.

Some wonder why the ruling team, while complaining of the bounds of the old laws, does not spell out a plan to change them, including the constitution. The Sargsyan-era constitution, lacking elementary checks and balances, is seen by many inside Armenia as an impediment. Some say that changing Armenia based on it is like building a democracy and market economy on the 1936 Stalin constitution. In theory, it was doable since the 1936 Stalin constitution holds the world record in terms of the number of rights and freedoms guaranteed for the citizens. But it was used for just the opposite.

The ruling party often complains about negative attitudes in media, especially practised by outlets owned or controlled by people linked politically and economically to the old regime. At the same time, civil society activists complain that the media environment, starting with public outlets, has not undergone much change in terms of the regulatory framework. And media by default must be critical if they want to defend their credibility.

One of the apparent things that Pashinyan did after the revolution was put a particular emphasis on the economy. He even called for an economic revolution. The call died out over the time. Some suspected that he was driven by the naïve belief that it was enough to remove old corrupt schemes and patronage and the economic system would produce a miracle. It did not happen, although the current growth rate (before COVID-19) looked quite promising, recording 7.6% GDP growth in 2019, according to the official World Bank data.

The system has some obvious limits for extensive growth. The internal market is small, the access to external markets

handicapped by logistical barriers (the Upper Lars passage blockades, the closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan) or situational difficulties (sanctions regime with Iran). The country remains vulnerable to energy supply disruption, and in particular, the price of gas. Some Armenians say with sarcasm that if the gas price rises by 50%, the fate of the revolution might be doomed. Luckily for the current government, the two post-revolutionary winters have been quite mild.

Certainly, the country needs a viable long-term economic strategy that will attract more foreign capital. The post-revolutionary government has ambitious aspirations to make the IT sector Armenia's calling card. The digital economy can, in fact, overcome the handicap of its isolated location. But its development in a very competitive global environment is a serious challenge.

Is the change already irreversible? In some aspects, it is. The previous system of state capture will never be rebuilt in the same form, but some elements of it may be reproduced in a new guise. Some people representing the previous mentality may return to power again (even if hidden in the shadows). The stake of the reforms in Armenia is politically still very high.

Most people in Armenia believe that the 2018 revolution was meant to put an end to the post-Soviet system of politics, economy, and social relations. And most probably this should be seen as its most tangible impact. It helped to change the mindsets of many people. In this respect, it can be called a revolution of mindset. But mindset has to be cultivated by new norms and new institutions—a new political culture.

GAME CHANGER

Armenians' ultimate point of reference for judging any developments relating to their country is security. Everything that has happened in Armenia is seen through the prism of security, and the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh (called locally *Artsakh*) comes at the top of that list.

The issue is sometimes very emotional. The revolution of 2018 has somewhat added a new dimension to it. When Pashinyan ascended to the office of prime minister, he openly declared that he did not have, unlike the two previous presidents, the mandate to represent Nagorno-Karabakh at the negotiations (consultations) aimed at resolving the conflict. After all, both Kocharyan and Sargsyan were representatives of the Nagorno-Karabakh elite and could claim to speak for the people of that region.

Some foreign commentators, including those coming from Azerbaijan, were initially quite optimistic about the prospects for a settlement after the revolution, bearing in mind that they considered the Nagorno-Karabakh politicians ruling Armenia as an obstacle to compromise. No doubt, for both Kocharyan and Sargsyan, the question of Nagorno-Karabakh was an absolute priority on their political agenda. However, it did not mean that they were not capable of making a deal on the issue.

From 2015, Sargsyan was exposed to quite strong and unified international pressure to go for a settlement, even a provisional one. The diplomatic circles in Yerevan were speculating about a so-called Lavrov Plan, submitted supposedly by Russia to the parties and consequently supported strongly by the other

co-chairs of the Minsk Group, namely the United States and France. Armenian foreign ministry officials became so pained by this speculation that they reprimanded Yerevan-based diplomats for even using the name the Lavrov Plan. “There is no Lavrov Plan,” they purported, even if some diplomats knew in detail its content. The Armenian foreign ministry *dementis* was interpreted as a clear sign that the Armenian side did not like the plan at all, at least the first version of it. They must have been really shocked when confessing that it looked as if it had been drafted in Baku.

The April 2016 war compounded the shock. Sargsyan looked like he was succumbing to the external pressure. His visits to Stepanakert became more frequent, but his talk of necessary compromises did not meet with enthusiastic reception there, to put it mildly.

In the perception of the diplomatic community at that time, he wanted to delay the deal but not to exclude it. After all, Sargsyan was known for declaring that “Agdam is not our homeland” (Agdam is a ghost town controlled by the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, captured during the war in 1993 and deserted by the Azeri population), interpreted as the willingness to return some of the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh controlled by Armenians as part of the deal. Even some local analysts conceded that the so-called occupied territories were since the beginning merely a bargaining chip. Some others disagreed, insisting that their return makes Nagorno-Karabakh totally defenceless and would inevitably lead to its loss.

The July 2016 events gave Sargsyan a strong pretext to delay the deal. Statements like, “look now, if the deal comes too early, Armenia will plunge into chaos,” was heard in some conversations. The pressure for progress increased after the 2017 elections. And as part of the reasoning explaining the imperative for Sargsyan to stay on as prime minister, the main argument heard was that only he could ensure a good peace deal for Armenia. His supposedly initial proposal on 23 April for delaying his resignation till autumn 2018 was motivated just by the presumed responsibility to conclude a deal. It did not sound convincing during the revolutionary developments. He had to step down immediately.

His compromise intentions found some justification in the run-up to the 2017 elections when he made a meaningful political gesture of meeting the first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. The initiative for the meeting came initially from Ter-Petrosyan, who telephoned. It was not easy for him. After all, they were on opposing sides of the barricades during the 2008 events and Ter-Petrosyan was put under house arrest. But in 2017, he thought it was necessary to demonstrate national unity. Sargsyan responded to the offer. Commentators speculated that Sargsyan needed Ter-Petrosyan as an ally in case the deal was made and had to be sold to the population. In fact, no other politician in the history of the Third Republic is considered to be more devoted to the cause of peace as Ter-Petrosyan. He paid a personal price for that in 1998 when he was ousted from the presidential office by people associated with the Nagorno-Karabakh elite. He has displayed stern determination in promoting his ideas for peace, regardless. He reportedly insisted on making peace the central issue of his

Armenian National Congress election manifesto in 2017, even if his advisers were telling him it would not bring the necessary votes. And it did not. The Congress (which considered itself for the previous almost 10 years the only genuinely independent opposition party) did not make it into parliament.

