

# Armenia's Everlasting Protest and Its Resonance in Post-Soviet States

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## E-Notes

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Armed group leader Pavlik Manukyan (centre) and his men after seizing the police station in Yerevan (Source: Gardmanahay/WikiCommons).

The past July marked yet another summer of unrest in Armenia. However, unlike the protests of 2015 dubbed “Electric Yerevan,” the events of 2016 have been more controversial. The Electric Yerevan protests drew people to streets against rampant corruption among the authorities, the government’s ubiquitous lack of transparency, and the worsening economic situation in the country affecting all Armenians. Most importantly, the Electric Yerevan was peaceful and oftentimes even cheerful.<sup>[1]</sup> The same cannot be said about the events of July 2016. While the police might have yet again used excessive force, the opposition group initially chose violence over peaceful civic activism long adopted by the Armenian opposition. Yet, while the tactics are undeniably different, the underlying drivers are essentially the same: deep-rooted public dissatisfaction with the political and socio-economic situation in Armenia.

While Russia’s President Vladimir Putin seems to overstate Armenia’s economic growth and falsely credit it to the Eurasian Economic Union,<sup>[2]</sup> roughly one-third of the population lives at or below poverty line. It comes as no surprise that the Armenian people have protested whenever they felt that their government neglected their

economic and social interests or continued to ignore transparency in decision-making. In 2013 they protested against the decision to snub the association with the European Union in favor of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union; in 2014 they protested against a questionable pension reform; in 2015 they protested against another electricity price hike designed to cover up corruption and mismanagement in the utility company. The continuously dwindling levels of legitimacy and newly emerging evidence<sup>[3]</sup> of systemic corruption do not boost the authorities' image either.

These were among the factors that reportedly pushed an armed group of 31 men to attack a police station on July 17 in a Yerevan district of Erebuni. The attack resulted in a two-week-long hostage situation. In the exchange of fire during the attack Colonel Arthur Vanoyan was killed on the spot, while policemen and attackers were wounded. One of the policemen, Gagik Mkrtychyan, died of his wounds on August 13 and another officer, Yuri Tepanosian, was shot on July 30 (the group's leader, however, denies shooting him). Police snipers wounded two of the gunmen, father and son Pavel and Aram Manukyan. Midway through negotiations the gunmen were offered the possibility of clemency for taking hostages and seizing a government building. The Manukyans were transported to a hospital and the group eventually surrendered on July 31. According to the Manukyans' lawyer, they have not been properly treated at one of Yerevan's hospitals. During a press conference on August 9, lawyers of other gunmen claimed that witness testimonies by the attending doctors who were also briefly held hostage had been coerced. The hostage situation is over, yet it remains to be seen how the prosecution of the gunmen proceeds.

Most of the group are veterans of the Nagorno-Karabakh war of the early 1990s and belong to a group *Sasna Tsrer*<sup>[4]</sup> with ties to another marginal opposition group, the Founding Parliament. Both groups have repeatedly called for the resignation of President Serzh Sargsyan and criticized other opposition groups and parties for playing along with the regime and participating in expectedly falsified elections. Indeed, regime change, President Sargsyan's resignation, and the release of the Founding Parliament member Zhirayr Sefilyan are the main demands of *Sasna Tsrer*.<sup>[5]</sup> In June 2016 Sefilyan was arrested for illegal procurement and transportation of weapons.<sup>[6]</sup> While denying allegations of planning a violent protest in Yerevan, the Founding Parliament admitted seeking to use the genocide commemorations in an effort to overthrow the government.<sup>[7]</sup> Given the status of the attackers and Sefilyan as veterans of the Nagorno Karabakh war, some have also conjectured that possible concessions to Azerbaijan as the result of the conflict's escalation in April 2016<sup>[8]</sup> might have prompted the July attack on the police station.

