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Material Forces vs. the Force of Ideas: What makes Russia Armenia's 'best friend'?

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The question of how states establish friendly relations provokes an inquiry into the interplay between social and material forces behind their behaviors. While constructivist driven received wisdom emphasizes the importance of social forces, realists would assign critical weight to material forces vs. the force of ideas. The case of Armenia is remarkable due to considerable gaps between its normative pursuits and strategic choices. While the European Union (EU) has been broadly framed as Armenia's civilizational choice and normative friend, it has tended to take a back seat to the strategic friend Russia. This study scrutinizes how the normative and strategic friends have been conceptualized in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia with a focus on the political and economic rationale behind Russia's treatment as indispensable friend. It concludes that the new Armenian government is largely bound to stick with the old discourse, shaped by a set of circumstances ranging from Armenia's troubled neighborhood to immense economic dependence on Russia. That said, in contrast to domestic political fluctuations, the landscape of foreign policy making is subject to a series of dire constraints that leave little to no room for revolutionary shifts and policy changes.

Keywords

Armenia – Russia relations, EU, Strategic and Normative friendships, Asymmetrical friendship.

Introduction

Claims of 'friendship' and 'special relationships' are found regularly in the political discourse, and 'the friend' is a commonly used term in the International Relations (IR) literature.

Building on insights borrowed from Aristotle and Schmitt, some authors argue that international friendship can take either strategic or normative forms. Essentially, strategic friendship – called so when recognized by a set of actors, who refer to each other as

‘friends’, is based on rational self-interest¹. It is an entirely instrumental, functional, and oftentimes asymmetrical form of friendship. Whereas, normative friendship is most likely to develop among actors who share high level of ideational and emotional bonds that permit mutual identification and trust. While strategic friends would always expect the other side to cheat or defect from contracts or agreements, and prepare for such a possibility by installing safeguards or backdoor-options, genuine, normative friendship, on the contrary, does not require structural safeguards².

Constructivist line of thought would argue that states’ behavior is motivated not only by material but social forces and therefore is a result of identity and interactions³. It follows that ideational factors, such as identity and beliefs are the core drivers of friendships in international relations. As a matter of fact, even though the core features of true friendship is its emotional altruistic dimensions, without any material-utilitarian and strategic interest involved, a bilateral partnership is unlikely to become affectively charged⁴.

The Armenian case is significant for several reasons. It is the only European country subjected to double blockade by its neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey with all ensuing consequences of unfriendly relations. Evidence suggests that the long-standing Nagorno Karabakh conflict has significantly affected Armenia’s perceptions of friends and allies. While Azerbaijan and Turkey have been unequivocally identified as foes, the necessity of standing up to the latters’ hostilities and guaranteeing Armenia’s security has led to Russia’s treatment as ‘friend in need’ and indispensable security ally. A closer scrutiny of Armenia’s foreign policy discourse reveals the discrepancies between the conceptions of normative and strategic friendships. While the European Union (EU) has been broadly

¹ Koschut S. and Oelsner A., (eds.), *Friendship and International Relations*, Springer, 2014, pp. 12-21.

² Ibid.

³ Wendt A., *Social Theory of International Politic*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 95-96.

⁴ Schuette L., *Friendship and International Relations*, 2015, <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/29/friendship-and-international-relations/>

regarded as Armenia's civilizational choice and normative friend, the it has tended to take a back seat to the strategic friend Russia. In other words, the material forces seem to outweigh the force of ideas. Evidently, Armenian-Russian relations are characterized by enormous asymmetry, fraught with Armenia's overwhelming political and economic dependence on Russia. One could argue that Armenia has little choice and no voice in strictly asymmetric relations with Russia. This study scrutinizes how the normative and strategic friends have been conceptualized in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia with a focus on the political and economic rationale behind Russia's treatment as indispensable friend.

This study relies on observations from political speeches, newspaper articles, official documents and interviews which provide a body of discourse. It places a special focus on the core political speeches of former Armenian Presidents, pertaining to their conceptions of post-soviet Armenia's friends and allies.

T. Van Leeuwen offers several techniques that social actors can use in their speech such as: exclusion, inclusion, suppression, thematization, activation, passivation, personalization, depersonalization, determination and indetermination, association and dissociation, differentiation and indifferentiation, beneficitation, backgrounding, abstraction, generalization, subjectification⁵. Van Leeuwen's theory on the representation of social actors via language establishes the "sociosemantic inventory" of the ways in which social actors are represented. Inclusion and exclusion are the fundamental categories, from which other subcategories derive⁶. The use of these techniques in political leaders' speeches is quite indicative of their treatment of 'friends' within the core inclusion – exclusion dichotomy.