The 1998 coup marked the first time when the Nagorno-Karabakh issue changed the course of domestic politics. After the 2018 revolution, some disgruntled politicians were hoping that it could change the course of domestic politics again.

The formerly ruling circles started accusing Pashinyan of undermining national security, committing negotiating errors and lacking the credentials to deal with the security agenda. More surprisingly, in the autumn of 2018, some *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh officials and politicians engaged in open polemics with Pashinyan. Media were reporting about visits of Sargsyan to the region. Kocharyan even declared that he would run for the presidency of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 (he had to give up his promises in the meantime). Some observers detected that the ousted regime was hoping to make Nagorno-Karabakh “the Vendee” of their return to power in Armenia. Quite a dire scenario in terms of its impact on the stability of the country and the region.

Pashinyan’s camp has consistently expressed confidence that Nagorno-Karabakh would elect a pro-transformational president and nobody would be able to drive a wedge between the Armenian Republic and Artsakh. But, for obvious internal reasons, he had to insist that Artsakh had to be represented at the negotiating table and any solution achieved should be acceptable to the people of the region. This internal dimension

of the peace process after the 2018 revolution somehow at times escaped the attention of some diplomats.

Will peace ever come to the region? The conflict, after more than 30 years of failed attempts, looks insolvable. Some of the past mediators themselves were overwhelmed by its complexity. One prominent diplomat already in the mid-1990s abandoned his professional optimism, stating privately that the Israeli-Palestinian deal could be reached sooner than a deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Those experts who have recently put hopes in Pashinyan to open a window of opportunity for peace do not sometimes hide their disappointment now. They recall his bold pro-peace declarations when he was close to Ter-Petrosyan at the start of his political career. They claim that the inertia of the conflict imposes itself on the views of the politicians and not the other way round. The new politicians inevitably follow the logic of the traditional thinking from the past. What speaks in defence of Pashinyan is that before doing anything on the outside front he had to concentrate on building his domestic credentials as a responsible and pragmatic leader.

There are many reasons why so far, the conflict has lacked a solution. The fact that both sides tend to believe that time is on their side has been one of them. At times, however, the sides were quite vulnerable (primarily economically) to be more pliant to international pressure for reciprocal compromises. The primary prerequisite seems to be the unified and strong position of the external partners, not only those directly mediating. If one of the partners believes that pressuring the parties for a deal is not worth it from the point of its interests in the region and

that a low-intensity local spat is quite tolerable and can be accommodated within its interests, then no peaceful solution will be in sight.

But the parameters for a fair deal are not so challenging to draft. The famous OSCE “safe” in Vienna contains documents spelling out elements of the agreement, with a clear indication of the way forward.

The EU has financed studies showing that the peace dividend, especially for Armenia, is quite considerable, at least a few percentage points added to GDP growth. The European Union has also committed itself to contributing to the post-conflict rehabilitation effort. At the same time, it is not directly involved in the mediation process, rather one of its members—France, which is co-chair. Changing the mediation format is for political reasons out of the question even if one of the sides has tried to re-open the issue from time to time. This author is probably one of the very few still active diplomats who were at the birth of the Minsk Group in 1992 (when he was acting head of the Polish delegation to the Helsinki follow-up meeting). The current mediation format had evolved since the 1990s, propelled by political considerations. The question remains how to make the EU and its Member States more involved in the region’s affairs (with due recognition of the activities of the EU Special Representative for South Caucasus).

When negotiating in 2017 the so-called Partnership Priorities, which is a political document framing the areas of dialogue and cooperation between Armenia and the EU, the Armenian side insisted vigorously on deleting any reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from the document. Why

the EU negotiators had to be so accommodating about it is another question. The programme documents on development assistance relating both to Armenia and Azerbaijan do not contain any conditionalities that would imply the peace factor, as if the war was not something relevant to the development assistance. And too often in the past, the sometimes totally unacceptable acrimonious rhetoric on both sides found no condemnation from EU officials.

The EU should put the regional situation higher on the agenda of its bilateral relations with other relevant countries, including Turkey. It earns the EU undisputable credit that its clear position on the need for the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia without preconditions is regularly raised by the Union when talking to its Turkish counterparts. It is at the same time understandable that the EU-Turkish agenda has become quite heavy in recent years. Yet, the regional context deserves to occupy a more prominent place, including in the context of the EU development assistance there.

One analyst from the South Caucasus a few years ago developed a very bitter, if perverse theory: “The conflict is eviscerating our states, but at least it puts our region on their (Western leaders’) radars. They know that they have to watch the situation, including human rights and democracy. Would they care at all otherwise?” It is high time to prove that he was wrong.

From a region of particular concern, the South Caucasus should finally grow into a region of inspiration. Settling the regional conflicts should move higher on the Western security agenda.

THE DOMINO EFFECT

Revolutions are contagious. Some of them are highly exportable. The Bolsheviks believed that the October Revolution was only the beginning of a world proletarian revolution. Some of them wanted to make it, on top of all, permanent. Other revolutions, by way of inspiration, produced a domino effect. The collapse of communism in Central Europe came as a chain of events. Some see a clear link between the Orange and Rose revolutions, as well as other “colour” revolutions. The revolution in Tunisia inspired the Arab Spring.

Armenians claimed that their revolution is unique and so local in its characteristics that it stands alone. And Armenia is probably too small and too specific to inspire others. Yet, there is something general in it. The Armenian Revolution is an interesting case of an anti-corruption and pro-democratic change in the wide European area without geopolitical underpinning. Exponents of change in some other post-Soviet countries are thinking of the same. And they watch the Armenian post-revolutionary experience with interest.