The Armenian political scene responded to the attack with mixed reactions. An opposition party, Heritage, put the blame for hostage-taking situation on the authorities and President Sargsyan. In response to the arrest of its leading members on charges of mass disturbances, Heritage will skip the upcoming local elections.<sup>[9]</sup> Earlier, in an open letter, Heritage also attempted to change the narrative insisting that *Sasna Tsrer* is an anti-terrorist group, while the government continues to hold its population hostage.<sup>[10]</sup> Alleging that the authorities constantly resort to lawlessness and force, it called for early elections. Parliamentary elections are planned for April 2017, which come a year before the incumbent president completes his last term and the country makes the switch to a parliamentary system. The opposition and many analysts believe that the objective of the upcoming switch to a parliamentary system has been to preserve President Sargsyan's power: he is expected to become the prime minister.

The reaction from the second largest political party, Prosperous Armenia, was less than supportive of the protesters. The party's leader, Naira Zohrabyan, called such actions as hostage-taking and rebellions, unacceptable in resolving political issues, especially given the tense situation with Azerbaijan. She went on to state that only a group that has at least several thousand supporters may have the right to speak on behalf of the people; the Founding Parliament's rallies attract nowhere near that number.<sup>[11]</sup>

Yet, the authorities seemed to be caught off guard. For at least several days after the attack neither President Sargsyan, the cabinet ministers nor the ruling Republican Party addressed the issue. Broadcast state media reported only briefly on the hostage situation, while social media was briefly blocked on the night of the attacks. While the hostage standoff continued, the police detained those with possible links to the Founding Parliament and patrolled major cities to prevent any gatherings; as a result at least 100 people were detained shortly after July 17 attack.<sup>[12]</sup>

This specific protest broke with the tradition of recent civic activism in Armenia by resorting to violence. It sparked mixed reactions and debates from the public and on social media. While the public is highly distrustful of the Sargsyan regime, a lethal attack did not gain support as readily as the jovial and inspiring spirit of the Electric Yerevan. Yet, it tapped into strong public disenchantment with President Sargsyan, his government, and the frequent use of unnecessary force by the police. There was hardly any public outpouring of support for the gunmen after the attack. Yet, after police detentions, rallies formed on Yerevan's main square and gradually moved to Erebuni district, the location of the ongoing hostage situation. On July 29, claiming that protestors threw stones, riot police clashed with them, leaving scores of injured. The protestors denied accusations, claiming instead that the stones were thrown by provocateurs.[13] These clashes prompted thousands to take to streets the next day in a protest against police brutality.

Video footage showed that the police used tear gas and stun grenades and assaulted several reporters, who had to be hospitalized.[14] Later reports show that the police used 74 different types of grenades. [15] After the clashes with the police more than 60 people, most of them protesters, were hospitalized due to serious injuries. According to media reports, senior police officers claimed that the crowd congregated too close to the compound surrounded by security forces. Yet, eyewitnesses claimed that the police launched stun grenades and attacked the protesters without warning, while plainclothes operatives provoked the protesters. Later in August, Armenia's police chief sacked the Yerevan police chief for his handling of the protests, subjected 12 officers to disciplinary action, and suspended another five.

These events also received international attention. Both the European Union (EU) and the United States called for release of hostages and cautioned the Armenian police against "excessive use of force" and "violations against the freedom of the press".[16] Russian reactions to the events were largely similar with one noticeable exception. While President Putin strongly condemned hostage-taking tactics and attempts to overthrow the government, he stayed silent on the issue of police brutality. This should not be surprising, however, given the Kremlin's omnipresent fear of the so-called color revolutions. This fear runs so deep that in February 2016, the lower house of the Russian parliament, the Duma, adopted a law, which in a nutshell equated a one-person demonstration to a group or mass protest.[17]

## The Resonance

This particular phase of protests may be over, but it is unlikely to be the last one, unless the political and socio-economic situations in Armenia change. Yet, the reasons behind the events in Armenia transcend its borders and may apply to other post-Soviet states, where traditionally fraudulent elections have mobilized populations in protest.[18] The examples of the original color revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine in the mid-2000s are major cases in point. Armenia had its share of mass electoral protests in 2008 and 2012: according to official reports, ten people died in March 2008 after riot police moved to disperse a peaceful sit-in protest. In addition, as the reports by election observation missions of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe show there has been no shortage of fraud in post-Soviet elections in the past two decades. Yet, besides electoral fraud, the publics in post-Soviet states now face increasingly worsening economic problems that continue to spread. And, as research shows, economic and social determinants, including income inequality, further enhance the chances of anti-regime protests.[19] There is no shortage of that in the post-Soviet countries either.

