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Varieties of Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes: The Cases of Belarus and Armenia

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Conventional wisdom suggests that faced with an imminent revolutionary threat, Russia consistently strives to fulfill its 'preventive counter-revolution' agenda in its neighborhood and beyond. While the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia seemed to defy the Russian ‘counter-revolution’ policy, its disappointing outcomes prompt us to conclude that there was barely a real revolution. Nevertheless, successful, mass-based opposition to a ruling elite tends to serve as an example to discontented elements in other countries. The question as to whether Alexander Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime in Belarus is resilient enough to shield itself from the diffusion effects of the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia,

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provokes an inquiry into the essential similarities and differences between the two regimes.

The two countries share much in common in terms of their close alliance with Russia, vividly manifested in their membership in the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO. As a result, of all the Eastern Partnership countries, Armenia and Belarus are by far the most vulnerable to Russian influence. Moreover, in both countries the post-soviet transition has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices, ranging from centralization and personalization of power to extensive crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms.

Against this backdrop, the comparative analysis of the two regimes reveals essential differences between the patterns of post-Soviet authoritarianism.

In terms of *elections*, it is necessary to note, that while the 2018 post-Velvet Revolution parliamentary elections in Armenia were largely seen as free and fair, this was an exception rather than the rule.

By contrast, expert reports have found “massive and systemic” human rights violations in Belarus before and in the aftermath of the August 9, 2020 presidential election. The OSCE report presents a long list of human rights violations related to presidential elections in Belarus: *“Intimidation and persecution of political activists, candidates, journalists, media actors, lawyers, labor activists and human rights defenders, as well as the detention of prospective candidates; election fraud; restriction on access to information, including internet shutdowns; excessive use of force against peaceful protesters; arbitrary and unlawful arrests or detentions; beatings; sexual and gender violence; abductions and enforced disappearances;*

torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and widespread impunity for all of the above” (OSCE, 2020, p. 3).

As a matter of fact, both Armenian and Belarusian societies’ have long suffered from lack of free and fair elections. Although elections are regularly held and for the most part are free of massive fraud, the incumbent authorities invariably use the administrative resources, thus creating an unlevel playing field between government and opposition. The electoral history of both countries suggests that elections in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes are pre-determined ‘contests’ under the ruling elites’ full control, rather than major struggles between opposition and the regime.

Not surprisingly, the political development in both countries has been characterized by centralization of power and ***lack of robust political opposition***. Since the ascension of President Alexander Lukashenko in 1994, the opposition has been repressed after most parliamentary and presidential elections without any substantial co-optation. As a result, the opposition has been weak and fragmented, with the ruling authorities exerting monopolistic control over civic activities. Moreover, it has not been uncommon for opposition activists to get harassed, threatened and arrested (Kolarzik and Terzyan, 2020).

Meanwhile, Armenia finds itself in a situation, where due to its overwhelming majority in the Parliament, the Prime Minister’s “My Step” alliance can put forward and pass any law with no compromise. Besides that, while positioning itself as “people’s government” the ruling party seems to downgrade the importance of political opposition. Overall, the narrative of

“people’s government” has been frequently used to legitimize government’s policies and shield itself from unwanted opposition, by framing every ‘sabotage’ against the government a step against the Armenian people (Terzyan, 2020, p. 149).

In effect, the nation-building has not been institutionalized and is subject to individual decisions and performance rather than to institutional strength. Institutionalization aims at translating individuals’ visions into policies sustained by appropriate structures, rules, and procedures. This comes down to transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms and contingent solutions into relationships that are normatively accepted and regularly practiced. Clearly, it is in this context that the advancement of a vibrant civil society and competitive party politics with well-institutionalized political parties and civil society organizations acquire critical relevance.

Meanwhile, the opportunities to express political grievances freely through free elections, democratic parliament and *open media* have been limited since the collapse of the USSR. Controlling the mass media and civil society has been crucial for Europe’s ‘last dictator’ Alexander Lukashenko’s rule, with him exercising unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019). While the government controls media narrative on narrative on politically sensitive issues and suppresses critical reporting, most independent journalists operate under the assumption that they are under surveillance by the Committee for State Security. In December 2018, amendments to the media law took effect, requiring that all online media outlets keep records of and

disclose to the authorities the names of people who submit comments (HRW, 2019).

While the Armenian media enjoys way more freedom, the government's low tolerance for criticism remains of concern. Even though Pashinyan's government does not tend to directly orchestrate news coverage, it has not been uncommon for Prime Minister Pashinyan to "attack" journalists for critical reporting thus creating a climate of intimidation (Mejlumyan, 2019). Moreover, as indicated in Freedom House reports, it has been common for journalists to practice self-censorship to avoid harassment by government or business figures (Freedom House: Armenia, 2019).

