

## Armenia's "Velvet Revolution": Time is Pashinyan's worst enemy

*Amanda Paul and Dennis Sammut*

Nikol Pashinyan's meteoric rise to the leadership of Armenia has happened unexpectedly. Widespread discontent with the administration of former president Serzh Sargsyan, youth's frustration with corrupt practices, and Pashinyan's sheer audacity turned what looked like an impossible task into a reality. A protest movement that started quite modestly in late March, focusing primarily on trying to block the appointment of Sargsyan as the country's new prime minister with full executive powers, eventually forced the governing Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) to acquiesce to Pashinyan's demands.

The self-styled "velvet revolution" has created huge expectations. But Pashinyan's ability to deliver remains constrained by a need to secure a popular mandate – not through the streets but the ballot box, and by Armenia's complicated military and strategic relationship with its neighbours. Time is not on Pashinyan's side, and there are some in Armenia see him as a temporary inconvenience. They include corrupt oligarchs who have profited from Armenia's dysfunctional economy; small-time bureaucrats and military officers who fear to live in a more competitive environment; and elements within the RPA, which still holds a majority in parliament. They view Pashinyan as an aberration that shall eventually be jettisoned. Pashinyan hopes that the Armenian people will keep faith with him for long enough for him to start delivering the promised change.

### Prioritising changes

Pashinyan understands that what the people want first and foremost is a fresh start, a better quality of life and justice against those who have pillaged Armenia since independence. Foreign and defence policy hardly featured as a theme during the street uprisings. Pashinyan has therefore opted to maintain continuity on these issues, at least for the moment. Armenia will thus remain embedded within the Russian sphere as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh will continue in the framework of the OSCE Minsk process. His domestic agenda, however, is ambitious.

Top priorities include cracking down on corruption, rooting out the deeply entrenched oligarchic system, transitional justice and "finding the stolen money". As Pashinyan does not have a majority in Parliament, building a broad and robust political coalition is paramount. The government's work plan will shortly be submitted to parliament, which is expected to be accepted. The upcoming parliamentary debate will indicate the battle-lines to come.

The new government knows it must secure an electoral success to seal the victory it has achieved on the streets. There is broad consensus that snap elections should take place before the end of 2018 to capitalise on the current wave of support. But, this may not be so straightforward. Parliament is to decide the timing of elections, and the RPA opposes snap elections. It wants to buy time in the hope that disillusionment with Pashinyan will set in. The RPA has promised to play a constructive role. Nevertheless, with its tentacles still spread through all three branches of power, its capacity to undermine the new government is considerable. Pashinyan may need to call Armenians back out on the street to keep the RPA in check. However, the prospect of permanent revolution is not one that he cherishes, or that Armenia needs.

## **Renovating Armenia under Putin's shadow**

Russia is a critical player in every facet of Armenia's life. Russia acquiesced to the change of guard in Yerevan, even if the Kremlin was not enthusiastic about it. Its silence rattled the RPA leadership in crucial moments of the transition. When Russia finally spoke, it was with great caution – underlining that the protests were an internal matter. Moscow may have learnt from its experience in Ukraine. To avoid igniting mass anti-Russian sentiment, the Kremlin seems less keen to back unpopular leaders.

Ultimately, Russia's position is secure due to its control over the economy and its huge stake in Armenia's security. The lack of alternative scenarios gives little room for manoeuvre for whoever is in power. Pashinyan has thus excluded foreign and security policy from his immediate agenda. During his meeting with President Putin on 14 May, Pashinyan strongly reassured him of the importance of Armenia's strategic relationship with Russia even though as late as 2017 Pashinyan's parliamentary bloc submitted legislation to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union.

Moscow may also disapprove Pashinyan domestic reforms, especially if they threaten Russia's economic interests. The honeymoon with Pashinyan may be short-lived.

## **Karabakh remains the elephant in the room**

Pashinyan has also tried to project the same message of continuity about his Nagorno-Karabakh policy. He is the first Armenian leader in two decades who does not hail from Karabakh, and who has not cut his political teeth there. Disagreements on Karabakh derailed the government of Armenia's first president, Levon Ter Petrosyan. Pashinyan seems determined not to let this happen to his government. So far Azerbaijan looks happy enough to see Sargsyan's back not to muddy the waters. The situation on the front line has been unusually calm. This works well for Pashinyan. However, this is a volatile line of contact where incidents are inevitable and can easily spiral out of control. Azerbaijan's patience is also unlikely to last. International management of the conflict has never been so important.

## **What role for the EU?**

The European Parliament and its national counterparts are currently ratifying the new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia. CEPA's importance has significantly grown because of the political changes in Yerevan. CEPA has widespread support in Armenia and contains tools and mechanisms that Pashinyan's willing and reform-minded government can use. Armenia's unique situation calls for a specific response from the EU. The European External Action Service should establish a task force under the chairmanship of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus to identify the aspects of CEPA that can be fast-tracked. It should also provide technical assistance and training in critical areas and sectors. This new task force should be time-bound and operate only for a fixed one term of 12 to 18 months.

## **Conclusion**

Pashinyan achieved an astonishing popular victory. He must now quickly deliver results and manage the aspirations of his supporters. While he has rightly prioritised internal socio-economic and governance reforms, issues related to foreign and defence policy, including on Nagorno-Karabakh, will remain. While continuity may work in the short run, Pashinyan will eventually have to become his own man on these issues. Meanwhile, the peaceful popular movement that Pashinyan has led in the past weeks shall remain a source of inspiration for others who face similar apparently hopeless situations.

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