Economy-driven protests are happening in other post-Soviet states. Russians' incomes are continuously falling: by early 2015 another 3 million people had been pushed below the official poverty line, increasing the total number to 23 million.[20] Earlier this year Moscow and St. Petersburg witnessed localized protests of mortgage owners. Since December 2015, Azerbaijan's currency lost about third of its value against the US dollar. In tightly controlled Azerbaijan, current economic problems led to a rare popular protest in January. In April 2015 Turkmenistan's gas industry workers protested over unpaid wages and lay-offs. In December 2015, Uzbekistan witnessed rare protests against deteriorating economic situation and constant shortage of gas and electricity. In January 2016, mortgage holders protested in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

As if following the Kremlin's example, many of the post-Soviet incumbents blame outside forces in plotting domestic unrest. Unsurprisingly, post-Soviet governments understand this and aim to prevent possible protests by creating alternative narratives or by limiting the opportunities for protest. Russia passed the so-called "foreign

agent” and “undesirable NGO” laws, which effectively banned several democracy supporting organizations. At the same time, it tries to enhance patriotism by creating the narrative of a threatened Russia, surrounded by enemies. Some also argue that the recent creation of the Pretorian Guard aims at minimizing the threat of protests. The Armenian and Azerbaijani governments also use the enemy-rhetoric, which capitalizes on the danger of the protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as an existential threat to either nation. Central Asian governments attempt to cement their power by eliminating potential opponents and moving family members into high-level positions: in September 2015 the Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev appointed his eldest daughter as deputy prime minister and in December 2015 his nephew as deputy chief of the Committee for National Security, while the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon appointed his daughter as head of his administration in January 2016.

Yet, there are hardly any indications that the publics of these countries may any time soon reconcile with their governments, unless meaningful democratic and socio-economic changes are introduced. However, while the violent tactics of Sasna Tsrer are condemnable, perhaps now more than ever there are reasons for post-Soviet autocrats to worry over anti-regime protests. They should especially worry when their populations are disheartened to the extent that they will support anti-government actions that are borderline terroristic in nature. And the reasons for that disheartenment come from entrenched domestic problems.

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[1] For more details on ElectricYerevan protest see Nelli Babayan, “Game of Narratives: Russian Media and Armenia’s #ElectricYerevan,” *Transatlantic Academy*, 2015, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/node/826>; Karena Avedissian, “The Power of Electric Yerevan,” *OpenDemocracy*, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/karena-avedissian/electrified-yerevan>.

[2] Hovannes Movsisian, “Putin Overstates Economic Growth In Armenia,” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27915014.html>.

[3] Sara Khojoyan, “Money For Army: Anti-Corruption Sentiments Grow in Armenia amid Karabakh Escalation,” *ArmeniaNow*, 2016, <https://www.armenianow.com/en/society/2016/04/15/armenia-panama-papers-offshore-scandal-mihran-poghosyan-karabakh/1067/>.

[4] “Sasna Tsrer” group (Daredevils of Sassoun) hails its title from an eponymous Armenian epic poem depicting feats of bravery and strength.

[5] Panorama, “Zhirayr Sefilyan Arrested,” *Panorama*, 2016, <http://www.panorama.am/en/news/2016/06/20/Zhirayr-Sefilyan-arrested/1599131>.

[6] Panorama, “Zhirayr Sefilyan Arrested,” *Panorama*, 2016, <http://www.panorama.am/en/news/2016/06/20/Zhirayr-Sefilyan-arrested/1599131>.

