

Authoritarianism, Democratization, and ‘Populism’: Armenia’s “Velvet Revolution” in Perspective

Saturday, May 1, 2021
Livestream on YouTube
University of California, Berkeley

From end March to early May 2018, a series of peaceful protests and demonstration led to the resignation of Prime Minister (PM) Serzh Sargsyan, whom the then ruling Republican Party he chaired had newly nominated for that office. Having completed his two terms as President, from 2008 to 2018, Serzh Sargsyan’s attempt to remain in power became obvious. This attempt also made it evident that the amended 2015 Constitution, which he had promoted to invigorate democratization by shifting power from the office of the President to the Parliament and the office of the Prime Minister, was merely a ploy to extend his rule. It was also the proverbial “last straw that broke the camel’s back.” A kleptocratic, semi-authoritarian regime that appeared to control all the levers of power and of the economy suddenly, and unexpectedly, collapsed. This regime change—which the leader of the protests and incoming new prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, referred to as a “Velvet Revolution”—was peaceful, something unusual for a post-Soviet republic. Subsequent parliamentary elections brought to power a new generation, younger deputies mostly between the ages of twenty-five to forty. A similar generation change also characterized the formation of the government. Youth, however, also means inexperience as almost none of the new deputies and ministers had held any political position in the past. Prime Minister Pashinyan has also turned out to be quite unusual, especially in a rather conservative country, as he rides a bicycle, addresses the population through his Facebook page or face to face in the streets, and displays photos taken with his spouse and children. As a result, the old guard accuses him of being a populist who polarizes society and his supporters of being members of NGOs financed from abroad, including by the Soros Foundation. All of them are said to be “a-national,” that is, individuals who are destroying the traditional “national values” of the country. In this context, this new generation of politicians led by Pashinyan faces the daunting task of reforming a sclerotic, corrupt political and economic system in which all the administrations and enterprises—from the local to the regional and national levels; from elementary schools to universities; from lower-level judges to the Constitutional Court; from small businesses to major ones—were controlled by members or cronies of Serzh Sargsyan’s former ruling party, the Republicans. The military debacle and consequent territorial losses resulting from the Azerbaijani-Turkish war against the self-proclaimed, unrecognized Republic of Artsakh (or Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) in the fall of 2020 have made matters worse. A “National Salvation Movement,” made up of seventeen opposition parties and groups mostly affiliated with the previous regimes, has accused PM Pashinyan of being a traitor and demanded his immediate resignation and the formation of a one-year caretaker government that would eventually organize legislative elections. Its street protests and demonstrations, characterized by extremely threatening and violent rhetoric but less successful than it expected, combined with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis in Armenia and the necessity of implementing the painful armistice clauses imposed by the Azerbaijani-Russian-Turkish troika (November 9, 2020), give the impression of a rudderless State. After much zigzagging, Pashinyan has finally called for legislative elections in June 2021.

This conference aims at analyzing what happened in Armenia in comparative perspective and through the prisms of authoritarianism, democratization, and ‘populism,’ a term the opposition has used to attack PM Pashinyan. Is what happened in Armenia a revolution? Can the Pashinyan-led regime change be compared to others? What are the prospects for such political transformations based on past occurrences in Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and Latin America? Is it likely that the rule of law will take roots and corruption will be slowly uprooted? Finally, how can one assess the first three years of Pashinyan’s rule?

Conference Program

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS - 9:30 a.m.

DR. STEPHAN ASTOURIAN, *William Saroyan Director, Armenian Studies Program;*
Associate Adjunct Professor of History, University of California, Berkeley

Morning Session

9:40 a.m.

“A Small World War?”