As for the state of *civil society* in the two countries, it is noteworthy that civil society organizations have been characterized by their organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making. The freedom of association is extremely limited in Belarus, where the registration of groups is remains entirely arbitrary, while the foreign funding to NGOs is treated as interference in domestic affairs (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

Only a few human rights groups continue to operate, putting their supporters and activists at the risk harassment by the government. Alarmingly, in 2018, the Criminal Code of Belarus introduced the prospect of large fines for unregistered or liquidated organizations, aimed at curbing their activism (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the anti-government protests following the 2020 presidential elections show that the Belarusian opposition and civil society have the potential to challenge the status quo meticulously preserved by Lukashenko.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to treat the successful actions by protesters or even civil society representatives per se as a shift in a robust or “emerging” civil society. The question remains as to if protests are organized by well-established and institutionalized organizations, or do groups emerge spontaneously out of the protests themselves?

Despite their organizational weakness and limited actorness, the Armenian civil society organizations enjoy considerable freedom and face less harassment by the government. While civil society played a critical role in the “Velvet Revolution,” the absence of an umbrella organization or clearly reform-oriented movement in Armenia, seems to leave the fate of the societal coalition that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power uncertain. Not surprisingly, the societal coalition started to break into pieces as Armenia endured tremendous setbacks in the war against Azerbaijan in November 2020. Overall, the demonstrations leading the revolution showed the “Velvet Revolution was a one-time fairy tale, rather than a feature of a vibrant civil society. Despite the growing number of civil society organizations (there are more than 4,000 registered civil society organizations, mainly non-governmental organizations (NGO), absolute majority of them are inactive with little to no potential to represent certain interest groups (Gevorgyan, 2017). NGOs are especially weak in terms of their social base, funding and heavily depend on foreign donors. Thus, further development of civil society organizations’ institutional capacities and networks is essential for boosting their actorness and becoming agents of democracy.

Admittedly, rampant corruption prevalent in Belarus and Armenia has long condemned the two countries to a vicious circle of underdevelopment, poor governance, and inability to implement reforms. Belarus is the 66 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International (Trading Economics, 2020). Corruption is present at all government levels in Belarus; customs, public procurement, and construction are particularly vulnerable sectors (Belarus Corruption Report, 2020).

The EU has been supporting anti-corruption efforts in Belarus through Good governance and fight against corruption in Belarus (PGG-Belarus). The latter is part of the overall CoE/EU Partnership for Good Governance (PGG) Programme “Fight against corruption and fostering good governance/ Fight against money-laundering” assistance facility to the Eastern Partnership countries. It is one of the National Components primarily focused on strengthening efforts aimed at preventing and fighting corruption (COE, 2020). Despite the EU’s efforts, Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule seems detrimental to defeating corruption. Meanwhile rampant corruption and weak rule of law would considerably undermine the overall progress Belarus has made with other reforms.

Notably, rampant corruption has been one of the biggest hindrances to Armenia’s democratic development and one the root causes of the “Velvet Revolution.” Unsurprisingly, the new government targeted the fight against corruption as a top priority. Namely, the anti-corruption efforts prompted Pashinyan’s government to criminalise illicit enrichment (Calliher, 2019).

Pashinyan has attached particular importance to judicial corruption. Following the controversial release of President Robert Kocharyan, Pashinyan contended that the judiciary is a remnant of the former corrupt system that would cook up conspiracies against the Armenian people (Asbarez, 2019). As a result, he called for a mandatory “vetting” of all judges in all the courts in the country because of their ties to the previous regime (Asbarez, 2019). Such statements are testaments to the difficulty of eliminating the deep-rooted authoritarian legacy, especially when it comes to a fight against judiciary corruption. In effect, Pashinyan largely failed to defeat systemic corruption and prosecute the corrupt officials, who are even planning to make a comeback amid huge public disillusionment with war defeat in Nagorno Karabakh.

One of the intriguing questions whether and to what extent the *minority rights* are protected. Essentially, Russia’s close allies have largely met the requirements of its ‘conservative alliance’ by largely discriminating against sexual minority groups. This has much to do with the Kremlin’s emphasis on the necessity of defending traditional values as opposed to those of liberal democracy. Against this backdrop, the West has been portrayed as a purely LGBT-promoting community that endangers national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond (MAXCAP Policy Briefs, 2015). Meanwhile, to prevent all these from happening, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West’s “crackdown” on conservative values and even world’s last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality, and feminism (Orlova, 2018).

Even a quick glance at the international human right watchdogs’ reports show severe violations of LGBT rights both in Armenia and Belarus.

