Velvet Revolution in Armenia: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction: Context of the Velvet Revolution

In the understanding of the Velvet Revolution in Armenia,[1] an important role belongs to the context and logic of the post-Soviet space. After the collapse of the USSR the political and socio-economic structure of Armenian statehood remained Soviet and the ruling elite gravitated towards authoritarian government models and aimed to capture the inherited economic potential of the Soviet Union. Like all other post-Soviet states, with the exception of the Baltic countries, Armenia was doomed to become a country with an oligarchic authoritarian political order. The declared intentions of the new states to build a modern state and a civil democratic society immediately after the collapse of the USSR did not have a basis and ultimately boiled down to an imitation of some of the democratic procedures and institutions, the real content of which had nothing to do with civil democratic society. This development of the post-Soviet states is objective, since time and change of at least one generation is needed before it is possible to talk about an actual transit from an authoritarian political order to a democratic one.

What is happening in the post-Soviet space is not unique and a similar pattern could be observed, for example, during the collapse of the colonial system after World War II. Many former colonies ultimately became authoritarian, after gaining independence and declaring their intention to follow the democratic path.

Nevertheless, despite the common pattern, the Armenian case turned out to be distinctive and divergent from the logic of the post-Soviet space. First of all, this is due to the specifics of the Armenian SSR, which by the time

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[1]   In the following text, the term "Armenia" will be understood as inclusive of people living both in Armenia proper and Artsakh, otherwise called Nagorno-Karabakh.

of the collapse of the Soviet Union could have been attributed to the developed countries. Soviet Armenia had a developed and diverse industry. In the economy of Armenia, a large part belonged to the IT sphere – from the production of microelectronics and computers to operating systems and software for the large military systems of the USSR. Up to 30 percent of the adult population of Armenia had higher education, and the presence of the Armenian diaspora and contacts with the outside world made the society more open.

Artsakh Problem

The other important element of the post-Soviet transition of Armenia was the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) problem, which almost immediately became pan-Armenian. The history of the problem can be traced back to at least the 19th century and the entry of the Russian Empire into South Caucasus.

In the form, in which it is known after the collapse of the USSR, the problem was formed in the 1920s, together with the formation of the USSR. Overcoming international isolation, the leadership of the USSR in the framework of establishing bilateral relations with Kemalist Turkey passed Artsakh and Nakhichevan to the Azerbaijani SSR. Attempts of the Artsakh Armenians in 1988-1990 to solve the problem by peaceful means within the framework of the USSR legal norms provoked a harsh reaction from the central Soviet leadership and authorities of the Azerbaijan SSR. In Azerbaijan, including the state capital Baku, the Armenian population was violently repressed. Ultimately, by 1991, many Armenians of Azerbaijan were forced out of the country as well as Nagorno-Karabakh.

The proclamation of the Republic of Artsakh, which was forced to organize its self-defence from the first days of its creation, was a response to the policies of Kremlin and Azerbaijan. By 1992, the military actions of Azerbaijan against Artsakh acquired the characteristics of an existential war. The solution of this task required the rapid creation of an armed force capable of conducting not only irregular, but also large-scale conventional operations, which were characteristic for 1988-1991. The task was successfully accomplished, and Artsakh was able to win military campaigns in 1992-1994.

The current border with Azerbaijan is the result of warfare and is fixed in the armistice agreement concluded with the mediation of Russia in Bishkek in 1994. Small changes in the border crossing occurred in April 2016, during the "Four-Day War". Thus, on the territory of the former Azerbaijani SSR, two states were created; the Azerbaijan Republic recognized by the international community and the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh. The Republic of Armenia and Armenian people in general, including the Armenian diaspora, act as security guarantors.

The existential nature of the confrontation with Azerbaijan excluded the possibility of following the logic of the post-Soviet space for the Armenian statehood. The Armenian people were forced to build a modern state capable of waging war against an adversary with greater economic potential and capabilities. Only a civil democratic society is able to ensure a long-term mobilization of the people. This imperative did not allow the Armenian statehood to follow through the creation of an oligarchic authoritarian political order. The signing of the 1994 truce led to the departure from this imperative and the oligarchic authoritarian order began to form up in Armenia, although the society repeatedly tried to return to the path of building a modern democratic Armenia. One can mention the presidential elections in the Republic of Armenia 1996, 2003, 2008, 2013, the shooting of the parliament on October 27, 1999. Nevertheless, the fact of being in the post-Soviet space, the influence of Russia, as well as the need to maintain the military balance in the context of the regional security system of the South Caucasus allowed Armenian authorities to suppress protests.

