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**A Necessary Turn to Russia: Armenian-Russian Relations**

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*This paper details the development of Armenian-Russian relations after Armenia restored its independence, analyzing policies and attitudes of both Armenia and Russia towards one another over that period. Additionally, Armenia's aspirations with the EU in regards to trade are mentioned and are used to compare Armenian foreign policy intentions with the real outcomes. Russian intervention in Armenia seems prominent, and seems to be coercing Armenia into a certain direction, both politically and economically. Over the years, Armenia has indicated its desire to move away from Russia in their foreign policy decisions, but they have not been wholly successful in doing so because of historic and contemporary Russian dominance in the region. The essay also briefly discusses Azerbaijan and Georgia's relations with Russia in order to better contextualize Russia's influence in the Caucasus region. This is notable because, although Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are in very close proximity geographically, there are a number of factors other than geography that have influenced the evolution of Russian prominence in the region. For example, while Azerbaijan has been able to latch on to other big powers, Armenia continues its cooperation both with the West and Russia traditionally keeping it closer to Russia.*

**Keywords**

Armenia, Russia, European Union, Foreign Policy, Eurasian Economic Union, Eurasian Customs Union, Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

**Introduction**

From its independence in 1991, Armenia has kept a somewhat balanced approach to foreign policy that is often referred to by scholars such as Minasyan as complementarist- a form of multi-vector

policymaking.<sup>1</sup> The same scholar suggests that a complementarist foreign policy outlook involves proactive observance of what major players in the world economy want; for example, Armenia often engages in a balancing act that pleases Russia while appealing to the U.S.'s need for allies in the Caucasus. Armenia has also been known to reach out to Europe, despite the fact that the Caucasus country is now more closely integrated into Russian-dominated economic systems as of 2015. However, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia signed in 2017 allowed Armenia to avoid isolating themselves from beneficial trade and travel agreements, while still deliberately not alienating Russia. The Velvet Revolution of 2018 adds another element of complexity to the situation, as this event allowed Armenians to peacefully remove a political leader expecting that the new one will effectively protect national interests domestically or internationally, especially in terms of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, although Armenians primarily seek to have a complex and balanced foreign policy, according to Cornell in 2011 they reached to the point, where they have no choice but to prioritise and focus on their relations with Russia above all other major economic and political players.<sup>3</sup> Many suggest this is the case because Armenia depends on Russian energy, trade, and security, but there is also the dimension of Armenia's policy's focusing centrally on domestic concerns and interests.<sup>4</sup> This concept of asymmetrical Russian influence in Armenia will be discussed in depth in the

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<sup>1</sup>**Minasyan S.**, Multi-Vectorism in the Foreign Policy of Post-Soviet Eurasian States, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 2012, **20**, 3, 268-273.

<sup>2</sup>**Davtyan V., Markarov A.**, Post-Velvet Revolution Armenia's Foreign Policy Challenges, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 2018, **26**, 4, 1-16.

<sup>3</sup>**Cornell S.E.**, The Caucasus in Limbo, *Current History*, 2011, 110, 738, 283-289.

<sup>4</sup>**Delcour L., Wolczuk, K.**, The EU's Unexpected "Ideal Neighbour"? The Perplexing Case of Armenia's Europeanization, *Journal of European Integration*, 2015, **37**, 4, 491-507.

following sections of the paper in context of Armenian policymaking; the paper will additionally draw comparisons with other Caucasus states, such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, so as to differentiate between the more regional aspects of Russian relations in the Caucasus and the Russian interactions with Armenia specifically.

Another pertinent topic that will be integrated into this discussion on Russian-Armenian relations will be the tense relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia over NK. Being that this is a conflict that is constantly and logically at the forefront of Armenian policymaking and that there is a Russian element to this conflict, NK will be considered throughout this paper as yet another element of complexity in the grand scheme of Russian-Armenian relations.

### **Maintaining Russian Support in a Complementarist System**

As previously stated, Armenia is a country that favors complementarism in foreign policy. To provide a bit of background, complementarism is achieved when a state does not take a significant foreign policy stance in the direction of one country or the next; in the case of Armenia, this means that the Armenian government does not particularly lean pro-West or pro-Russia, but attempts to attain a certain amount of influence with many powerful international actors.<sup>5</sup>

According to Minasyan, the fact that the Armenian Diaspora has such a far-reaching impact contributes greatly to this foreign policy approach and distinguishes Armenia from countries like Azerbaijan, which do not have quite as many of their own native people living around the world. However, as time progresses, Armenia finds itself in a unique position where it may be required to choose between Russia and the West.

