

Russia Misjudged and Seeks to Restrain the Revolution in Armenia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 599

June 2019

Pavel K. Baev¹

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

The Caucasus remained strikingly stable for a whole decade after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. Neither the explosion of turmoil in the Arab world from 2011 nor the escalation of the Syrian war from 2015 reverberated deeply in this region. The April 2018 revolution in Armenia, however, delivered a shock that can alter this regional stability. A year and a half into the evolution of this revolution, its trajectory remains indefinite and most questions about its drivers and root causes are still as open as is the [famous](#) Chinese opinion on the French Revolution (“too early to say”). This short analysis deals with Russian responses to the 2018 Armenian revolution. These have been surprisingly mild, given President Vladimir Putin’s pronounced hostility to street uprisings against authoritarian rulers. The Kremlin’s further policy of restraining this disagreeable revolution could change as its grasp on power in Russia becomes insecure.

The Fallacy of Taking Armenia for Granted

Revolutions are not merely disapproved of in Putin’s Kremlin, they are fiercely condemned as manifestations of violent chaos sponsored and manipulated by the intrinsically malevolent West. It is counterintuitive, therefore, that Moscow did not attempt to suppress the brewing and then gradually unfolding revolution in one of its few strategic allies, Armenia. A military intervention was certainly never an option, if only because of geo-strategic problems with transporting enough forces. A wide range of hybrid options was, nevertheless, available for the Kremlin, which has boldly experimented with them in various places, from Montenegro to the UK. However, the Armenian opposition was left unmolested. Russia’s infamous [trolls](#), for example, did not attempt to corrupt or shut down Nikol Pashinyan’s social media presence, which was a key tool for his campaign.

The simplest and perhaps sufficient [explanation](#) for such passivity was misjudgment caused by the elementary lack of attention at the highest level of decisionmaking in the

¹ [Pavel K. Baev](#) is Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

Kremlin. Putin's courtiers were preoccupied in the spring of 2018 with micro-managing the Russian presidential elections and the ensuing governmental reshuffling. Final preparations for the 2018 World Cup were also a major concern, and Putin sought to make sure that nothing would disturb that grand event, in which he had invested much personal effort. Against this background, Pashinyan's pre-election [march](#) from Gyumri to Yerevan was taken as an insignificant peculiarity of political decorum in the country, which was destined to remain utterly dependent upon Russia's low-cost patronage. The resignation of newly appointed Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan (who was once warmly congratulated by Putin) came as a shock to the Kremlin, which had to reconcile the fact that it was too late to attempt a forceful counter-revolution.

Moscow [assumed](#) that the big security picture in the region remained static because Armenia was still locked in conflict with Azerbaijan and confrontation with Turkey, meaning that the security of Russia's 102nd military base would not be challenged. This positive geopolitical [perspective](#) clashes with acute perceptions that a precedent of regime change by street protests constitutes a security challenge. President Pashinyan's meetings with Putin have not alleviated the concern that a revolutionary government cannot be a [reliable ally](#) for Russia, and the swift measures against [corruption](#) in the old Armenian political clans have added to this concern. The Kremlin seeks to tame the anti-corruption campaign and to [counter-balance](#) the concentration of power in Pashinyan's hands, only to discover that its stern signals are counterproductive. The official [praise](#) of the "friendly atmosphere" in Putin's meeting with Pashinyan at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2019 rings distinctly false.

Difficulties in building relations with the new Armenian government have prompted mainstream Russian experts to [re-evaluate](#) the lessons of the "victory" over Georgia. Many [consequences](#) of that seven-day-long, ten-year-old war indeed matured only in the course of the new confrontation between Russia and the West. Moscow tended to believe that the inglorious end of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency rewarded its projection of brutal force, but now it has to reckon with the reality of Georgia's steady upgrade of ties with NATO, which cannot be stopped by Russian [warnings](#). Suspicions about Armenia's gradual drift in the same direction are underpinned by irreducible mistrust in leaders relying on "street power." Such feelings matter more in Russian policymaking than sober strategic assessments, shaping temptations for another exercise in projecting power aimed at expelling the specter of revolution and exterminating hostile Western encroachments.

The Geometry of Incongruent Triangles

The easiest and infallibly efficient way for Moscow to put pressure on Armenia is to upgrade relations with Azerbaijan, which is eager to erode the formal security alliance between its adversary and Russia. Putin has cultivated closer [personal ties](#) with President Ilham Aliyev than with any Armenian leader, which is only natural given the rigid authoritarian character of the dynastic Aliyev regime. Assuming the role of guarantor of

the [fragile cease-fire](#) in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has gained a position of dominance in the geopolitical triangle with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moscow also feels confident that Baku cannot opt for partnering with the United States and the EU because Azerbaijan's value as an exporter of hydrocarbons is quite limited, while its track record of harsh suppression of any political opposition keeps growing.

At the same time, Moscow is far from relaxed about the close ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey, which has provided invaluable support for Baku's inflexible position on resolving the 30-year-old Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Transportation of Caspian oil and gas is a major issue in the Russia-Azerbaijan-Turkey triangle, and Moscow does not have meaningful control over it. Putin has invested much effort in building rapport with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (after their bitter quarrels in late 2015) and seeks to turn the strategic partnership with Turkey into a means of deepening disagreements inside NATO. This partnership also helped in setting a cooperative framework in Syria, but since the fall of 2018, Turkey has been testing the limits of this cooperation—for example, it sought (unsuccessfully) to [block](#) Syrian/Russian offensives in the rebel-held Idlib province. Armenia, meanwhile, tries to make itself useful for Russia by [partaking](#) in “humanitarian missions” in Syria, since even a symbolic deployment of peacekeepers helps legitimize the Kremlin's intervention. Iran forms a basis for yet another triangle as Russia tries to take a lead in defying new U.S. sanctions, and Armenia seeks to preserve its long-term connections with Tehran.