The emerging oligarchic authoritarian order was in deep contradiction with the commitment of Armenian people to democratic values and the need to ensure the national security of Armenia in the long term. As a result, a significant part of Armenian population left the country, realizing the fundamental injustice of the emerging political order and its inability to solve the tasks of providing national security. These trends reached their peak by April 2016, when, due to the supply of offensive weapons and military equipment by Russia and Israel, the military balance was disturbed.

The April 2016 war made it obvious for Armenian people that under the conditions of an oligarchic authoritarian political order, Armenia is doomed to degradation of statehood and military defeat. The return of the con-

scripts, who took part in warfare, who survived the catastrophe and returned to society until now, made the national revolt and Velvet Revolution inevitable.

The Dynamics of the Velvet Revolution

The trigger for the beginning of the national revolt and the Velvet Revolution was the violation of the social contract concluded by Serzh Sargsyan with the Armenian society in 2015 during the adoption of the new constitution and the transition to parliamentary government. Understanding all the threats of such a transition in the conditions of war and the immaturity of political parties, the society agreed to adopt a new constitution, upon the condition that Serzh Sargsyan would not try to claim the position of first person for the third time. Going for a third term, Serzh Sargsyan sharply inflated the situation in Armenia. Moreover, the isolation from society led to the fact that already during the process of appointment to the post of Prime Minister, Serzh Sargsyan allowed himself a number of statements that crossed the red line. The society saw the threat of repetition of the scenario on March 1, 2008, when blood was shed on the streets of Yerevan, in the words of Serzh Sargsyan.

The action of the political opposition "My Step" led by Nikol Pashinyan, unfolding by this time, began to change its status, largely regardless of its leader, but rather due to the radicalization of society. Having launched a rally in one of the Armenian cities as an opposition leader, Nikol Pashinyan entered Yerevan, that was ready to rebel, but now in a different capacity, and to his honor was ready to accept a new role and lead the revolt, aimed at overthrowing Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling Republican Party of Armenia.

By mid-April, protests acquired a pan-Armenian scope, and Nikol Pashinyan received the mandate of a national leader, called upon to carry out political transit and dismantling of the oligarchic authoritarian political order in Armenia. The taboo on spilling blood left an imprint on the revolt, which acquired a non-violent character and respecting the principle of the rule of law. The original style of the Armenian Velvet Revolution was formed, the first stage of which ended with the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan and the appointment of Nikolay Pashinyan as Prime Minister.

The next stage of political transition should be the holding of early parliamentary elections. Internal threats to the chosen course today can be considered minimal. The undertaken attempts of revenge by the political forces of the old regime led to a sharp and unequivocal rebuff from society and the understanding of the necessity of holding early parliamentary elections as soon as possible, in December 2018. And, if in the early stages of the Velvet Revolution, Nikol Pashinyan's appeal to the rule of law and non-violent methods of struggle was perceived as an approach slowing down the revolutionary process, the events of the fall of 2018 show that this was a justified attitude. The chosen strategy makes it extremely difficult for the losing oligarchic system to counteract, as it is not accustomed to operating with non-violent methods and within the framework of public forms of political struggle.

Moreover, the attempt of a counter-revolutionary revenge in early October showed that appealing to the rule of law accustoms the society to non-violent methods of struggle, strengthens the corresponding political culture, which in itself is an important achievement of the Velvet Revolution. The support of the Armenian people is the main and, as of today, practically the only factor allowing Nikol Pashinyan to preserve the power. The direct mandate of the people, as an awakened sovereign, makes it extremely difficult for the former regime to neutralize Nikol Pashinyan. The intention of the leader to give the society the control over the political transition based on the principle of the rule of law and non-violent methods, raises the level of political consciousness within the society, thus creating prerequisites for holding early elections and moving to the next stage of the Velvet Revolution.

Possible Ways of Unfolding the Next Stage of the Velvet Revolution

The comprehension of the possible ways of unfolding the Velvet Revolution requires the development of a framework, within which the analysis will be carried out. It is important to understand that the decisive elements of the changes in the society are the institutions, without considering the ways of evolution or transformation of which, it is impossible to formulate the principles of the reforms.

