
WHY THE 25-YEAR INDEPENDENCE ANNIVERSARY WILL RING HOLLOW WITH MANY ARMENIANS

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In less than a month Armenia will mark the 25th anniversary of its independence.

It should be a time for joy.

But like many Armenians I will be thinking about what might have been, about the opportunities lost.

As our country approaches the September 21 anniversary date, it remains one of the poorest in the former Soviet Union.

Corruption is rampant, and theres a huge gap between the rich and poor.

Its no consolation that corruption and a wealth gap are the norm in every other country in the region.

Armenians dont think much about whats going on elsewhere. Their focus is their own survival.

It makes me sad that many Armenians – particularly older ones – long for the days of the Soviet Union.

Although most Soviet citizens had few material possessions, everyone who wasnt a dissident was guaranteed a job, a roof over his head, enough to eat, electricity, water, gas, an education and medical care.

Now the guarantees are gone.

The governments pension reform program of 2013 didnt help our strapped pensioners. It simply made working peoples paychecks smaller by forcing them to make mandatory pension-system contributions.

The change led to street demonstrations, as did the governments approval of transit-fee increases in 2013 and electricity-price increases in 2015.

During the Soviet era, all of Armenias brightest students could gain entry to a top university.

Now, money talks. Mediocre students can enter an elite university by paying bribes. And they can

get through it without even having to attend class — also with bribes.

Money also talks in health care. If you need an operation or extensive treatment, you'd better have bribe money. Otherwise, you may not last long.

One of the major reasons why Armenia has been unable to do better since independence is that it is independent in name only.

In reality, it is still a Russian colony.

Russia provides Armenia with most of its gas. It also owns the pipeline system that delivers the gas across the country.

In addition, a Russian company owns Armenia's largest electric utility. It was that company that informed the government in the summer of 2015 that it planned to raise its rates 17 percent — news that sparked nationwide protests.

Armenia had a great chance to reduce its economic dependence on Russia when, in the fall of 2013, it was ready to sign an association agreement with the European Union.

That agreement would have set it on a path toward full EU membership.

Armenians who knew anything about the world were eager to see their country join the EU because Europe is more prosperous than the former Soviet Union — and why not go with the best?

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been trying to recreate the Soviet Union, would have none of that.

He summoned Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to the Kremlin for talks.

No one except Putin, Sargsyan and a few insiders from both governments know exactly what was said.

But it was obvious that Putin gave Sargsyan an ultimatum.

Shortly after the discussion ended, Sargsyan announced that Armenia would be joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community instead of the EU. The announcement was greeted with street demonstrations in Armenia — to no avail.

Not only is Russia maintaining its stranglehold on Armenia's economy, but it also stations troops in Armenia to insure that its vassal does not get out of line.

Putin hates the color revolutions that ushered in regime change in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. The last thing he wants is a liberal or even pro-Western political movement in Armenia, a country that Russia has subjugated for 300 years.

Ostensibly Russia's army and air force bases are in Armenia to protect the country from external threats.

But Armenians know full well that if anything that resembled a color revolution began bubbling on their soil, and Armenian troops were unable to contain it, Russian troops would.

Given Russia's continuing economic and military subjugation of Armenia, I will take no joy in

marking Armenias 25th year of independence on September 21.

Because our country is not yet independent.

My overriding emotion on that day is likely to be sadness rather than joy □ sadness for what might have been if the country had looked westward instead of remaining under Russias thumb.

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Image: A winter view of Armenias capital of Yerevan. Author: Serouj Ourishian (Wikipedia)

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