DR. GEORGI DERLUGUIAN, *Professor of Social Research and Public Policy, New York University Abu Dhabi*

ABSTRACT: Karabagh belongs to the list of glorious and wretched places which can ignite disproportionate conflicts: Alsace, Danzig, Ulster, Trieste, Tangier, Smyrna, Sarajevo, Jerusalem, Hong Kong, etc. The emotions and violence, however extreme, seem easier to explain than the plans of different armies and the willingness of their political leaders to sacrifice lives time and again. Perhaps, such brutal wars happen only when a certain vacuum emerges in world geopolitics and the stakes become even higher than usually thought. In 1918-20 Karabagh was a serious aftershock of World War I. In 2020, could it mark the onset of an analogous world reordering by massive violence? Might the world-systems theory of hegemonic transitions apply actually to the small remote Karabagh?

BIO: Dr. Georgi Derluguian graduated in African studies from Moscow State University and served in Mozambique during the 1980s. In the United States since 1990, he has worked at the universities of Binghamton, Michigan, and Northwestern. His main intellectual interest is the evolution of human societies. Dr. Derluguian has also conducted expeditionary fieldwork in the Caucasus and written on post-Soviet wars. The book *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* (Oxford, 2013) co-written with Immanuel Wallerstein, Randall Collins, Michael Mann, and Craig Calhoun was translated into seventeen languages. In the last ten years, Prof. Derluguian has worked at New York University in Abu Dhabi and lived in Yerevan, Armenia.

10:10 a.m.

“Deciphering Pashinyan’s Foreign Policy: From ‘Democratic Invincibility’ to ‘New Sardarapat’”

DR. VAHRAM TER MATEVOSYAN, *Associate Professor and Chair, Political Science and International Affairs Program, American University of Armenia*

ABSTRACT: The 2018 protests in Armenia were principally about democratization and social justice, leaving little room for foreign policy. Once elected prime minister, Pashinyan and his team, inexperienced in foreign policy, tried to transfer to it the same populist narrative that had helped him to succeed at home. In international settings, the new government talked about reform, social justice, and a “democratic breakthrough” in the belief that striving toward democracy would make the country immune to external threats, attract investment, and guarantee help from foreign partners in solving Armenia’s socioeconomic and security problems. The paper explores how the new government has handled the Karabakh negotiations during the thirty months leading to the war in the framework of the principle of “democratic invincibility” and how his foreign policy led to the 2020 Artsakh War which he famously coined as Armenia’s “new Sardarapat”?

BIO: Dr. Vahram Ter-Matevosyan is an Associate Professor and the Chair of the Political Science and International Affairs Program at the American University of Armenia. He specializes in the foreign and security policies of Turkey and the South Caucasian states. He received his PhD in History from the University of Bergen (Norway) and a Master’s degree from Lund University (Sweden). He was a Visiting Professor at Duke University (2016) and a Fulbright Scholar at UC Berkeley (2009-2010). He has authored two monographs and more than a dozen peer-reviewed articles.

10:40 a.m.

“The Revolution is Dead, Long Live the Revolution?”

LILIT GEVORGYAN, *Russia and CIS Associate Director, IHS Markit, London*

ABSTRACT: The failure of the 2018 Armenian revolution was almost inevitable. The vast majority of Armenians took to the streets wishing for social justice and better security. However, they stood little chance of succeeding. Their revolution came under attack by Armenia’s organized oligarchy, and powerful external actors. But above all, the revolution was aborted by the very revolutionary leader, Nikol Pashinyan, and his confidants. The military defeat in Nagorno Karabakh only hastened the domestic political crisis in Armenia, which had been in making at least for two and a half decades. Pashinyan’s ascent to power was the logical end of a period of “fake politics” in the absence of a political elite. Armenia’s dire national security situation and the threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity necessitate a true revolution, one that Armenians in their homeland and Diaspora have been waiting for decades.

BIO: Ms. Gevorgyan is responsible for analyzing the macroeconomic, political, security, and business environment of Russia and the former Soviet republics. She has lived and worked in Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, and the US. She is a regular contributor to major media outlets. Prior to joining HIS Markit, now IHS Markit, in 2009, Ms. Gevorgyan had gained knowledge of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) risk environment during her time at the Eurasia House at Cambridge University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), LSE Enterprise, and the United Nations. Earlier in her career, she worked for the ministries of foreign affairs and economy in Armenia and she was press relations officer at the Armenian Diplomatic Mission in London. She completed a Diploma from NATO Defense College in Rome, gaining a focus on conflict resolution. Ms. Gevorgyan’s university degrees include a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts in Political Science from Yerevan State University, as well as a Master of Science in International Relations and Political Economy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

11:10 a.m.