The big question remains whether in the long term it is possible to build in Armenia a Western model of democracy, rule of law, and economic governance within the existing geopolitical set-up. So far, the narrative and the style of governance of the authorities in Armenia differs visibly from the other members of the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

After the Yalta division of Europe, people in Central and Eastern Europe realised that as part of the geopolitical

orientation imposed on them, they had to also accept the communist model of state, economy, and society. One came with the other. When they tried to democratise the system, like in Czechoslovakia in 1968, they had to face the Brezhnev Doctrine in action. Only with the collapse of the geopolitical division could they become democracies.

Whether Armenia will be able to experience that geopolitics do not matter and that it can dismantle the post-Soviet system of governance and become a Western state and society is still unclear. Armenia has taken some very important steps in the right direction, but the path forward is still long.

The post-Soviet space survives on the absolutisation of the notion of stability. Any revolution by definition threatens the status quo. Revolutions can bring chaos. The Armenian Revolution is a good example of an orderly transition, within constitutional constraints, without the use of force and violence whatsoever.

Revolutions happen when people feel desperate and lose fear at the same time. Normally, people who have nothing to lose are free of fear. In modern societies, people always have something to lose. And they are afraid of violence. That is why the ruling circles in some post-Soviet countries tried to use the images of the Ukrainian Maidan to scare ordinary people away from thinking about protesting. And it worked. They also deployed intimidation tactics in the context of even modest and mild discontent. They started showcasing corrupted officials (but not the loyal ones) to prove that they could fight corruption without public pressure. All of this may have had an impact on the older generation, but the young one is increasingly escaping

the effects of these deterrence policies. The post-Soviet system of governance has no future.

Some experts believe that the West has in the meantime abandoned attempts to follow any active policy of supporting the democratic transformation in some post-Soviet states. Its policies towards some of these countries took different turns in the past, going into circles without much impact on the situation on the ground. Thus, the reasons for frustration can be understandable. Should frustration produce passivity? Some democratic opposition activists have accused Western politicians of abdication, naivete, or even cynicism.

There was in the Western policies towards Eastern Europe initially too much idealism. The West thought that it was enough to remove communist ideology to put Eastern Europe on the democratic track. And later there was too much liberal belief in the inevitability of democratic transformation. Some believed that developing economic ties would make it happen (“Wandel durch Handel” and others). When by the beginning of the new millennium, the reversal to authoritarian methods became apparent, the West realised the force of geopolitical considerations driving some post-Soviet states. Russia’s 2014 aggression against Ukraine was the final proof of the strength of the geopolitical factor.

Western policies in the last several years, in particular in some international organisations like the Council of Europe, looked like they are based on minimalist philosophy: we must accept that we cannot have liberal democracies in some post-Soviet states for the time being; we cannot improve their human rights record, let’s at least prevent it from deteriorating;

let's show strategic patience because now we have much bigger worries. Some Western politicians started to believe that putting pressure by ostracising some states in Eastern Europe, one in particular (Russia), hurts the geostrategic interests of the West. The real geostrategic (and ideological) contender, according to this policy, is somewhere else—China.

Even if not true, that's how the Western attitude is perceived by some pro-democratic forces in some Eastern European countries.

Two years after it happened, the Armenian Revolution still stands alone. It did not generate any concatenation of significant events outside. Even the liberal scholars in the West who constantly look for developments that uplift their spirits by reconfirming the strength of Western values of human rights and democracy did not spend much time analysing and publicising the Armenian Revolution. They should have. Definitely, the Armenian model is replicable.

ESCAPING ZERO-SUM GAMES

The developments in the post-Soviet space, and, in particular, in the Eastern Partnership region continue to be perceived in the context of the relationship between Russia and the West. Russia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has looked at the former Soviet republics through a geopolitical lens. The activism of Euro-Atlantic structures in the region (the European Union and NATO) has been interpreted in terms of an incursion, or at least a geopolitical rivalry.

Many Western experts in the '90s mused about a possible strategic deal between Russia and the West. They feared that without political devices linking Russia with the West, a reprisal of a Cold War-style confrontation would be unavoidable. Some even were ready to imagine Russia's membership in NATO as a goal in building a strategic community between Russia and the West. Various initiatives were put in motion to build confidence and understanding between the two: the Russia-NATO Council, the inclusion of Russia in the G7 (G8), Russia-EU Partnership Council, and so on. Without any lasting result.

The relations today are at the worst state since the collapse of the bipolar world. With sanctions, acrimony, diplomatic spats and openly anti-Western propaganda in Russia nowadays. The experiences of the past 30 years do not discourage some Western politicians today from thinking about new "resets" and rapprochements.

Some leaders of Eastern Partnership countries have the challenging task of considering EU-Russia tensions in their daily practice of diplomacy, in particular, if, like Armenia, they want to have good relations with both. For some other states, the EU (or the West in general) has become an open geopolitical alternative. For some others, relations with the EU are seen as an important counterbalance to avoid one-sided dependence on Russia. For some, on occasions, EU relations are simply a card to be played when the pressure from Russia becomes unbearable. For others, the West may be sometimes seen as a threat challenging the legitimacy of the political regime. The baseline is that many of the leaders there perceive the region as a strategic battleground between the West and Russia. Even if most Western politicians reject such an approach.

The Armenian leadership before the revolution had invented a formula that was supposed to remove the country from the Europe-Russia rivalry. They claimed that Russia was, for Armenia, a geopolitical choice while Europe was Armenia's "civilisational" choice. But, as stipulated elsewhere, what if the civilisational choice becomes hostage to the geopolitical choice.

The present Armenian government declares that it does not want to choose between West and East, and it wants to be seen as a mediator of dialogue and cooperation. No doubt, the solution to all dilemmas of choice for Armenia would be strategic rapprochement between the West and Russia. Experts, however, have difficulty in pinpointing any concrete initiatives (even confidentially) which Armenia has advanced to foster this outcome. Some Armenian officials before the revolution who sincerely deplored the deteriorating climate in relations between Russia and the West did not even believe it would be worthwhile: "we are too small and things have gone too far to be repaired."