In 2007, the World Bank noted that Armenia was slowly rolling towards more EU-Centric economic policies and that Armenia was increasingly seeking to be involved in Europe's successful international trade ventures. As Armenia drifted in the direction of the

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<sup>5</sup>Minasyan S., *Op. Cit.*, p. 268-273.

EU, they were able to shift some of their economic bonds with Russia towards the West, from Russia representing “56 percent of Armenia’s exports and [supplying] 49 percent of Armenia’s imports of goods, these shares fell to 25 percent and 27 percent, respectively, in 1999, and 19 percent and 23 percent, respectively, in 2003”.<sup>6</sup> Decreasing Russian involvement in Armenia’s economy in the 1990s and early 2000s shows that Armenia, although complementarist for the most part, wished to lean to the West as the years went by. Perhaps this is the case because Armenia saw potential economic growth in becoming more and more integrated with the EU.

At the same time, Russia has long possessed much leverage over Armenia, which prevents the Caucasus state from becoming more involved economically with the EU. The said leverage exists not only because Armenia owes Russia sizeable debts that cause Armenia to lean more on companies such as Itera and Gazprom for the nation’s gas,<sup>7</sup> but also because a majority of Armenian infrastructure belongs to Russian investors and Armenian trade routes going through Georgia are always under a watchful Russian eye.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, because Armenia has massive debts to Russia, the Russian government has power over most of Armenia’s own energy sector, which gives Putin’s Russia “additional political leverage over its chief ally in the South Caucasus”.<sup>9</sup>

Azerbaijan, Armenia’s next-door neighbor, does not have such issues with Russia because Azerbaijan is largely able to purchase its own freedom due to its wealth in natural resources. That said, there is a common sentiment held among S. Caucasus countries (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) that Russia has far too much dominance in the S. Caucasus region in general. Thus, Armenia wants to be free of the invasive Russian control in the region, but the Caucasus country’s

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<sup>6</sup>Mitra S., et al, *Caucasian Tiger: Sustaining Economic Growth in Armenia*, 2007, 351.

<sup>7</sup>Mitra S., et al, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup>O’Sullivan J., *Caucasus Diary*, *National Review*, 2008, 60, 17, 28-32.

<sup>9</sup>Danielyan E., *Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia With Debt Agreements*, *Eurasianet*, 2003, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-tightens-grip-on-armenia-with-debt-agreements> (4/4/17).

hands are tied due to already-established Russian dominance in the area. And that dominance exists in more forms than energy supplied to Armenia; one area in which this dominance exists is in security.

As is well-known, Armenia is a part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which means realistically that they lean on Russia for much of their military needs. Although Russia is not officially involved in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian President Vladimir Putin frequently reminds Armenia who they depend on for security. Vladimir Socor wrote of this, stating that, when Armenia had already expressed a desire to sign European Union Trade and Association Agreements in 2013, a meeting between Armenian officials and President Vladimir Putin took place. This meeting seems to have served a strategic purpose on Putin's behalf, reminding Armenia of the importance of their defense partnership. Shortly after the meeting with Putin, Armenia altered its policy trajectory to focus more heavily on strengthening friendly ties with Russia by joining the Eurasian Economic Union and the Eurasian Customs Union.

V. Socor adds that, even though the shift in economic policy to Russia would cause Armenia to incur financial damage, without Russian military presence, Armenia would encounter a military-based loss that would simply be too impactful to undo. In fact, if Armenia were to fall out of favor with Russia, they could face serious risks of Azerbaijani attacks on the country and NK. Conversely, Azerbaijan does not have to worry about obeying Russian policy positions because they do not have to depend on Russia for military or economic support as Armenia does. Georgia is likewise not dependent on Russian security and, because it is not one of the six countries in the CSTO, they do not have military or other obligations to Russia in the realm of security. Therefore, this limitation is somewhat unique to Armenia within the Caucasus region.

