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**POST-MAIDAN UKRAINE - A VIEW FROM ARMENIA**

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The last few years in Ukraine seen through the prism of the Armenian political discourse.

Armenias perplexing decision to side with Russia on the Crimean and broader Ukrainian issue has subjected the country to public and political backlash in Ukraine and beyond. Notably, pro-Russian narratives have been a salient feature of Armenian political discourse during the upheaval in Ukraine. This reached a point when the Armenian leadership hailed the annexation of Crimea as a model exercise of the right to self-determination. Yet, the 2018 Velvet Revolution engendered a glimmer of hope that along with other changes, the new Armenian government may revise its unequivocal support for Russias controversial foreign policy choices.

The turmoil in Ukraine has reinforced the Armenian political leaderships fears about the possible resumption of Cold War type relations with ensuing consequences for small and war-torn Armenia. Former president Sargsyan even invoked the dire situation in Ukraine as a justification for Armenias decision to join the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). By confirming its allegiance to Russia, Armenia avoids angering the Kremlin and prompting it to take punitive measures against its possible disobedience. A closer look at Armenian discourse shows a tendency to treat Ukraines outright defiance for Russias strategic interests as the core rationale behind the devastating crisis. It is unsurprising that the Armenian leadership has condemned the European Unions recklessness and interference in the sphere of Russias privileged interests. Sargsyan even attributed setbacks of the EU-backed Eastern Partnership to its anti-Russian nature. By joining the EAEU, Armenia has made it clear that it does not support the EUs destabilising policy and wants to refrain from adding fuel to the fire.

Another major fear is that the escalating Russia-US confrontation over Ukraine will adversely affect the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement. Both Russia and the US are the permanent Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group on the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. As their relations steadily deteriorate, there is not much to ensure their full-scale involvement in moving the needle on the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Rather, by putting all their weight behind the Ukrainian issue, both Washington and Moscow may not do much to challenge the status quo in Karabakh. Overall, there are concerns that all the negativity accumulated throughout the crisis in Ukraine between Russia and the United States will inevitably get projected onto their relations regarding Karabakh, thus making matters more complex.

Furthermore, a huge source of fears is the crippling effect of western sanctions against Russia on the Armenian economy. As a result of heavy economic dependence on Russia – its economic downturn significantly aggravates Armenias economic crisis. Notably, Russia is the main external trade partner of Armenia. It is the destination for around 20 per cent of Armenian exports and the source of 70 per cent of remittances. Russia also leads foreign investments in Armenia. There are more than 1,400 enterprises with Russian capital, which is over one-fourth of all economic entities with involvement of foreign capital. Moreover, Russia is home to more than 2.5 million Armenian migrants, whose remittances account for around 10 per cent of Armenias GDP. Meanwhile, the depreciation of the Russian rouble means that the remittances sent from Russia have decreased in value. The roubles devaluation has led to price increases in Armenian exports to Russia, thus affecting trade volumes.

According to various estimates, the sanctions against the Russian banking sector, which has profound involvement in the Armenian economy, have adversely affected the Armenian economy and even contributed to electricity price hikes in 2015.

Furthermore, the sanctions against Russia have resonated with Armenia due to its heavy dependence on Russian military equipment. Washingtons intention to pressure foreign governments into relinquishing Russian defense acquisitions will put conflict-stricken Armenia between a rock and a hard place: while the country seeks to keep good ties with the United States, it would be too crippled to cope without Russian weaponry.

Beyond that, the Armenian political discourse has long revolved around the narrative of the Crimea precedent, that the self determination of Crimea will positively affect the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Strikingly, former president Sargsyan went so far as to frame the referendum in Crimea as an exercise of peoples right to self-determination via free expression of will. Clearly, Sargsyans treatment of the Crimean referendum as a model of self-determination was bound to upset Armenian-Ukrainian relations. The situation came to a head in March 2014, when Armenia voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine that declared Crimeas recent secession vote invalid. Thus, Armenia endorsed the legitimacy of an illegal and rigged referendum.

Ukraine was quick to recall its ambassador to Armenia for consultation and summoned the Armenian ambassador to Ukraine over Yerevans shocking position on the annexation of Crimea.

Given former opposition leader Pashinyans critical stances on Russian coercive policies, it would be easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes, including Armenias own stance on the situation in Ukraine. Yet from the outset of his term as prime minister, Pashinyan has

confirmed Armenias unequivocal and unwavering support for Russian policies. At his very first meeting with Pashinyan, Putin stressed the necessity of continuing cooperation in the international arena, focusing particularly on the UN where the two nations have always supported each other. It is not a surprise that post-revolution Armenia voted against another UN resolution on the de-occupation of Crimea in December 2018. The resolution expressed grave concerns over the Russian military buildup in Crimea and called on Russia to end its temporary occupation of the Ukrainian region.

Overall, consistent with his predecessor, Pashinyan continues to support even the most controversial Russian foreign policy actions, ranging from Ukraine to Syria.

There has been an ingrained belief among Armenian leadership that Armenia only benefits from Russias greater involvement in its near abroad. All this comes down to Armenias inferiority complex of a weak and small state, bound by neighboring Turkish-Azerbaijani hostilities. It is in this context that Russia is broadly perceived as a pivotal security ally in Armenian political thinking and in the public conscious. Overall, there is a broad consensus among the representatives of the Armenian political elite that the acute threats posed to Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey warrant heavy reliance on Russia. Thus, despite some resentment that Russian policy may generate, Armenia has to abstain from provoking Russia. Otherwise, the latter will hit where it hurts by arming Azerbaijan, increasing gas prices, or even mistreating the Armenian community in Russia. Armenias solidarity with Russia on the issue of Ukraine comes as an unsurprising consequence of the enormously asymmetric nature of Russian-Armenian relations.

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