The Institutions of the State and Political System of Society

Samuel Huntington's definition of institutions as "stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour"[2] will be used in this work. Samuel Huntington lists four pairs of criteria for assessing the degree of development of the institutions that form the state: adaptability-rigidity, complexity-simplicity, autonomy-subordination, and coherence-disunity.[3]

The more adaptable, complex, autonomous and coherent is a state institution, the more effective it should be. An adaptive institution is able to assess changes in the internal and external environment, and change its own structures, functions, and procedures for surviving and forming responses to challenges and threats.[4]

The criteria "autonomy" and "coherence" of institutions are closely related. Autonomy characterizes the degree of development of the corporate identity, which allows it to draw a line and distinguish an institution from other institutions and social structures. Coherence is a systemic measure of the degree of consistency of the functions of the elements and organizations of an institution or the political system as a whole. In a political system with low coherence, there is an overlap in the functions of various institutions, which makes it difficult or even impossible to identify the dominant institution responsible for ensuring this function.

In patrimonial or decaying societies, family members of the leader or his clan receive overlapping powers in the system of government and power. Moreover, special positions in power can be created for certain individuals. Loyalty in such societies turns out to be a more important criterion than the professionalism or talent of a state or political figure. In this case, the formal structure of the state apparatus ceases to correspond to the real

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[2] Huntington, Samuel P. (2006). *Political Order in Changing Societies*. With a new Foreword by Francis Fukuyama. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 12.

[3] Ibid., pp. 12-24.

[4] For the problems of adaptability of military institution consider see: Арзуманян, Рачья В. (2012). *Кромка хаоса. Парадигма нелинейности и среда безопасности 21 века.* Издательский дом «Регнум», Серия Selecta XIX, Москва.

distribution of power, leading to a loss of institutional coherence or, even, breaks in the system of power and government.[5]

Political transition and the development of the society are historically determined processes – each country follows its own path, which is shaped, inter alia, by the historical context. Following this logic, it is possible to come to the controversial conclusion, that the unfolding of political institutions in another society requires the creation of a historical context similar to the one in which they originated. However, this view is not entirely correct, and political history shows that institutions that provide benefits to their societies are copied and improved by others through learning, mimicry and adaptation to their own institutions. The latter is inevitable, since the institutions are conservative and have great inertia. Societies rarely follow the path of complete destruction of existing institutions, and new institutions are layered upon existing ones, allowing the old ones to exist for long periods of time.[6]

Understanding the importance of the historical context of the emergence of institutions helps to realize the complexity of their implementation in other societies. Often, political institutions are born as a result not of political, but other challenges and threats. For example, the rule of law has historically been of religious origin, and the attempts to root it basing solely on political factors are extremely difficult.[7] Institutions are the product of a long chain of events, but the historical context is less important than the functionality of the institute, which allows other societies to deploy it, and sometimes in completely unexpected ways. For example, it would be extremely difficult and simply impossible to imagine the situation that developed in the Republic of Armenia in early October, when the national leader urged his supporters on the streets of Yerevan to follow the rule of law and non-violent forms of struggle against the members of parliament who tried to carry out a counter-revolutionary coup.

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[5]   Fukuyama, Francis. (2011). *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. First edition, *New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,* p. 474-75.
[6]   Ibid., p. 437-38.
[7]   Ibid., p. 439.

Violence and Dysfunctional Balance

Possessing natural conservatism, institutions often delay in adapting to the changes in the internal and external environment. In addition, any institution or system of institutions provides preferences and benefits to certain groups in society. Yes, an established political system of the society can provide public goods for all of its members, but this does not suggest the absence of elite groups with privileged access to national wealth, opportunities and benefits. Using privileged access, such groups seek to extract rents from their positions, ensure greater speed of capital increase, preserve social position, etc. Moreover, elite groups, having their share in the control of institutional mechanisms, seek to protect the status quo. Although society as a whole would benefit from institutional changes and reforms, elite groups can resist, if changes bring a decrease in profits and benefits with them, seeking to preserve a stagnant and dysfunctional balance.[8]

The ability of the society to initiate institutional changes depends on the ability to neutralize elite circles interested in the current status quo and able to veto reforms. This is the essence of politics and the art of a political leader to initiate reforms using the combination of power, legality, intimidation, negotiation, charisma, ideas and organization. Historical experience shows that social mobilization turns out to be an important source and tool for the destruction of the dysfunctional balance of traditional elites, immured within coalitions that receive rent from state and public institutions. What is happening in Armenia can be considered a classic example of the ability of the society to take such actions.