Furthermore, even though Russia prevented Armenia from signing the agreements with the EU and instead convinced Armenia in

2013 to join Russian-led economic groups,<sup>10</sup> Armenia has continued to make changes in their economic policies in order to better comply with the EU's standards outlined in their Association and Trade Agreements.<sup>11</sup> In 2017, as mentioned in the introduction, Armenia signed CEPA which, according to the European External Action Services, has greatly strengthened, "political, sectorial and trade areas of mutual interest"<sup>12</sup> between Armenia and the EU. That said, it is imperative to note the specificity of the language in stating that the two entities, the EU and Armenia, have come closer in terms of their *mutual* interests; this means that Armenia can have the relationship it needs with the EU without abandoning their interests in other areas of the world. Delcour and Wolczuk wrote about the relationship between the EU and Armenia in further depth, stating that the reasons why Armenia wishes to increase some ties with Europe but not others lies in the fact that Armenia views Europe, not Russia, as modernizing force.<sup>13</sup> What this means is that, when it comes to infrastructure and technology, Armenia knows that it needs to look elsewhere from Russia for what will realistically be sustainable for the process of modernizing their society; in this matter, Armenia sees more potential for partnership with the EU.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>**Ademmer E., Delcour L.**, With a Little Help from Russia? The European Union and Visa Liberalization with Post-Soviet States, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2016, 57, 1, 89-112; **Socor V.**, Armenia Trades European Union Association for Russian Protection, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-trades-european-union-association-for-russian-protection/>, (15/4/2017); **Socor V.**, Russia's Custom's Union Project Finds Acceptance in Armenia, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-customs-union-project-finds-acceptance-in-armenia/>, (15/4/2017).

<sup>11</sup>Armenia to Continue to Adapt 'Key' EU Directives, Despite Joining Customs Union. *BBC*

*Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit*, 2013, Retrieved from *LexisNexis*, (23/4/2017).

<sup>12</sup>European External Action Services, Fact Sheet on EU-Armenia Relations, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/education/4080/fact-sheet-eu-armenia-relations\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/education/4080/fact-sheet-eu-armenia-relations_en) (18/01/2019).

<sup>13</sup>**Delcour L., Wolczuk, K.**, Op. Cit., 502.

<sup>14</sup>**Delcour L., Wolczuk, K.**, Op. Cit., 493.

At the same time, because of the shared security network with Russia, Armenia finds itself in a situation in which it can truly only use “linkages with the EU [to] complement rather than replace the dependency on Russia.”<sup>15</sup> Though the article this quotation comes from was written in 2015, this still holds true for Armenia today. Additionally, after the Velvet Revolution took place in Armenia in 2018, the new Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, voiced that it was a political goal of his administration to bolster ties with Russia.<sup>16</sup> As this is the case, and because the European relationship with Armenia expands upon the necessities inherent in Armenia’s continued closeness to Russia, it cannot be assumed that the political elites may not wish to increase ties with the EU overall. That is, Armenia does not typically trade one big power for another. This is something that Pashinyan has in common with preceding political elites in Armenia in that there is not much motivation to accede to the European Union, especially if Armenia’s national economic needs are met through other means, i.e. the CEPA.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it would seem that joining the European Union is not conducive to maintaining the complementarist strategy that Armenia has played and will continue to play as time proceeds.

Another area of influence Russia has over Armenia is that the South Caucasus state’s economy depends on remittances from Armenians in Russia for a large part of its GDP.<sup>18</sup> Such a dependence on Russian money for economic support means that, rather than developing Armenia’s domestic economy, Armenians living in Russia who are sending remittances back to Armenia are unintentionally

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<sup>15</sup>Delcour L., Wolczuk, K., Op. Cit., 502.

<sup>16</sup>Pinchuk D., Osborn A., New Armenian PM tells Putin he wants closer ties with Russia, Reuters, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-armenia-putin-pashinyan/new-armenian-pm-tells-putin-he-wants-closer-ties-with-russia-idUSKCN1IF1A3>, (19/01/2019).

<sup>17</sup>Delcour L., Wolczuk, K., Op. Cit., 493.

<sup>18</sup>Ademmer E., Delcour L., Op. Cit., p 89-112; Tariver E., FCO Recognizes Armenian Diaspora’s Influence on Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, *Trend News Agency*, 2014, retrieved from *LexisNexis*, (23/4/2017); Mitra et al, Op. Cit., p. 147-192.

stifling development in Armenia's domestic political and economic spheres. This contributes to the Caucasus country's lack of sufficient progress with eliminating poverty within its boundaries.<sup>19</sup> This means that as remittances from Russia constitute a significant part of GDP, if Armenia does not take serious steps to reduce it in the near future, in case of a favorable occasion it can become an important lever of impact on public opinion in Armenia in matters of relations with Russia.