Some of the voices coming from different quarters in Russia have displayed quite a schizophrenic attitude towards European influence in the post-Soviet space. On the one hand, Europe is disparaged as a weak, amorphous, powerless geopolitical entity. Europe has no security potential, according to these views, to challenge the positions of Russia. Europe, unlike America, is not seen as a serious rival. Armenia is sometimes quoted as a good example—Europe is believed never to be able to substitute for Russian security guarantees, Russian military presence, or Russian military supplies and technology. And still today many Armenian experts mimic the Russian approach of treating Europe as a political lightweight, seized with permanent

internal crises, paralysed with Hamletian torments concerning its own future.

On the other hand, Europe is considered by Russia as a serious soft-power contender. Europe has become the epitome of a good life, not only in terms of the level of wellbeing and social protection but also as a model of the rule of law with an independent justice system, anti-corruption policies, and individual freedoms. This magnetism of Europe is quite strong, especially among the young. Recent troubles in Europe, such as the fiscal or mass-migration crises, have not weakened this force too much. Even despite the efforts of the hostile anti-European propaganda.

In a country like Armenia, even with such a big diaspora in the West, the mass culture trends, fashion, and even music come from abroad, mainly from the West. Yet, it comes chiefly through Russian media and the Russian pop culture filter. Also, political news from the global scene reaches Armenia mainly as interpreted by the Russian television channels. And still, Europe remains a positive symbol. For example, the term “*evro-remont*” has become synonymous with the highest quality refurbishment. Europe stands for the best quality. And young dreams hang on Europe, even more than on America.

The soft power of Europe is seen as a challenge. Therefore, the main attack on Europe has pivoted to the issue of cultural identity and values. Europe, as portrayed by its enemies in the post-Soviet space, is a decadent place, plagued by moral permissivism, anti-family attitudes, and rotten values. Some circles in a conservative society like Armenia are naturally inclined to see approaching Europe as an attack on local

identity. For any European ambassador, it takes a lot of patience and time to explain that Europe is about cultural diversity, that Brussels does not impose any model of cultural values, that an agreement with Europe does not imply the automatic introduction of same-sex marriage, legalisation of marijuana, or the practice of euthanasia.

Official Armenian policy has been for years to reconcile the privileged security connection with Russia with the inflow of European development assistance, trade, and investment. Armenia wanted to benefit from all possible options. After they started negotiating the Association Agreement with the European Union, the president at that time stated that EU, CIS, and Eurasian integration need not be mutually exclusive. They did not experience any particularly compelling pressure to join the newly established Customs Union led by Russia. In September 2013, though, they found themselves in an awkward position. They were suddenly confronted with “an offer they could not refuse” of joining the EEAU (or to be precise, the Customs Union at that time).

They initially thought this could be compatible with the AA they negotiated with the EU. The spokesperson for the EU High Representative made it clear in public at that time that “if Armenia were to join any customs union, this would not be compatible with concluding a bilateral Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Armenia because a customs union has a common external trade policy and an individual member country no longer has sovereign control over its external trade policies.” For the European Union, the issue was purely technical. The Armenian side had to look at it from a political perspective. They understood that the offer

to join the Customs Union was based on purely geopolitical considerations.

They still tried a political compromise to rescue their relationship with the European Union. Beginning in October 2013, President Sargsyan stated that Armenia was ready to sign a deal with the EU during the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013, without the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area component of the agreement that would contradict Armenia's membership in the EEAU/Customs Union.

This proposal had to be rejected by the EU. Armenian officials, later on, blamed the EU for applying a double standard with Eastern Partnership countries—refusing Armenia the option later on applied to Ukraine. They ignored, however, the fact that the free-trade part of the agreement with Ukraine was simply delayed in its implementation for obvious reasons.

No deal was signed between Armenia and the EU at the Vilnius summit. On 9 October 2014, Armenia signed a treaty on its accession to the EEU and became a member state on 2 January 2015.

For domestic consumption, the government officials tried to shift the responsibility for the failure of the negotiations onto the European Union, even for their decision to join the Eurasian Union. They claimed that the European Union by rejecting their ideas concerning the reconciliation of the two agreements and by pursuing an “either/or” policy had forced Armenia to join the Eurasian Union. Some of them went so far as to imply that by negotiating a new Comprehensive and

Enhanced Partnership Agreement a couple of years later, the European Union had admitted its own earlier fault.

The Armenian story at that time missed one crucial element—the EU had put no pressure on Armenia or any other Eastern Partnership to start negotiations on Association Agreements. Countries that were not ready for an AA (or for different reasons), such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, stayed outside of this process.

Since the launch of the Eastern Partnership, Armenians have had understandable misgivings. Local experts predominantly saw it as a geopolitical tool of the West aimed at pushing Russia out of the region. They always had to be reminded that the EU was quite open to including Russia in its neighbourhood strategies. When these concepts were being first developed almost 20 years ago, it was Russia that did not want to be treated by the EU as just a neighbour. EU interlocutors discussing it with their Russian partners recall that they heard that neighbour status would only diminish the importance of Russia, which wanted to be seen as a global partner on par with the United States or China. Even during the elaboration of the Eastern Partnership framework, the EU officials were offering Russia full transparency and accessibility.

Some Armenians complained that the initial Eastern Partnership approach was supposed to be based on “one-size-fits-all” philosophy. The truth is that the partnership never restricted the individual ambitions of the countries of the region. In many ways, it was a demand-driven vehicle. In fact, the expectations towards the partnership started diversifying throughout the process. In the case of Ukraine and Georgia,

the bilateral agenda with the EU overshadowed with time the multilateral framework.

The Eastern Partnership in its 10 years of operation bore undeniable achievements, including some of beneficial value for Armenia. It opened new channels of financing development needs. These can bring several additional million euros to Armenia but only if its projects are competitive enough. The peculiarity of various Eastern Partnership programmes is that money is distributed according to the quality of the projects and Armenia must compete with other Eastern Partnership countries for that. The platforms established within the Eastern Partnership process offer the possibility to exchange experience and information that normally those six countries would have no occasion to do. The informal meetings of line ministers on issues like energy, environment, or education proved to be very lively and enriching.