The stability of stagnant balance explains one of the reasons why violence plays such an important role in institutional reforms. Sometimes violence turns out to be the only way to convince the elite groups blocking institutional changes and reforms[9], and the question is what form it takes. In this

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[8]   Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order…*, p. 483-84.

[9]   Bates, Robert H. (2009). *Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development*. Norton Series in World Politics, Second edition, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company; North, Douglass C. / Weingast, Barry R. / Wallis, John. (2009). *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

sense, we can talk about legal, political, economic, military and other types of violence. Separately, it is worth noting the fear of violent death, which is stronger than the desire for material gain and is able to provide the necessary motivation for reform[10]. Nevertheless, violent methods of reforming institutions are becoming a less acceptable form of overcoming political deadlocks. The way of creating a modern and efficient state in the 21st century may be less violent, when the main burden of implementing institutional innovations and reforms lies on non-violent mechanisms. A vivid example of such an approach to reforms is the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, which can be considered a model of this approach to reforms in the post-Soviet space.

The Logic of the Transition of Society

The central postulate of Samuel Huntington's book "Political Order in Changing Societies" is the statement that political development has its own logic, which is connected, but different from the logic of economic and social development. A society may not cope with political transit and endure a decline and even a catastrophe when economic and social modernisation is not coordinated with political development. It is necessary to distinguish between political, economic and social dimensions of reforms and to understand how they correlate and interact with each other in a particular society.

Such a view on political development, as a process with its own logic, conflicts with the classical theory of modernization developed by 19th century thinkers such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and others, who sought to comprehend changes in European society brought by the industrialization and the development of industrial and financial capitalism. The classical theory of modernization seeks to explain its logic, based on the historical period since the Protestant Reformation. Huntington, engaging in a controversy with them, argues that the basic institutions and procedures of modernity do not necessarily reinforce each other. Democracy, for example, did not always contribute to political stability. The political order, which is actually identified by Huntington with the category of the state,

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[10]   Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order,* p. 489.

should take priority over democratization, and the development strategy, which became known as the "authoritarian transition," confirms this conclusion[11]. One can give an example of South Korea or Taiwan, who modernized the economy under authoritarian rulers and only later opened their political systems for democratic transition.

The European way of modernization is not a simultaneous movement in all dimensions of transition and development after the Reformation, but rather a series of shifts on a much larger time scale spanning at least fifteen centuries. This way, individualism at the social level of development could precede capitalism, the implementation of the principle of the rule of law - the formation of the modern state, and feudalism and resistance of the central government become the basis of modern democracy.[12]

In the 21st century, the perspectives for political development are more diverse due to the possibilities of intensive economic growth, which provides more resources for the states to reform through the mobilization of new social forces, which over time tend to become political actors. For example, in the unfolding Velvet Revolution in Armenia, a large role is played by young people working in the sphere of high technologies, who are at the stage of self-organization and awareness as a new social group.

At present, countries have the opportunity to choose from the many models of transition and development around the world.[13] The other side of the coin shows the negative phenomena and processes that in the era of globalization easily cross the borders of states. In the 21st century, it has become much more difficult to provide functions related to the traditional notion of political order and state. In other words, at present, there is no possibility to talk only about "national transition and development", but it is necessary to take into account actors and forces that are outside of the state, when giving a holistic assessment of both society and its international con-

[11] Zakaria, Fareed. (2003). *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad.* New York, NY: Norton.

[12] Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order,* p. 463.

[13] Gerschenkron, Alexander. (1962). *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

text.[14] This conclusion is more than relevant for Armenia and the South Caucasus.

Thus, it is necessary to pragmatically consider and take into account the historical aspects of the origin of political and state institutions. On the other hand, institutions cannot simply be transferred to other societies, regardless of the norms and rules established in it, or the political forces that support their unfolding. The implementation and deployment of an institution is not an engineering task and requires hard work in convincing people of the need for institutional changes. It requires the creation of a coalition supporting changes that can overcome the resistance of old elites interested in preserving the old system.