Unfortunately, current trends indicate that, no matter how successful Armenia is in working with important actors with divergent viewpoints in the international political arena, and no matter how much Armenia wishes to be complementarist in their foreign policy, there is a natural current developing that will force the comparatively smaller country to face a little more towards Russia in their future endeavors. Thus, it can be said that, although Armenia has a lot of allies all over the world, they must remain under the Russian umbrella of control because Russia has naturally been poised to have Armenia closely tied to itself. This has been, in part, the result of Russia's providing work for Armenians, which successfully keeps Armenia compliant with Russian objectives.

Azerbaijan, as mentioned earlier, does not have the same issue with remittances from Russia composing the major part of their economy because of Azerbaijan's status as an oil-rich rentier state.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, opposite of Armenia, Azerbaijan does not have to comply with Russia to keep economic development going. Additionally, because the Azerbaijani government is rich from oil resources, they also do not always have to answer to their own citizens.<sup>21</sup> Comparing Azerbaijan with Armenia, it is evident that Armenia must work with Russia in order to survive, meaning that Armenia is less free than Azerbaijan from Russian dominance. However, Armenia is able to be more democratic domestically, which signifies that, even though

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<sup>19</sup> **Tariver E.**, Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> **Ross M.L.**, Does Oil Hinder Democracy?, *World Politics*, 2001, 53, 329-332.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



Russia has its hand more firmly placed in Armenia, Armenians enjoy more democratic freedom than Azerbaijanis because Armenia is not a rentier state.

### **Public Opinion, History, and Russian Relations**

Perhaps, from the information presented above, it would seem that Russia is simply a bully that pushes Armenians around. However, matters are more complex than that; reports on public opinion in Armenia, though limited, suggest that Armenians generally approve of Russia being so involved in Armenian government and economics. Indeed, in an article entitled, “Russia’s Custom’s Union Project Finds Acceptance in Armenia” Socor argues that many Armenians were in favor of unifying trade with Russia because doing so would solidify Armenia’s connections to NK, while protecting the rest of Armenia from their enemies next door.<sup>22</sup> Also, in about 2013, there was not a notable amount of public resistance against the shift in Armenia’s policy from West-leaning to Russian-leaning; Socor states in his article that primarily intellectuals disagreed with the government’s decision, and protests that occurred were not large enough to change the government’s opinion.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after this, however, the Armenian government decided that they “needed to give Europe some proof of its complementarity,” which was achieved by “transitioning to parliamentary rule.”<sup>24</sup> Later came the CEPA, which added another angle to the methods of shifting from East to West of Armenia as a country.

Recent history could explain why Armenians have not minded drawing closer to Russia in the past few years. One scholar, Richard Giragosian, wrote that Armenia, though complementarist from its

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<sup>22</sup>Socor V., Op. cit.: Russia’s Custom’s Union Project Finds Acceptance in Armenia.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Iskandaryan, A., The Velvet Revolution in Armenia: How to Lose Power in Two Weeks, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 2018, **26**, 4, 462-475.

moment of independence, has had to depend more on Russia since 1991 because becoming an independent state came as such a surprise. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Armenia was a bit more complementarist than they are now, looking to Russia as needed, but recently, Russia has sought to develop control over the smaller nation. For instance, Armenia has apparently, “done little to reverse its traditional subservience to Russia” which has “raised concerns”.<sup>25</sup> This explains a lot about why Armenia makes attempts to be more Western, while still sticking with Russia on various foreign policy fronts; it also sheds light on the fact that a complementarist system is not necessarily sustainable when one tries to work with competing, big world powers.

At the same time, Armenia implemented policies in the 1990s aimed at making Armenian the only official language of the country, though Moscow periodically tried to give similar status to the Russian language using soft methods. From an outside perspective, it appears that Armenia chose to do such a thing, along with making Armenian their only national language, for reasons similar to Estonia’s in making the national language the dominant one.<sup>26</sup> When Estonia started switching the language of government and education to Estonian rather than Russian, the intent was to put ethnic Russians at a disadvantage and revive the culture of their region.<sup>27</sup> Yet, according to scholar, Levon Abrahamian, Armenia’s reasons for favoring the Armenian language were not exactly the same as those in Estonia for favoring Estonian. Instead, in Armenia some problems were caused by the fact that the Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan were Russian-speaking who had negative collective memories about the use of Russian language attached to an era of USSR control.<sup>28</sup> So, Armenia’s revival of national language was not a direct attack against

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<sup>25</sup>**Giragosian R.**, Armenia’s Search for Independence, *Current History*, 2014, 113, 285.