Armenia indeed hoped that the 2020 deliverables, which contained very concretely drafted orientation goals for the Eastern Partnership, would reinforce its national aspirations, as on the issue of visa-free travel. Regrettably, their impact on some issues was modest. Nevertheless, Armenia should be the country most interested in developing and reinvigorating the Eastern Partnership format. More initiatives could be coming from Yerevan on this topic.

There are forces in Armenia who openly opt for declaring membership in the European Union as an ultimate policy goal. In October 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan advised that, “any future EU accession is a question that the people of Armenia need to answer and would only

occur following the withdrawal of Armenia from the Eurasian Union.” The government emphasises “neither the West, nor the East” option. There is, of course, the external factor—the impact of the experience of Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries with approximation to the European Union. Some Armenians say that if the people of Armenia see the real benefits of it and start envying the Georgians (for the time being, they seem to envy visa-free travel to Europe and Batumi beaches only), they will start expressing a pro-European tilt also at the ballot box. In the 2018 elections, the two most pro-Western and pro-European parties (the nationalist Sasna Tsrer and the moderate “We Alliance”) did not make it into parliament. The party “Bright Armenia,” sometimes practising quite European thinking, moved to the opposition benches.

Armenia continues its commitment to participate in the Russian-led integration platforms. After the April 2016 war, it did not hide its disappointment with how the CSTO obligations were interpreted by some of its members, in particular when Azerbaijan was shelling and attacking the state border of Armenia. In theory, an attack on the territory of one member state should prompt a reaction from its allies if bound by a collective-defence arrangement. The unexpected recall (even if justified by domestic procedures) of the Armenia-designated Secretary-General of the CSTO and the subsequent blocking of the appointment of his successor did not win Armenia much sympathy inside the pact. But for Armenia, it remains an untouchable pillar because of its security relationship with Russia.

The Armenian authorities, when justifying the decision to join the Eurasian Union, cited a number of considerations

that allegedly made membership worthwhile. One related to the status of the hundreds of thousands of Armenian migrant workers in Russia (overall, there are probably more than 2 million Armenians living there). These migrants provided for a sizeable portion of remittances from abroad, which some years ago at their peak accounted for almost 20% of the GDP of Armenia. The forced return of those migrants to a country where no jobs were waiting for them would create a socially (and politically) explosive situation. Another reason concerned the stability and prices of gas and oil products from Russia (although they are regulated by bilateral deals). Next was the accessibility of the Russian market for Armenian agricultural products, including wine and brandy. In short, all that argumentation implied that not joining the Eurasian Union would harm bilateral relations between Armenia and the Russian Federation.

Armenian experts admit that the main reason for the establishment of the Eurasian Union was clearly geopolitical. The publicly quoted reasons cover up the real objectives behind the insistence on the part of Russia to see Armenia in the Eurasian fold. Russia wanted to mark the borders of its geopolitical zone. This objective has been achieved in a satisfactory way, and the Armenian experts believe that from the geopolitical point of view, there is little more at present that Russia can achieve through the Eurasian format. They dismiss as unrealistic ideas of imposing the rouble as a single currency or imitating some other integration advances of the European Union.

The local experts judge with moderate marks the impact of membership in the Eurasian Union. Trade with Russia has crossed \$2 billion and has shown a dynamic upward

trend recently, with Russia accounting for more than 25% of Armenia's overall trade. Yet, the European Union was as a bloc for several years the main export destination for Armenia (mainly because of the demand for copper and other minerals).

What has preoccupied Armenia has been the total dependence on Russia in terms of energy (chiefly gas) supplies. It is no secret that Armenia's priority in the Eurasian Union has been to create a single energy market. The present situation in the Union favouring Russian companies having access to cheaper energy supplies puts Armenian manufacturers at a disadvantage.

The economic dependence on Russia creates volatility in times of crisis, when the rouble is hit by dropping prices of oil (or by sanctions) and the Russian economy shrinks. Armenia sticking to the policy of a stable national currency (dram) and relying on remittances from abroad suffers immediately from the weakened rouble.

Armenian economic links need rebalancing. The wise strategy of the post-revolutionary government has been to put more emphasis on neighbours. The sanctions regime still handicaps relations with Iran. Armenia managed to save the barter arrangement on electric energy for gas and is looking forward to the launch of a third electricity connection, which would increase the volume of the barter. But more ambitious plans should probably wait for better times, even if Armenia is ready for them now. The EU has declared its commitment to support modernisation of the border infrastructure with Iran (like it did on the Armenia-Georgia border). It should do more to help Armenia improve the North-South road connection,

in particular by supporting a good financing vehicle for the construction of the Sisian-Kajaran tunnel.

The relations with Georgia have received a major political boost recently. Observers hardly recall such a surge in contacts in the years since independence. In a way, these two historical neighbours are only rediscovering themselves as partners. The EU should strongly encourage and support its bilateral links.

Russia will remain for Armenia a key international partner. Armenians will have to rely on cheap Russian military materiel (supplied to Armenia at Russian factory prices, meaning even four times cheaper than for other countries) and relatively cheap Russian gas (after the 10% increase in 2019 it still sells at \$165 per thousand cubic metres), which with time (and investment) may be substituted by gas from Iran. Russia will remain an important market for the Armenian labour “surplus” and agricultural products.

Armenia is bound with Russia by strong historical links (some Armenians maintain that the Russian recapturing of eastern Armenia from Persia in the 19th century saved Armenians as a nation). Nevertheless, the majority of Armenians would like foreign and economic relations better rebalanced.

How much Armenia matters for Russia is an evolving issue. Some believe that Armenia serves now for Russia as the irreplaceable *pied-a-terre* in the region of South Caucasus. With Georgia gravitating towards the West, and Azerbaijan towards Turkey, Armenia’s value as a strategic asset for Russia must have increased.

Besides, Armenia has always been a willing Russian ally. After all, it was the Armenian leaders (and not the other way around)

who at the dissolution of the Soviet Union asked Russia to take over the military base in Gyumri and take responsibility for guarding the borders with Iran and Turkey. There is supposedly a rule never to let down a willing ally.