It is also necessary to convince people to accept new behavioural patterns as an established order. Often, new institutions must be complemented by cultural shifts. For example, electoral democracy will not function effectively in the absence of an independent press and a self-organizing civil society, which allows it to provide control over the government. The survival and development of institutions is associated with the ability to meet the needs of society, and in this sense, they are universal. This fact makes it possible to draw general conclusions regarding political transit and the development of political and state institutions, bearing in mind the need for their compliance with the requirements of the internal and external environment.

Possible Future of the Velvet Revolution

At present, it is very likely that the second stage of the Velvet Revolution in Armenia will be completed when Nikol Pashinyan and the coalition of parties supporting him win a double-digit victory in the parliamentary elections and the Republic of Armenia enters 2019 after completing the transition of executive and representative branches of power. The following logic and stages of the follow-up Armenian reforms are plausible. In 2019, the Republic of Armenia will have the opportunity to make changes in the judicial branch, which will make it possible to talk about the end of transit and the possibility of transition to systemic reforms. Changes in the judiciary are

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[14] Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order,* p. 507.

crucial. In the 21st century, methods of selectively using anti-corruption investigations to raise government revenue and intimidate political opponents can also be observed in some states.

The Transition of Power at Other Government Levels

The completion of the transition of power in the Republic of Armenia will allow initiating a similar process elsewhere in the Armenian state structure. The Velvet Revolution in Yerevan initiated similar processes in Artsakh concurrently. However, the Armenian people quickly came to the understanding that simultaneous revolutionary changes are extremely risky, given the state of war with Azerbaijan. There could be a situation, where the rising tension could lead to loss of control, chaos and, ultimately, defeat. After the end of the transition of power in the Republic of Armenia, it may be possible to carry out a similar process elsewhere not by revolutionary methods, but in a softer form of transformation, when the change of power takes place without the need of the street.

The transformation of power should not take place based on an agreement within the ruling elite, but through a public political process, as was the case in the Republic of Armenia. In addition, corrupt individuals cannot claim the key positions of the President and Speaker of the Parliament of Artsakh. These should be persons, who have not stained themselves in corruption and other criminal schemes and are accepted by large sections of the Artsakh society. In the time remaining before the next presidential and parliamentary elections there, this problem should be solved and politicians and public figures who are capable of carrying out systemic reforms should be put forward by and from the society.

Initiation of Systemic Reform

Together with the initiation of judicial reform and the transition of power in Artsakh, the new government should begin to develop and implement systemic reforms. The task is complicated by the fact that the Velvet Revolution in many ways was unexpected for its organizers, forcing them to act in a parallel way, when the reform will be carried out simultaneously with the development of the reform project. Taking into account the originality of the Velvet Revolution it will be extremely difficult to find counterparts

in world political history to rely on. It will also be difficult to find precedents of systemic reforms in the context of an active military threat in a dynamic security environment.

One of the few guidelines for such reforms can be the Huntington approach, when it is necessary to distinguish political, economic and social dimensions and talk about interrelated reforms with the selection of those that will be the engine of qualitative changes in society. Political changes were the first to be initiated in Armenia, but it is not guaranteed that after the end of the transition, the political reforms will endure. In addition, it is important to understand that in this case it is not only and not so much about theory, but practice, which will be determined by the evolving intra-Armenian and regional contexts.

The success of systemic reforms in Armenia will largely depend on the ability of the new government to maintain a holistic vision of the changes taking place, forcing ad hoc changes not only in tactics, but also in the strategy of reforms. This requires the new government to choose an institution that will provide holistic view of the Armenian society and statehood during reforms. The most logical decision would be to delegate these functions to the respective Security Councils, solving the task of synchronizing the activities of these structures throughout the Republic of Armenia. The staff of the Security Council of Armenia could become a center for the development and maintenance of Armenian reforms, allowing them to be separated from everyday state and political activities and focusing on the national security of Armenian people.

Nevertheless, at present, we can speak confidently only about the completion the stage of transition of power and the necessity to prepare for the complex phase of judicial and systemic reforms in the conditions of dynamically changing contexts, both within Armenia and in the region – an activity that must be attributed not only and not so much to science, but also to the art of politics, national security and strategy.

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