While there is huge societal discrimination against minority groups in these countries, the government agencies have not done much to alleviate the situation (Freedom House: Armenia, 2019; Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

Moreover, other minorities, including the ethnic ones in Belarus (particularly ethnic Roma) and religious ones in Armenia are poorly protected and they face wide and varied forms of discrimination (Viasna, 2017).

Last, but not least, it has been common for both Armenian and Belarusian regimes to be treated as pro-Russian.

While previously styling himself as a staunch proponent of Armenia's full-fledged Europeanization, shortly after coming to power the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan confirmed the country's further commitment to the Eurasian integration. He ruled out the possibility of foreign policy U-turns while stressing the necessity of further rapprochement with Armenia's 'strategic ally' Russia (Terzyan, 2019, pp. 103-104).

Essentially, the persistence of troubled relations with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey further feeds the narrative that the security alliance with Russia is pivotal to building Armenia's resilience against hostile neighbors.

This sentiment has been further reinforced by the recent surge of war between the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces that broke out on September 27 and ended on November 9 due to the Russia-brokered ceasefire and deployment of Russian peacekeepers across the conflict zone.

In effect, along with tightening Russia's grip on Armenia, the Russia-brokered ceasefire has further heightened Russia's treatment as a 'savior' across Armenia. This narrative is not novel. Rather, it has been deeply ingrained in Armenian political thinking and public consciousness. Shortly after the collapse of the first Armenian Republic and its Sovietization in 1921, one of the prominent leaders of its Government, Hovhannes Kajaznuni noted: "From the first day of our statehood we well acknowledged that such a small, poor, deprived, and isolated country as Armenia cannot become truly independent and autonomous ... We should be grateful to bolsheviks. By deposing us, they - if not saved—have put on a reliable path" (Mirzoyan, 2010, p. 23-24). A century later, the perception of Russia in Armenian political thinking as 'helpless' Armenia's 'protector' in the face of Azerbaijani- Turkish hostilities, has largely remained intact (Terzyan, 2017, p. 193). Remarkably, one of the opposition leaders – the chairman of "One Armenia" party Arthur Ghazinyan went so far as to contend that in the light of the immense devastation unleashed on Armenia because of the war, it would be a reasonable decision and a prudent choice for Armenia become a part of Russia in the form of creating a united/common state with the Russian Federation (Ghazinyan, 2020). The Armenian authorities, media and intellectuals consistently feed the narrative that by deploying its peacekeepers across the conflict zone, Russia saved Armenians. It follows that all Armenians should be grateful to Russia and worship the Armenian-Russian alliance.

As for Belarus, while Alexander Lukashenko has exploited competition between the EU and Russia to extract subsidies and sustain his regime, there has been no considerable stride in having Belarus join the European family of democracies. Rather, Russia's relationship with Belarus

is closer than that of any other former USSR country. This reflects the country's structural dependence on Russia in the economic, energy, geopolitical, as well as socio-cultural spheres.

Under the Lukashenko's regime, Belarus has become linked with Russia through a multitude of bilateral treaties and agreements covering virtually all areas of inter-state action. As a result, Russia's relationship with Belarus is closer than that of any other former USSR country. Ambrosio (2006), notes that the situation in Belarus is such that the external factors that have proved to promote democratization have been weakened or undermined by its relationship with Russia in general, and by the proposed Russia-Belarus union in particular (Ambrosio, 2006).

Russian leaders, including Putin, have consistently legitimized Lukashenko's rule both diplomatically and politically, not least through defending Belarus's unfair and unfree elections. In the economic realm, Russia-Belarus trade and Russian subsidies shield Belarus from any possible trade sanctions from Western Europe, thus sustaining the regime's unreformed economic system (Ambrosio, 2006). Notably, the Belarusian opposition has not raised the issue of redefining relations with Russia, while stressing the necessity of further strengthening the bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, it is highly unlikely to build democracy when faced with Russian authoritarian influence.

While the EU is largely viewed as peace and democracy promoter, Russia is seen as its ideological rival, that strives to produce autocracies in post-Soviet countries with the view to absorbing them into its ranks. As

noted earlier, the Russian policy towards its ‘near neighborhood’ has been broadly associated with ‘authoritarian resistance’, ‘authoritarian diffusion’ and ‘democracy prevention’ (Von Soest, 2015; Finkel and Brudny, 2012).

Some observers go even further, by contending that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014, p. 83). Indeed, the total fiasco of post-Velvet Revolution government both in terms of domestic and foreign policies, among others, further reveals the excruciating difficulties of a democratic state-building in the orbit of the Russian influence. Whether or not a possible domestic change in Belarus will be more successful is yet to be seen. At this point there is little ground for optimism amid the two post-Soviet states’ unshakeable allegiance to the Kremlin, along with the difficulties of diminishing economic and political dependence on Russia.

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