[7] Karlen Aslanian, “Jailed Oppositionist May Be Implicated In Attack On Yerevan Police,” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27915285.html>.

[8] For more details on the fighting in Nagorno Karabakh in April 2016 see Nelli Babayan, “Here’s What the Research Reveals about the Violence in Nagorno Karabakh — and How ‘freezing’ Conflicts Can Backfire,” *Washington Post*, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/07/here-what-the-research-reveals-about-the-violence-in-nagorno-karabakh/>; Gerard Toal and John O’Loughlin, “Here Are the 5 Things You Need to Know about the Deadly Fighting in Nagorno Karabakh,” *Washington Post*, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/06/will-war-erupt-in-nagorny-karabakh-here-are-the-5-things-you-need-to-know/>.

[9] RFE/RL, “Opposition Party To Skip Local Elections Over Arrests Of Members,” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27925812.html>.

[10] Heritage Party, “The Statement by Heritage Party on the Situation in the Country [Zharangutyun

Kusaksutyun Haitararutyuny Erkrum Steghtsvats Iravichaki Kapaktsutyamb],” *Aravot*, 2016, <http://www.aravot.am/2016/07/28/721087/>.

[11] Panorama, “Rebellions and Hostage Taking Will Not Resolve Political Issues [Apstambutyunnerov, Mardkants Patand Vercnelov Voreve Qaxaqagan Harts Chi Lutsvelu],” *Panorama*, 2016, <http://www.panorama.am/am/news/2016/07/17/%D5%86%D5%A1%D5%AB%D6%80%D5%A1-%D4%B6%D5%B8%D5%B0%D6%80%D5%A1%D5%A2%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%B6/1613870>.

[12] Nane Sahakian, “Armenian Ombudsman Deplores Protesters’ Arrests,” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27868000.html>.

[13] Karlen Aslanian et al., “Police Again Clash With Protesters In Yerevan(Updated),” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27888975.html>.

[14] Human Rights Watch, “Armenia: Excessive Police Force at Protest,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/01/armenia-excessive-police-force-protest>; Radio Liberty, *Clashes in Sari Tagh: Explosions, Injured [Bakhum Sari Taghum. Tchaitukner, Viravorner]*, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ism6t\\_Q0D18&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ism6t_Q0D18&feature=youtu.be); Richard Mills, *U.S. “Deeply Troubled” By Armenian Standoff*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27890168.html>.

[15] Naira Bulghadarian, “Armenian Police Reveal Types Of ‘Special Means’ Used Against Protesters,” *RFE/RL*, 2016, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27923327.html>.

[16] Maja Kocijancic, “European Union – EEAS (European External Action Service) | Statement by the Spokesperson on the Latest Developments in Armenia,” *European Union External Action*, 2016, [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160730\\_01\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160730_01_en.htm); U. S. Embassy, “Statement from U.S. Embassy,” <http://usembassy.state.gov/news073016.html>, July 30, 2016, <http://armenia.usembassy.gov/news073016.html>.

[17] Slon, “Deputies Equated Campaign Cube to Pickets [Deputaty Priravniali Agitatsionnye Kuby K Picketam],” *Slon*, 2016, <https://slon.ru/posts/64505>.

[18] “Ballots Not Bullets: Electoral Systems, Ethnic Minorities and Democratization,” in *Architecture of Democracy*, by Allan Greenberg, First Edition (Rizzoli, 2006).

[19] Harald Hagemann and Vadim Kufenko, “Economic, Structural and Socio-Psychological Determinants of Protests in Russia during 2011–2012,” *Economics of Transition* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 3–30, doi:10.1111/ecot.12084.

[20] Ivana Kottasova, “Russia’s Slump Pushes 3 Million into Poverty,” *CNNMoney*, July 22, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/07/22/news/economy/russia-crisis-poverty-three-million/index.html>; Neil Macfarquhar, “Russians’ Anxiety Swells as Oil Prices Collapse,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/23/world/europe/russians-anxiety-swells-as-oil-prices-collapse.html>.