

Police Reform in Armenia REVOLUTION OR EVOLUTION?

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*"In Georgia, everything happens in a revolutionary way; in Armenia, gradually."
("В Грузии всё происходит революционно, в Армении – постепенно.")*

- Grant Mikaelyan, Caucasian Institute

"This is a new Armenia. That's all!" ("Это новая Армения – и все!")

- Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia

This memo addresses current police reforms in the Republic of Armenia. We analyze these reforms' origins, assess their successes and failures, and compare them with similar reforms adopted in other post-Soviet countries, notably Georgia. We find that police reforms in Armenia, as in other post-Soviet states, have been highly state-dominated though not completely insulated from civil society. Although reforms have reduced some forms of graft, improved the technical capacity of the police, and reduced "red tape," there has been less progress toward improving police accountability to citizens. Also, in contrast to Georgia's police reform efforts, Armenia's reforms have relied far less on personnel changes such as the dismissal and replacement of corrupt police officers.

Both "commercialization" and corruption were rife among Armenian police until recently. In contrast to Russia, Armenia did not actually become a "criminal state," but Armenian police services were severely compromised by corruption and nepotism. Such practices were (and to some extent, still are) tolerated by the government as tools to use against opposition politicians. According to a 2002 TsRR/ТИ-Armenia survey, Armenian heads of households and small and medium business enterprises (SMEs) considered the police and prosecutor-general's office to be the most corrupt state institutions. There were few serious official efforts to address police corruption in the first two post-Soviet

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decades, apart from a presidential decree on police reform in 2006 under former President Robert Kocharyan, which appears to have had little practical effect. However, more substantive policy changes intended to improve police services began to be implemented in 2008 and some results became observable in late 2011 and 2012.

Scholarly investigation of post-Soviet police services is necessary because policing reform is integral to the success of any broader project of democratic transition. Our data consist of ethnographic research conducted by Shahnazarian between 2011 and 2013 in several Armenian cities, including Yerevan, Vanadzor, Stepanavan, Razdan, and Masis. Shahnazarian also interviewed 117 people, among whom were NGO activists, police officers, taxi drivers, government officials, and ordinary citizens. In order to understand the consequences of Armenia's police reforms for the daily formal and informal interactions of ordinary policemen with citizens, interviews and field observations focused specifically on the professional behavior of Armenian *siloviki* and, in particular, the highway police. Below we briefly comment on the origins of the reforms, describe their components, and assess their results.

Origins of the Reforms

Announcing his package of reform proposals for the police in 2011, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan declared, "This is a new Armenia. That's all!" Indeed, police reform is tightly connected to an effort by Armenia to rebrand its image. The same approach was visible during earlier police reforms in Georgia. In addition, the president's speech and subsequent legislation demonstrated that he is closely controlling the course of police reform. Indeed, the majority of respondents believe that the progress and results of the reforms are entirely dependent on the authorities, although civil society is making serious efforts to secure control over the implementation of the reforms.

Just as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's "revolutionary" government saw police reform as important for several of its political goals (in particular, independence from Russia), Sargsyan's cabinet aspires to show loyalty to Western partners and EU values. As in Georgia, a key factor in demonstrating the government's seriousness was the appointment of a new police chief with a mandate to carry out sweeping reforms. In Armenia, this was Vladimir Gasparyan, who began his tenure as head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) in 2011 with a remarkable speech denouncing bribe-taking and promising to get rid of police who partake of it.

The reasons for the exact timing and content of the reforms need to be investigated further. As a preliminary matter, we note that international partners, such as the World Bank and the EU's Eastern Partnership, had been urging the government to address police malfeasance for years. The reform package may thus be specifically linked to the government's wish (now forestalled by Russia's insistence that Armenia join the Customs Union) to conclude an association and free trade agreement with the EU. In addition, as we note below, the content of the reforms resembles the better known policies of Saakashvili, which were first implemented in 2003. Because of the demonstration effect of Georgia's reforms, Armenia may have come under increased international pressure, or the government may have concluded that similar reforms

were feasible and desirable in Armenia, or both. Finally, similar reforms were also implemented in 2008 in the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Given the close links between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, it would be interesting to investigate the exact mechanisms of influence between the two entities.

Components of Police Reform in Armenia

Armenia's police reforms can be divided into two components: (1) technical and material improvements to policing, including systemic features such as salaries, training, and equipment; and (2) administrative restructuring, including the creation of new specialized units and reorganization of the highway police. In contrast, more radical personnel reform—dismissals of poorly performing or corrupt officials—has been conspicuously absent.

Substantial investments have been made in upgrading the material resources of Armenian police. In addition to new uniforms, the MIA purchased 400 Toyota cars equipped with cameras, radios, and speedometers, which are now patrolling Armenia's roads and highways. As in Georgia, the police academy was replaced with a new academy charged with introducing a competitive system of recruitment.

There has also been a significant rise in police salaries, accompanied by increased efforts to recruit more educated young officers. Salaries have been raised to about \$600-900, compared with \$120-140 before the reforms. (As a result, highway police now earn more than people in many other occupations, including doctors.) This rise in salaries and improvements in material resources and police training are aimed at curbing incentives for corruption and at presenting the police as an attractive employer, while also instilling a sense of pride in serving the state. These salary increases were made possible by the creation of a special fund, established in 2006. About \$10-12 billion was spent on the restructuring of the Highway Police alone.

Some police agencies have also been substantially restructured or even newly created. A new "Elite Battalion" was created in November 2011 with the mandate of carrying out ongoing foot patrols in city centers and policing public demonstrations. Its officers are highly educated and are required to speak both Russian and a major Western language, usually English or French. These officers are also given extended training in courteous treatment of citizens. There have also been efforts to introduce other Armenian police officers to "community policing" approaches intended to make the police more approachable to citizens. These efforts have had the support of the OSCE and other international partners.