But at the same time, Armenia is probably the only Russian ally that does not need the Russian political umbrella when dealing with the West. For many years, experts ascribed to Russia a policy based on the premise that the more authoritarian the regimes in the post-Soviet area were, the more dependent they were on Russia. Any leader of a post-Soviet country who was not welcome in the West could count on the warmest hugs in Moscow as compensation. These experts say that Western ostracism has made post-Soviet leaders more dependent on Russia. This resulted in sometimes difficult dilemmas for the West as to how to react to the democracy and human-rights deficits in those countries. Some experts believe that, for instance, a principled position on the dictatorial rule of Alexander Lukashenka only helped make Belarus totally dependent on Russia.

The revolution in Armenia totally changed the perspective, at least for Armenia. It earned strong democratic credentials and deserved warmest hugs from the West. But it could not distance itself from Russia. As once commented privately to European diplomats by a senior Armenian official, the close security alliance between Armenia and Russia must have cooled down some of the Western reactions to the democratic changes in Armenia.

Some Russian analysts made comments during the revolutionary days that testified to the axiom of taking

Armenia for granted: “Where would they wander,” they asked. Some of Pashinyan’s decisions were interpreted as confirming their point. He agreed to send an Armenian small non-combat contingent to Syria under Russian command, allowed Russian inspectors to visit U.S.-supported bacteriology labs, and signed new contracts for Russian weapons. This prompted some local conspiracy theory lovers of believing that Moscow must have supported Pashinyan’s ascent to power. They claim that Sargsyan was capable of showing more resistance to external pressure and refer to his refusal to recognise the breakaway entities of South Ossetia or Abkhazia (quite risky for a neighbour of Georgia having a minority in a compact location) or Transnistria. But the whole story is that they do not calculate what he could get in exchange. He was never offered anything to make him seriously think of that. But on the most strategic issues like the joining of the Eurasian Union, he left no space for complaint. Seeing a great conspiracy around the revolution involving Russia (moreover, supported by the U.S. to make things even more ridiculous) appears to be sheer lunacy.

In fact, Russia showed much political restraint, strong caution and distance during the revolutionary climax. Nothing was said or done in public to imply any temptation to interfere with the developments. What has been said and is being said behind the scenes should be left to the imagination.

Some of the statements from Moscow were interpreted by the Armenians with worry. When on 26 April the official Russian press statement after the conversation between President Putin and acting Prime Minister Karapetyan referred to the notion that the settlement of the crisis must happen “on the basis of the results of the legitimate parliamentary elections held in

April 2017,” the local observers saw it as an attempt to reverse the victory of the revolution. But as discussed earlier, such statements came too late to influence the logic of events.

Some local pundits assess that the wait-and-see approach on the part of Russia continues till today. Certainly, the Armenian government has not given any serious pretext to question its sincerity in confirming its attachment to bilateral and multilateral commitments with Russia. Nevertheless, the rebalancing of Armenian foreign ties is unavoidable. Armenia cannot allow itself to lose sight of emerging opportunities. Whether the closest ally of Armenia will try to put boundaries on this process, and where, remains debatable. And probably even the Armenian authorities do not know it and maybe even do not dare yet to ask.

Only one Armenian party (though outside of parliament) now postulates stepping out from the Russian-led integration formats. In theory, Russia could resort to strong instruments of pressure to constrain the pro-Western gravitation of Armenia. But applying them would contain a big risk of damaging its image with Armenian society, especially when that society is quite united and there are no political alternatives to play with on the political scene.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR THE ROAD

Every successful revolution can at some point turn against itself. Revolutions are generally led by people who know how to destroy the old order and not necessarily by those who

know how to build a new one. And revolutions like to devour their children. In Armenia, the devouring process is still not so spectacular but cracks are visible. Some involved in the revolution have left governing positions. People who confess losing enthusiasm are not difficult to spot.

In the revolutionary camp, the mundane business of governing overshadows the emotions of the revolutionary days, naturally. And the revolutionary rhetoric erodes and becomes less and less mobilising. This is particularly the case if the expected changes and reforms arrive at a slow pace, even if for objective reasons.

The glorious days of April 2018 are inevitably fading, but for many, including mostly the still-young generation, they were the most formative days of their lives. They will serve as defining moments in their civic biographies.

For some observers, the constitutional referendum planned initially for 5 April 2020 could become an important gauge of the state of political emotions in Armenia. Changing the constitution to allow for a renewal of the composition of the Constitutional Court is seen as a continuation of the revolution's spirit. For its opponents, including those from formerly pro-revolutionary political circles, it is seen as an assault on the rule of law.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the political context dramatically. It is evident that it will reverberate across political life in most countries. Any public vote in the wake of the crisis in most countries will become an opportunity to express people's opinion on the handling of the crisis more than anything else.

The pandemic has also reminded us of the role of “black swans” (hard-to-predict, rare, unexpected events with significant consequences) in our modern lives. Nassim Nicholas Taleb could write another volume of his book with coronavirus the only case. It is already visible through the prism of the crisis how right he was when saying, “we attribute our successes to our skills and our failures to external events outside our control.” This applies to more than just handling the effects of “black swans.” If revolutions fail, all revolutionaries attribute it to external events outside their control.

Any society in the process of reforming their country needs clear and inspirational goals. There must be something that mobilises them and helps them overcome hardships. For Central-Eastern European states, the prospect of joining the Western family of nations and becoming members of the EU and NATO constituted such an inspirational goal. Closing the prosperity gap with the rich Western European States now inspires them. What will be the inspirational goal for Armenia in the coming months? Can its society be mobilised around it?

The Armenian Revolution was a marvellous example of peaceful change without geopolitical repercussions. The outside world, and above everything, the West, should showcase the Armenian Revolution as a model for doing radical things in a responsible, tranquil way.

Armenians themselves have been quite timid to use their revolution to rebrand the image of the country and publicise it around the world. And the world, both West and East, remain circumspect about its appreciation of the Armenian Revolution (seemingly for totally different reasons).

