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# The Armenian hope and the Russian track

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**Summary**

On September 8, the leaders of Russia and Armenia met for the third time since the power in the South Caucasus country was changed by non-violent means. How straight is the track of Russian-Armenian relations — it was on this track the coachman has changed, but not the carriage? And how long will there be drag from the past on this track?

**Contents**

1 Revolution or just standing in the square?
2 The geography one can't dismiss
3 The pressure points in Russian-Armenian relations
4 Credit worthiness

In Russia, after a wave of color revolutions swept through several states of the post-Soviet space, there were two main approaches to the perception of premature departure of rulers from their offices. The first turned out to be cherished by the guardians of the regime. The cunning West was hand-feeding the opposition, which took residence at the American embassies, and once again surrounded Russia with puppet governments under the premise of the triumph of democracy. And this government, of course, wants to quickly set up a military base with an American flag in order to get into NATO. The second approach was favored by the opposition. Internal democratization brought real popular leaders to power, because the thieving incumbent ones got too sloppy. And the peaceful revolution put flowers into the muzzles of the special forces rifles, drove out corrupt officials and now brings about European reforms and while pushing away the dark empire.

The reality is somewhere in between.

## Revolution or just standing in the square?

Armenia in 2018 turned out to be a unique case. First, the revolutionaries did not put forward any geopolitical demands. No flags of the EU, NATO, no slogans "Farewell, Russia" and the likes. It was extremely Armenian case, and not anti-Russian, as some media outlets in Russia reported — the case focused on domestic policy demands.

Secondly, the revolutionaries did not break the law. Their leader Nikol Pashinyan came to power not just by legitimate, but also by legal means. After several days of strikes and rallies, of which, according to the legislation, the opposition regularly informed the Yerevan police, he was forced by the parliament to appoint himself the prime minister.

Thirdly, the main “supporter” of Pashinyan, who handed over power to him, was the power itself. The protege of power, Karen Karapetyan, in spite of the image of the “man of Gazprom”, would have been an excellent premier accepted by society. But one person did not believe in him as a “successor”. President Serzh Sargsyan, as it turned out, did not fully understand the nation: at first he promised that he would resign after the end of the cadence, and then decided to play a Saakashvili, becoming the prime minister with a weak president appointed by the parliament. The nation did not accept this. Pashinyan has long worked, technologically speaking, to take over when the authority falls down - the legitimacy of this regime was low. In addition, on March 1, 2008, when 10 people were killed, still loomed over it. Large numbers for a small country. The government broke the social contract, which can be simplified as follows: we’ll bear with you while you steal, but we won’t forgive a murder.

Fourthly, Western structures, of course, participated in the long-term preparation of these protests. Shadow of Soros wandered around Armenia in the company of Transparency International for many years. Russia invested in the regime. CIS observers said that "the elections were fair." And part of the society had the wrong, but strong feeling that Russia supports corrupt officials.

> Finally, despite the fact that Armenians like the word “revolution” very much, there was just a change of elite groups - the political system remained the same, and the institutions were not dismantled and renovated. In other words, the horses stayed, the coachman changed.

Takin the metaphor further, he cannot steer to the west, although some of the coachman’s friends are good friends with foreigners. The surrounding landscape won’t let anyone change track. But people in the carriage very much believe that the coachman will not be stealing to repair it.

## The geography one can't dismiss

After the spring events in Armenia, a some “talking heads” in Russia showed a common reflex: if something incomprehensible happens in neighboring countries, cry “Maidan!”. Armenia remains a strategic ally of Russia, a member of the CSTO, a recipient of weapons and gas with discounts, a country that respects the common past and remembers the place of residence of the largest part of the diaspora. The main enemy lies in the east; the main ally is two borders away to the north. Only an inadequate politician will want to spoil relations with a partner that provides security and supports the economy.