“Armenia’s Democratic Transition, 2018-21: Revolution or Regime Change?”

DR. ANTRANIG KASBARIAN, *Development Director, Tufenkian Foundation, New York City*

ABSTRACT: The ‘Velvet Revolution’ began in Spring 2018 with mass mobilization forcing the resignation of then-Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan. Did this transition constitute a revolution, per se, or something different? The search for answers is ongoing, with mixed conclusions at this writing. Clearly then, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ is at best a work-in-progress – having achieved regime change, but with its revolutionary aspect still undeveloped, and at times contradictory. To get at these contradictions, I turn to the complex relationship between social movements and democratization: as Charles Tilly notes, movement claims and movement consequences are often not one and the same. Indeed, social movements, in and of themselves, may promote democracy but do not attain staying power unless they insinuate themselves directly into a mode of governance. The paper concludes by identifying the key areas of governance that have either furthered the movement’s goals or caused a backslide/reversion toward chaos and authoritarianism.

BIO: Dr. Antranig Kasbarian is well-known for his activities as journalist, activist, researcher, and development worker. He holds a Ph.D. in geography from Rutgers University, where his dissertation was entitled “We Are Our Mountains: The Geography of Nationalism in the Armenian Self-Determination Movement, Nagorno-Karabagh, 1988-98.” He is a former editor of the *Armenian Weekly* and has served the Armenian-American community in various capacities over four decades. He continues to publish and lecture on topics pertaining to Armenia, Transcaucasia, and especially Nagorno-Karabagh. Professionally, he serves as Development Director of the New York-based Tufenkian Foundation, pursuing charitable and strategic endeavors in Armenia and Karabagh.

11:40 a.m. - 12:10 p.m.

Discussion among the conference participants

12:10 p.m. - 12:40 p.m.

Q&A with the audience

12:40 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Lunch Break

Afternoon Session

2:00 p.m.

“Are Growing Pains or Democratic Declines Behind Armenia’s and Georgia’s Political Crises?”

DR. ANNA OHANYAN, *Richard B. Finnegan Distinguished Professor of Political Science and International Relations, Stonehill College*

ABSTRACT: Georgia and Armenia arrived at their respective democratic breakthroughs quite differently, but the challenges of democratic consolidation they face are strikingly similar. And despite substantial research demonstrating the regionally conditioned outcomes of democratic consolidation, the Euro-Atlantic policy community habitually views these two cases separately. Georgia’s democratic pathway within the European umbrella contrasts sharply with Armenia’s pathway in Russia’s authoritarian security orbit. This bifurcated approach created theoretical blinders and policy omissions in this region. This presentation focuses on the regional dimension of democratic consolidation, with an emphasis on the geopolitical reshuffling in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the 44-Day Turkey-backed Azerbaijani offensive against the Republic of Artsakh. Wars are major stressors for young democracies, but Armenia’s specific signature during its democratic breakthrough bodes well for its prospects of democratic consolidation, as will be argued in this presentation.

BIO: Dr. Anna Ohanyan is Richard B. Finnegan Distinguished Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Stonehill College. She is also a Nonresident Senior Scholar in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Prof. Ohanyan is a two-times Fulbright Scholar and previously served as a doctoral fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and a visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She is an author, editor and co-editor of four books, and numerous academic and policy articles. Her books include *Networked Regionalism as Conflict Management*, a monograph with Stanford University Press (2015), and *Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond*, an edited volume with Georgetown University Press 2018. Her latest work is a co-edited volume with Laurence Broers, *Armenia’s Velvet Revolution: Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, published with Bloomsbury Press (2020).

2:30 p.m.