The variability of these overlapping triangular interplays makes Armenia's predicament significantly better than one might think given its landlocked position and closed borders with two of its four neighbors. In order to explore the available opportunities, however, it needs better access to the headquarters of policymaking in Moscow than the Pashinyan team could possibly gain. The inexperienced and inherently unstable revolutionary Armenian government has limited flexibility on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and its best hope for neutralizing the Azerbaijani intrigues in Moscow is the reluctance in the Kremlin to play with the risk of destabilization in the Caucasus.

The Mutation of Caucasian Catalysts of Conflicts

Russia at the end of the second decade of Putin's “era” is significantly more defensive in its behavior and far less potent in executing new enterprises than it was at the start of intensified confrontation with the West in early 2014. Sustained economic stagnation has necessitated significant [cuts](#) in resource allocation for military build-up, except for the “wonder-missiles” [presented](#) by Putin in his 2018 address to the parliament. Contraction of incomes and trimming of social benefits have resulted in the decline of public trust in Putin's leadership to a [historic low](#) in May 2019. Discontent has acquired political character in many Russian regions, from Arkhangelsk to Yekaterinburg, and the North Caucasus comes under the influence of new catalysts for old conflicts.

Seeking to pacify this turbulent region, Moscow has used a combination of brutal suppression and generous funding, and it worked well enough to quell any disturbance that could have spoiled the ceremonies of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Since then, however, the allocation of money from the federal budget has been much reduced, which affects the reliability of political patronage networks. The loyalty of many elites has eroded, and Moscow opted for a [radical reshuffling](#) of the Dagestan government in February-March 2018, which so far has not resulted in any significant destabilization. What triggered [mass protests](#) locally was the decision on land swaps between Chechnya and Ingushetia, and the determination of protesters took the Kremlin by surprise. The issue may be parochial, but it brought into focus the fact that Chechnya, which is ruled by the ambitious maverick Ramzan Kadyrov, remains effectively outside Moscow's control and constitutes a serious security challenge for the whole Caucasus.

In support of this, one can say that the revolution in Armenia accelerated the trend of gradual deterioration of political stability in the North Caucasus, with the lack of meaningful reaction from Moscow confusing its regional elites. The Russian leadership cannot rely on levers of economic influence but feels the need to reassert its role as the master of the Caucasus and to demonstrate its readiness to use force, which, as many in Moscow believe, is the only political means that is respected in these borderlands. In a political environment of strategic assessments and rational choices, such readiness would have been constrained by previous experiences; for that matter, Russia's dominance over the quasi-states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is internationally unacceptable and locally untenable. The Kremlin milieu, however, has few checks on the idiosyncrasies of the aging leader and balances against the angst of his corrupt courtiers.

Conclusions

The 2014 Armenian revolution is certain to experience many setbacks, but its every success in asserting democratic norms and exterminating corruption will irritate the Russian leadership. The Kremlin seeks to establish that this revolution, like the turmoil of all other color revolutions, does not make sense, which thus leaves the Pashinyan administration needing to prove that it does. Putin's court cannot begin to understand the value of people's hopes inspired by and invested in the victory of their uprising, but it can count on creeping disillusionment. The revolution indeed will not deliver any tangible prosperity, particularly with Russia [controlling](#) many Armenian economic assets, so Putin can work on the assumption that, given time, politics in Yerevan will return to fraud and profiteering as usual, as happened in Ukraine after the Orange revolution in late 2004. The problem with the "strategic patience course" is that Moscow cannot count on time because it has no way of knowing how fast time may run out for Putin's regime.

The urge in the Kremlin to do something about the Armenian revolution could be strengthened by the overlap of various crises in the North Caucasus (where Kadyrov's Chechnya cannot be disciplined), but still, direct action remains improbable. Armenia is,

after all, one of the few strategic allies of Russia that wants to keep up pretenses for benevolent leadership in the post-Soviet third of Eurasia. More probable and indeed perfectly feasible is a new intervention against Georgia. There is certainly no need, in the strategic perspective of the Russian General Staff, to replay the August 2008 tank assault toward Tbilisi, but a swift occupation of Poti could be a low-risk and guaranteed-success operation. Batumi could perhaps be left in peace in order to avoid direct tensions with Turkey, but a capture of the southern town of [Akhalkalaki](#), which used to host a Russian base, could bring Russian troops to the border of Armenia, thus blazing a “corridor” to the Gyumri base.

Such blatant breach of international law is certain to see an outcry of condemnation in the West and perhaps new sanctions, but the Russian leadership has learned to enjoy the former and to stomach the latter. It might even turn this smallish confrontation peak into an opportunity to demonstrate NATO’s weakness in the Black Sea theater and to exploit discord in the Alliance, particularly as far as Turkey is concerned. In Russian strategic terms, Georgia is the perfect target for the next exercise in projecting power, and the revolution in Armenia has made such aggression more probable. The new Armenian government might find itself in an impossible situation of detesting Russian power plays but not being able to condemn or resist it.