Why the West has looked sometimes so stolid puzzles some Armenians. Is it because the country is small and peripheral? Is it because of its specificity? Maybe the country itself did not want to be seen as a cradle of political changes in other countries, is that possible?

The Western nations have, in fact, sent clear, appreciative signals. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron paid very successful visits to Armenia and praised the Armenian Revolution. The EU and some members decided to increase the level of development assistance. But in some other countries, relations went back to business-as-usual mode.

For the West, the million-dollar question is: how big a stake is there to have in the success of the revolution in Armenia? Unlike in Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova, where the EU is sometimes perceived as underwriting the reform process in those countries, this type of link does not apply to Armenia. Yet, the costs of failure of the Armenian Revolution are much higher than the benefits of its success.

Armenians, at least some of them, often complain that the West should care more about them. For many European politicians, Armenia is a far away, small country about which they still know very little. Its location is not seen as strategic. It is not rich in natural resources, nor considered to be a mass tourism destination. But most Europeans who have discovered for themselves what Armenia is would argue that the West should care more.

Many Armenians ask Western visitors a direct question: “do you consider us Europe at all?” Some Western visitors hesitate to give a straightforward answer. Their history textbooks did

not contain many references to Armenia when telling the story of Europe. Very few of them know that Paghdasar Dpir wrote his “Song of Joy” 50 years before Friedrich Schiller put on paper his “Ode to Joy.” But still what a coincidence. Komitas composed his “Antuni” more than 50 years before Górecki wrote his “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs.” But still, what another remarkable coincidence. The bridge between Armenia and Europe has been built by plenty of similar coincidences. We do not need to invent an artificial bridge but simply rediscover and rely on the cultural and civilisational one.

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, politicians and bureaucrats in Western Europe had to redefine the borders of Europe. The European Union had to do it, the Council of Europe as well, likewise the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. In the case of the latter, the pressure from the U.S., Turkey and Russia were decisive in making all the post-Soviet states, including those from Central Asia, eligible to join. In the case of the Council of Europe, the compromise struck excluded Central Asia, to the chagrin of Kazakhstan, which complained that its part of territory located in Europe is bigger than the European territory of Turkey, and yet, they could not join the Council of Europe. But the Council of Europe opened its doors to the South Caucasus.

In the political sense, Armenia is part and parcel of Europe as defined by the European Union and the Council of Europe. In the economic and technological sense, though, not always. Some big international corporations still place Armenia on their maps as part of Asia, unfortunately. And the mentality of some Europeans still resists the acceptance of the wide notion

of Europe embodied in the Council of Europe membership. They believe that Europe ends somewhere on the Bug and the Dniester rivers. If not even at the cafes of Vienna.

As Luuk van Middelaar once recalled, the borders of Europe have always been fluid. Originally, Europe stood for the lands of the Charlemagne Empire and its vassals. When all the European kingdoms were invited to negotiate the treaties of Westphalia, England, Russia, and Turkey were not among the invitees. But in 1815 at Vienna, Russia and England were already fully treated as European nations. Turkey became recognised as a European player at the 1878 Berlin Conference.

Armenia is one of the world's most ancient civilisations. One can see the silhouettes of Armenian warriors sculptured on the walls of Persepolis. Armenians have remarkably preserved their identity. Contemporary Armenians can read without difficulty texts written in their language in the 5th century.

Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as the state religion (before Rome). And its contacts with Western Christianity were sometimes very close and enriching. It is enough to recall the story of the Kingdom of Cilicia, the Armenian state that existed in the 11th–14th centuries outside the ethnic cradle of Armenians, on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, where the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic communities lived side by side tempting some church officials to think of absorbing Armenians into the Western church. As Norman Davies in his *Vanished Kingdoms* suggests, states are born and sometimes survive by pure luck. Luck is important, especially during the infancy of a newly born state. Armenia was denied it for centuries despite having strong state-building instincts and traditions.

When in January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson unveiled his peace programme, Poland secured a separate point on his agenda. Armenia, although covered indirectly by a neighbouring point, did not earn the luck to be mentioned. But later on, Wilson outlined his vision for Armenia, although without much impact. Some Hungarians still point out that Hungary suffered from bad luck of having to accept “Trianon.” Turkey was strong enough to bury “Sevres.” Some Armenians still believe that had the U.S. Senate approved Wilson’s motion for assuming the mandate over Armenia, the whole region of the Middle East would look differently today. But that’s an alternative history that should not preoccupy the present generations. The collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible to materialise the dream of statehood for Armenia.

Armenia has been plagued by the curse of its location—for many centuries sandwiched between the big and expansive empires of Persia, Turkey, and Russia. Some European nations should discover similarities with Armenia in their struggle to preserve their own identities. And being part of these empires naturally separated Armenia from the mainstream of European development.

This separation could not serve as an explanation for the past muted European reactions to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, even if Europe as such was engulfed in war and its own suffering at that time. The recognition of the ordeal of Armenians as part of common European history is a moral imperative for Europe and its individual nations. It is more than a casual gesture. It is more than a sign of compassion. In no way is it an act of retribution, and it should not be made dependent on some

political considerations how it may affect relations of European states with other countries.

The House of European history in Brussels is an excellent place to show and talk more about the integral link between Armenia and the rest of Europe. The European light can be of inspiration to many Armenians. European politicians and diplomats should be doing more to project it. To start with, the number of European embassies in Yerevan should increase. Slovakia has recently made a good example by opening an embassy. Not once have the Armenian partners pointed out that an important European country like Denmark has 12 embassies in Africa but none in South Caucasus or Central Asia. The Netherlands has 101 embassies and 318 consulates worldwide but until recently had no representation in Armenia (it deserves praise for finally deciding to open an embassy in Yerevan). Spain's diplomatic outreach is very global (it even includes two diplomatic representations in Equatorial Guinea) but it didn't include Armenia on its list of permanent diplomatic presence.

The connectivity between Armenia and Europe needs improvement as well. It is good that European tour operators have recently discovered the potential of Armenia and low-cost airlines are coming to the country.