“Reconstructing the *Demos*: Populist Vectors of Democratization in Poland and Czechia”

PAWEL KOSCIELNY, *PhD Candidate, Department of History, University of California, Berkeley*

ABSTRACT: In the hope of generating a helpful perspective on Armenian populism, I trace the historical sequences of the Law and Justice (PiS) regime in Poland (2015-present) and the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens Movement (ANO) government in Czechia. Better understood as *integral parties* rather than classical populist movements, the stories of PiS and ANO render a few general points for comparison: (1) meanings of democracy and democratization have been destabilized since 1989 (2) since the EuroCrisis, urban precariats have become available for new alliances of social forces representing ‘the people’ (3) historical memory has become more, not less, relevant to political competition over time.

BIO: Pawel Koscielny is a PhD candidate in the History Department at UC Berkeley. His dissertation “Post-Communist Memory as Democratic Pedagogy” compares civic education programs developed by national memory institutes in the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland since 1989.

3:00 p.m.

“Post-Velvet: Armenia’s Stubborn Drive Towards Democratization”

DR. NERSES KOPALYAN, *Assistant Professor in Residence and Undergraduate Engagement Coordinator, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 Artsakh War served as constraints on Armenia’s democratization process, which had been on a relatively positive trajectory since the Velvet Revolution. While the process has slowed down, it has not, by any means, stopped. This process is traced on a continuum, from installing democracy to consolidating democracy. The Velvet Revolution began the process of democratic transition, but the limitations in institutional reforms and in the implementation of a transitional justice agenda, the stagnation in judicial reforms, the crisis in civilian-military relations, and the political aftershocks of the war have produced a complex configuration. The processes through which many of these issues have been addressed, however, do suggest an increased level of institutionalization within both Armenia’s political culture and system. Utilizing recently accumulated data on the post-war dynamics facing Armenia, the findings suggest a positive trajectory for continued institutional reforms, especially considering the upcoming snap parliamentary elections, and present an assessment of Armenia’s electoral climate.

BIO: Dr. Nerses Kopalyan is an assistant professor-in-residence of Political Science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His fields of specialization include international relations, political theory, and philosophy of science. He has conducted extensive research on analytic philosophy, feminist theory, and paradigm building. He is the co-author of *Sex, Power, and Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). He is also the author of *World Political Systems after Polarity* (Routledge, 2017). His current research concentrates on political violence and terrorism and their impact on geopolitical and great power relations.

3:30 p.m. - 3:40 p.m.

Coffee Break

3:40 p.m.

“The Impact of the Velvet Revolution on the Armenian Diaspora and the Imperatives of Governance”

AMBASSADOR ARMEN BAIBOURTIAN, PHD, *Consul General of Armenia, Los Angeles, California*

ABSTRACT: The speaker will outline the profound impact of the Velvet Revolution on the Armenian Diaspora communities, focusing on the case of California. He is going to depict the paradigm shift in the conceptual perception of the Homeland that took place within the Armenian community in California and the reassessment of its role. The speaker will analyze the issues of governance in post-revolution Armenia according to the UN principles of governance and measured against worldwide governance indicators. The potential vital role of the Armenian Diaspora in achieving incessant improvement of governance will be discussed.

BIO: Ambassador Armen Baibourtian has held the position of Consul General of Armenia in Los Angeles since September 2018. He also holds the title of the first Armenian Consul General in Los Angeles (1995-1997). He was Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for 5 years (2014-2018). He had worked earlier at the United Nations as Senior Adviser to the UN Resident Coordinator (2008-2013). A. Baibourtian served twice as the Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister (1997-2000 and 2004-2008), simultaneously being the Chief Negotiator with the European Union. He co-chaired the U.S.-Armenia Security Dialogue (1999-2000). He became the first Ambassador of Armenia to India and, concurrently, to Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia (2000-2004). He was also the Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in New York (1993-1995). Dr. Baibourtian holds two PhDs, in International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University (2010) and Modern World History from Yerevan State University (1990).

4:10 p.m. - 4:40 p.m.

Discussion among the conference participants

4:40 p.m. - 5:10 p.m.

Q&A with the audience

5:10 p.m.

Closing Remarks