Prime Minister Pashinyan constantly emphasizes publicly that relations with Russia are “brilliant”, but reminds that both countries do not interfere in each other’s internal affairs. He is the head of state, and he is supposed to say that.

> Russia is probably the most interested party to what is happening in Armenia, but its behavior during the crisis event is commendable.

They did not support the falling power (they have no one but themselves to blame – should have kept the word), didn’t entice with multi-billion loans, didn’t evacuate anyone to Rostov-on-Don. But the opposition who came to power are yet to fully understand how to build relations with a strategic ally.

The loudest was the criminal case of the CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov. What Yerevan sees as a restoration of justice in connection with the “March 1 case” (Khachaturov then headed the Yerevan garrison) seems from Moscow like settling a political score. Then they arrested the ex-president Robert Kocharyan, but they immediately released him. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hinted to Yerevan politicians that keeping one’s the word is the right behavior. So, with the change of power, off-record guarantees of freedom to individual politicians were most likely obtained through the mediation of Russia.

The South Caucasus Railways, the subsidiary of Russian Railways, was subjected to searches and tax claims worth $ 19,000. The amount is ridiculous by the standards of any country bigger than Vanuatu. A little later, Prime Minister Pashinyan corrected the journalists: it was about $ 60 million.

Before Pashinyan’s visit to Russia, it turned out that the persecution of Kocharyan is still political. This was said so of record. First, Pashinyan has a bone to pick with Kocharyan. Secondly, Pashinyan repeatedly promised to punish those guilty in the “March 1 case”. Thirdly, the country demands the fight against corruption, and the ex-president (and

concurrently one of the richest people in the country) would be a perfect scapegoat. Fourth, Kocharyan still has allies among security officials, judges, middle-level officials, some journalists — all those who owe him a career. Therefore, there is a small, but still a chance that Kocharyan will want revenge. That is, everything indicated that Robert Kocharyan would be behind bars.

Now it has become publicly known that the heads of the National Security Service and the Special Investigation Service were discussing the following: Pashinyan insists that Kocharyan needs to be put away. This does not match the image of a person playing exclusively by the book. The authenticity of the record is acknowledged by both parties to the conversation. The prime minister himself explained the incident with historical persistency: the judges are still calling in to consult.

## The pressure points in Russian-Armenian relations

Future will see many significant pressure points in the Russian-Armenian relations. Probably the most sensitive is the issue supply of Russian weapons to Azerbaijan. Russia believes that by maintaining a balance in the region, it avoids a big war. Armenia wonders why an ally is arming the enemy.

Robert Kocharyan will be the second source of concern. Russia opposes political vendetta. But the huge public demand for justice and the repeated promises of Pashinyan to put the perpetrators of the crackdown on demonstrations on March 1, 2008 behind bars will push the current Armenian authorities to tough decisions. The phrase of the head of the national security of Armenia, Artur Vanetsyan, in a tapped phone conversation – “the prime minister says put him away, but the Russians are losing their temper!” - very clearly outlines this dilemma for the authorities.

Thirdly, Pashinyan was not able to speak well with businessmen from diaspora at the meeting in Moscow. Patron Ruben Vardanyan wondered why the think tank created with his funding was closed and called on the prime minister to switch to the language of numbers.

## Credit worthiness

The new prime minister of Armenia is Obama and Che Guevara in one person. A talented speaker and a professional (adjusted for this century) revolutionary, he looks at the country from his Facebook account, from the fridge magnets, from the T-shirt of a Yerevan boy.

> Pashinyan enjoys a huge credit and a very short bench. He sits on it in professional solitude, opting for the former when choosing the between trust and competence.

Nikol Pashinyan gave the country hope. Many Armenian experts are trying to explain the changes in the mass consciousness: both old people and young people once again believe that something will change about the country. People admit that they are ready to change their career paths and place of residence, because until April 2018 it seemed that Serzh Sargsyan was there forever. The main question is: how can Pashinyan and his small and not always professional team, who have given hope to all of Armenia, manage this credit?

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