Yet, this European inspirational light needs solid backup in supporting the modernisation of the country. The EU for many years has been "punching below its weight" in the region, and in Armenia, in particular. It has effectively enhanced its political profile in the past several years, but this should be only seen as the beginning of the process. The Western Balkans in the

1990s were displaying similar European under-engagement. But it was successfully overcome. Today, the Balkans stand among the top priorities for the European Union.

Armenia is now in a somewhat fortunate position that it does not have to repeat the whole transformation odyssey of the other post-communist countries. It could and should make a shortcut leap taking advantage of the technological revolution. This requires, of course, also a concerted effort in terms of Western expert advice and Western-sponsored capacity-building. But most importantly, Armenia needs some clear strategic national projects that would serve as flywheels for the economic system, education, and state management. These ideas will not come from abroad. They have to be born inside Armenia. This may sound like flashiness and propaganda, and yet, Armenia needs a clear vision of a new start.

Every nation knows best what is good for its future. No nation likes it if anything is imposed on it. However, in the interconnected world where nations increasingly try to solve common problems, some friendly views from the outside can be helpful. Economist Amartya Sen, when developing his ideas for global justice, introduced the concept of scrutiny of distant strangers. Seclusion sometimes hampers the ability to develop critical views, which help to move things forward. We all need distant observers.

Even trivial angst may sometimes inhibit growth. Indeed, there are still many people in Armenia afraid of the change. Most of all because of previous disappointments. There are people, even in important offices, who would prefer to return to the *status quo ante*. And some of them profited a lot from

the anomalies of the old system. Sometimes they feel no shame for what they did in the past. And some of the people of the ancient regime do really want to come back. And they may. The experience of many post-revolutionary countries is that people's memory can be very short and selective.

The 2018 revolution became a historic opportunity to liberate many Armenians from the syndrome of learned helplessness. They started to believe that life could take a different turn in Armenia. The role of foreign friends in Armenia was simply to make them believe that another scenario was possible.

The inertia of the old ways and habits in many societies is the source of recurring “impossibilism.” Two years after the revolution, the Armenian society is slowly approaching the trap of losing faith that old habits can be overcome. They deserve to avoid it.

And they deserve—let it sound like this author's personal *ceterum censeo*—to be included in the EU visa-liberalisation programme.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Any serious diplomatic cable should culminate with policy recommendations. An attentive reader has already spotted several of them on the previous pages of this essay.

The most strategic of them would require the EU to revive and reinvigorate the concept of “wide Europe” and to define anew its role in it. With Brexit, even the most devout

champions of making the EU an ever-expanding pan-European project had to scale down their ambition. But the common European identity is a real thing, and it needs active political nurturing. Armenia is a good example of a country that is not yet articulating the goal of joining the EU, but it wants to feel like a legitimate member of the bigger European family. The EU should develop a strategy of how to work with the other European nations, both regionally and globally, how to use for this purpose bodies like the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and others. Too often the EU is perceived in Strasbourg and Vienna as punching below its weight. And some European diplomatic forums are still treated as sandboxes for playing national ego games. The EU could do more to mobilise a common wider-European voice in global institutions and platforms.

The EU should increase the support to the Eastern Partnership, building upon its pragmatic vocation. At the same time, it should engage more in promoting specific links in the region, like the bilateral contacts between Georgia and Armenia. It should try to develop ingenious initiatives that would involve all the three countries of the South Caucasus. Some aspects, for example, disaster relief, require a regional approach despite the gravity of existing bilateral problems. Issues like energy security and connectivity also would require a more coordinated regional effort supported by the EU.

The settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should figure higher on the EU external action agenda. While the mediation role should rest solely with the Minsk Group co-chairs, the EU can afford more political attention and persuasion to support moving the peace process forward. The

EU should engage more in pushing for the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations without preconditions.

The EU and its Member States should coordinate its financial and technical assistance around the benchmarks of CEPA. A group of friends of CEPA (EU institutions and interested Member States) both in Brussels and in Yerevan should provide a permanent platform for coordination and political support.

The EU Member States should increase the number of their diplomatic representation in Armenia and intensify their contacts with Armenia at the political level. And the political section of the EU delegation should be reinforced. The leaders of Armenia should be receiving more invitations to European capitals. The EEAS should develop a pattern of technical consultations with Armenia on global and European issues. Some good examples are offered by working consultations with other states before the start of every new session of the General Assembly of the United Nations that the EEAS practices. The dialogue, as stipulated by CEPA, should also extend to the security area. If the EU wants to be seen as an important political actor in the region, it must prove that it is a viable security agent.

The EU should continue building its positive image among the population of Armenia. It should, at the same time, be more supportive to those groups and movements that express a clear pro-European stance and link the future of Armenia with Europe. The defensive attitude just to confront fake news and hostile anti-European propaganda is not sufficient. The EU should not be shy about supporting the European spirit inside Armenia.

The assessment of government policies should be fair. After the revolution, the West granted to the new ruling team a grace period refraining from open criticism when it comes to the delays in the implementation of the common agenda. The EU should make it clear that it supports policies and not personalities. Policies that deviate from the European values and the common agenda should be timely identified and exposed.

And, last but not least, Armenia should be included in the visa-liberalisation programme.

These were some policy recommendations for the European side. It might be considered undiplomatic to spell out here similar policy recommendations for the Armenian partners. They should rather do their part in developing a clear and realistic agenda on Europe and learn to communicate it comprehensibly to their European counterparts.

28 May 2020

The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable provides an analysis of the political situation and the causes of mass protests in Armenia in the spring of 2018, which led to the change of political power in that country.

The author describes the mechanisms of the formation of the post-Soviet model of the state in Armenia and the process of growing social discontent. He reports in detail the course of revolutionary events as seen through the eyes of Western diplomats stationed in Yerevan. The study notes the successes of the new political team in reforming the country, as well as the difficulties it has experienced due, among others, to the resistance of the old economic and political structures. The author analyzes the geopolitical context of the reform process in Armenia. He takes into account the factor of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and its possible settlement. The essay deals with the possible impact of the events in Armenia on the development of the situation in other post-Soviet countries.

The final part contains suggestions and recommendations regarding the European Union's policy and Poland's activities in the region, and towards Armenia in particular.



ISBN 978-83-66091-58-0



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