As noted above, the highway police, long famed for their corruption and rudeness, have been a major target of the reforms. This has entailed improving road infrastructure (like new traffic signals, painted lane divisions, and other signage). Armenia has also scrapped its Soviet highway code and adopted international highway traffic standards and has created a special administrative court for traffic infractions. As in Georgia, there has been a major public relations campaign diffused through the mass media and NGOs to publicize correct driver and pedestrian behavior. Fines are being used aggressively to enforce these standards, and the Armenian police officials we

interviewed even claim that in some respects Armenia is now stricter in its approach to road safety than Georgia, notably in imposing substantial fines on drivers of vehicles that lack the required safety inspection certificate.

Technology has been enlisted to reduce opportunities for bribery and extortion, in particular by automating many processes and reducing interaction between citizens and highway police. Surveillance cameras (some actually functioning, others serving as “camouflage”) have been installed throughout Yerevan. The number of road speedometers (which allow the police to gauge the speed of moving traffic) has also been increased. To prevent predatory behavior, highway police are prohibited from standing on the road and must patrol in their cars at all times. Fines are now payable only in banks and not to officers. As a result, citizens we interviewed claimed that the incidence of bribery and extortion has dropped considerably, although they also note that the police have become hyper-vigilant in enforcing fines even for minor infractions. The proceeds from these stepped-up fines are being used to fund the operations of the police themselves through a system of rewards and incentives, whereby the officer who imposes the fine keeps a portion of the proceeds and surrenders the remainder to the state and to the security technology company Security Dream, an MIA contractor. This new policy suggests that informal bribes have in effect been partially replaced by legalized ones that are shared between the officer, the state, and the company. Indeed, some taxi drivers complained that they now pay more in “fines” than they ever paid in bribes.

There have also been some efforts to improve police officers’ demeanor toward citizens. These efforts sometimes involve cooperation with NGOs, such as “Achilles,” which helped draft the new highway code and provided anti-corruption training for police officers. Efforts have been made to sanction severe misconduct toward civilians. “Under the former minister I could hardly be subject to any [punishment] if I slapped a citizen, while under the new one I will be punished,” one officer told us. Some citizens who were interviewed noted that while corruption still takes place, it is more concealed than previously, suggesting that police are genuinely afraid of punishment for bribery and extortion.

While all the reforms noted above recall similar policies adopted in Georgia, there is a substantial difference between the two countries’ approaches to police reform. In Armenia, there has been much less replacement of police personnel. Where police have been dismissed, this has typically been done quietly, without resembling the showy public-relations campaigns seen in Georgia. Such dismissals have usually involved low-ranking officers rather than command-level ones. Some respondents suggest that political power in Armenia is more diffuse than in Georgia, and so the Armenian government must tread more carefully in dismissing police, especially high-ranking ones. Even glaring cases of corruption have usually resulted in the dismissal of a few low-ranking “scapegoats,” rather than the command officers who may actually be more culpable. With the major exception of Gasparyan himself, few senior MIA officers are new to their posts. Conversely, in contrast to Georgia, there has been little effort to reduce the number of officials employed in the MIA, which arguably remains highly over-staffed.

Evaluation

What drives these reforms? Like their Georgian equivalent, Armenia's police reforms are aimed at restoring the state's monopoly on violence, which had been established to a large extent by 1990s-era police chief Vano Siradeghian who put an end to the thieves-in-law in Armenia. Officials believed this monopoly had been compromised by the ability of criminal groups to co-opt the police. The new policies also reaffirm the power of high-ranking officials to control informal rents derived from public office and to determine how and by whom such rents can be appropriated. By attacking the most visible aspects of police dysfunction (e.g., rude and overtly corrupt highway police), the reforms also aim at creating an image of a modern functioning society, both for Western observers and for Armenian citizens.

As to whether these reforms have actually benefited citizens, caution and nuance are required. True, police are now more disciplined and possibly more circumspect in their treatment of civilians. Surveys suggest that citizens do perceive some improvements in officers' day-to-day behavior. In a Gallup press release, it was reported that almost 70 percent of Yerevan residents surveyed in November 2012 either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that police service had improved over the last year. However, it is also true that the reforms have not emphasized formalized accountability to civilian authorities for ongoing management of the police or disciplining of wrongdoing by them. Nonetheless, we can see visible improvements in police work in Yerevan since the end of 2011.

Finally, in an interesting contrast with Georgia, we note that Armenia's police reforms did not follow a regime transition. It seems likely that the limited personnel replacement observed in Armenia reflects that the government must move cautiously in dismissing police officers, as well as civilian employees of the MIA, as such dismissals implicate the power of senior officers and other high-ranking officials. (Likewise, Georgian police reforms were more closely integrated with other administrative changes than appears to be the case in Armenia, although more research is needed on this point.) However, as in Georgia, it is also noteworthy that most of the Armenian reforms concern day-to-day "street" policing rather than the policing of high-level economic crime or other official misconduct. According to several respondents who work in NGOs, a serious attempt to come to grips with the latter would entail, at a minimum, independent auditing and inspection of government ministries, and the creation of genuine judicial independence for Armenia's courts. While NGOs are sometimes invited to help implement some reforms, the political decisions that led to those new policies remain highly closed to participation from the public.

In short, Armenia's police reforms emerged out of a different political context than Georgia's, somewhat limiting their scope. However, as in Georgia, Armenian reforms are ultimately aimed at removing glaring abuses that sully the image of the state, rather than at subjecting the police to ongoing oversight by citizens or civil society.

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