<sup>26</sup>**Abrahamian L.**, *Armenian Identity in a Changing World*, 2006, 73+77.

<sup>27</sup>**Laitin D.**, The Four Nationality Games and Soviet Politics, *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, 1992, 2, 126.

<sup>28</sup>**Abrahamian L.**, Op. cit.

Russia and Russians, but was rather a conscious decision made to restore solidarity of nationhood among Armenians through a distinctively Armenian mother tongue.

In contrast to Armenia, Azerbaijani people have more pronounced negative feelings towards Russia, being that they view Russians as conquerors who mainly seek control of Azerbaijan.<sup>29</sup> Also in contrast to Armenia, according to a news piece written by Rusif Huseynov, Azerbaijan's motives for ousting the Russian language were certainly founded in a national pride movement that was meant to send a message to Russia that Azerbaijan was separated from Russian control once and for all. The differences between Armenia and Azerbaijan are interesting to note here because, from this information, it can be inferred that Armenia is closer to Russia than Azerbaijan is today due to presence of an historical base in Armenia for acceptance of Russian control and culture. Indeed, Armenia has historically found a way to allow Russian dominance, while maintaining satisfaction in their desired degree of pride in a distinctly Armenian nation.

### **Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia's Tilt Towards Russia**

Although the NK conflict has been mentioned a number of times throughout the essay, it is worth further elaboration in the context of Russian-Armenian relations. This is so because there are those who believe that Russia takes a strong lead in the conflict, which is actually not the case.<sup>30</sup> It is true that Russia contributes greatly to the strength of Armenia's security, but Putin has openly said that he does not want Russia to play a major role in the conflict.<sup>31</sup> In the same breath, Russia does intervene on a smaller scale when it proves convenient, but not on such a grand level as many may think.

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<sup>29</sup> **Huseynov R.**, Russian Language in Azerbaijan: An Outdated Relic?, *New Eastern Europe*, 2016, [http://neweasterneurope.eu/old\\_site/articles-and-commentary/1937-the-russian-language-in-azerbaijan-an-outdated-relic](http://neweasterneurope.eu/old_site/articles-and-commentary/1937-the-russian-language-in-azerbaijan-an-outdated-relic), (30/4/2017).

<sup>30</sup> **De Waal T.**, The Karabakh Conflict as "Project Minimum," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75584>, (19/01/2019).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Although, because “The defining feature of post-Soviet Armenia has been the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”<sup>32</sup> Armenia does appear to make a lot of decisions for their domestic and foreign policy future based upon what may or may not happen in NK. This does make sense, being that many Armenians have been killed in Baku and Sumgait and in the conflict zone from the late 80s onward,<sup>33</sup> and Armenia constantly has to be on its guard, always “seeking other allies, even if in economic – rather than security – terms.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, along with the aforementioned push factors that compel Armenia to focus its foreign policy primarily on Russia, there is the fact that one of Armenia’s main priorities is to protect the vulnerable populations in NK. As a result of focusing their efforts on protecting the zone of ethnic violence, they must seek economic and infrastructural fortification offered by the EU, while avoiding the alienation of Russia at all cost.

## **Conclusion**

Is Russia Pushing for a more Pro-Russian Armenia? The short answer to the question above is: Russia does not have to force Armenia to lean in a pro-Russian direction in an Armenian system of complementarity because the solution of a number of issues on Armenia's foreign security as well as Nagorno-Karabakh's military security is largely related to its cooperation with Russia. There are also historical roots connecting Armenia back to Russia, and such connections simplify Russian efforts to extend its influence to the smaller South Caucasus state. Comparison to Azerbaijan and Georgia indicates that Armenia-Russian relations are not to be generalised with the rest of the Caucasus, but should be viewed as unique to Armenia

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<sup>32</sup> **Delcour L., Wolczuk K.**, Op. Cit., 502.

<sup>33</sup> **Cox C., Eibner J.**, Ethnic Cleansing in Progress: War in NagornoKarabakh, Institute for Religious Minorities in the Islamic World, 1993, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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as a country. In fact, if Armenia were to be grouped in with other Caucasus countries in studies of Russian relations, there would be serious risk of overlooking the fact that Armenia is often not offered alternatives to military-political cooperation with Russia for solving vital security issues.