The discourse analysis of Armenian policy makers' speeches regarding Russia suggests that they have tended to make extensive use

⁵ **Van Leeuwen T.**, *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 23-53.

of the technique of inclusion, by emphasizing the political and economic indispensability of Armenian-Russian partnership; activation by resorting to deeply-rooted treatment of Russia as ‘savior’ as well as generalization by regarding ‘Russia first’ foreign policy narrative as undisputed.

The Conception of the ‘Normative Friend’ in the Foreign Policy Discourse of Armenia

Friendship is not rare in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia. The term ‘friendly state’ is quite widespread. Yet a thorough discourse analysis of Armenia’s foreign policy leads to identify five key partners qualifying for “friends”. On the regional level, Georgia and Iran are regarded as indispensable partners and brotherly nations. Meanwhile, on the global level, a pronounced emphasis is placed on reinforcing partnership particularly with the EU and USA. Russia stands out as vital security partner and strategic political and economic ally.

In essence, neighboring states which have regular relations, high level of interaction and interdependence are often described as old friends. It follows that the term of a ‘friendly state’ can be reduced and attributed to any state that does not have a particular conflict with a second state⁷.

Yet, this line of thinking falls short of accounting for various forms of friendly relations and in particular the essential differences between strategic and normative “friendships.”

A closer scrutiny of Armenia’s foreign policy discourse reveals the propensity to treat the European Union as a “normative” friend with the European integration framed as Armenia’s civilizational choice: “The people of Armenia have made their historic and irreversible choice. Our road to becoming closer to Europe has been unique in a natural way...”⁸. It follows that Armenia’s heritage,

⁷ Schuette L, *Op. cit.*

⁸ Serzh Sargsyan. Statement by the President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2011,

values, culture and identity make the Armenian nation an indivisible part of Europe, constituting the cornerstone of Armenia's policy of European integration⁹. The EU itself has been framed as normative and liberal actor, which has ample 'soft' tools to contribute to peace and democracy promotion in the turbulent South Caucasus region¹⁰.

Most Armenian political parties, the government and parliament shared Sargsyan's position on Armenia's European foreign policy identity and the necessity to adhere to the path of European integration. In Armenia's foreign policy discourse, the EU's uniqueness has been inextricably linked to its commitment to extending its values to its neighbourhood, with the view of transforming it into an area of security, prosperity and stability.

The notion of peace promoter is inherently linked to that of normative actor. There has been a tendency in Armenian discourse to attach critical importance to the EU's mounting engagement with its turbulent neighbour, the South Caucasus region. As a powerful actor, the EU's groundbreaking mission would have a crucial role in breaking the deadlock in the Armenian-Azerbaijani troubled relations and particularly in the Nagorno – Karabakh conflict settlement¹¹. This would occur gradually, acquiring salience due to the successful implementation of the EU's ENP and EaP initiatives.

In President's words, the EU could significantly contribute to conflict resolution by promoting democracy and laying ground for democratic interstate dialogue; advancing trust-building measures through people-to-people contact and joint undertakings aimed at expanding the areas of common interests, and most importantly,

<http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2011/06/22/news-91/>
[Accessed 4 Jul. 2015].

⁹ **Serzh Sargsyan**. Speech by President Serzh Sargsyan at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2012, <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2012/03/07/news-124/> [Accessed 21 May 2015].

¹⁰ **Terzyan A.**, 'The Evolution of the European Union's Conception in the Foreign Policy Discourse of Armenia: Implications for U-turn and the Path Beyond the Association Agreement', *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 2, 2016 pp. 167-168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.168-169.

intensifying its engagement with Azerbaijan and ensuring that the latter complies with ‘European rules’. Therefore, policies of rapprochement with Europe are not only an axis of internal reforms, but also a pivot of the foreign policy agenda’:

We attach importance to the EU’s involvement in Armenia and South Caucasus not only because the EU is a global player, but primarily because it is the best model of nations’ peaceful, secure and sustainable development. Our vision of the South Caucasus’s fully-fledged development is anchored in the values and understanding which made Europe’s success possible¹².

It follows that the EU has been conceived as a superior and normative actor, which, owing to its success story, has a historic mission to ‘civilize’ its fragile neighbours, suffering severe constraints of acute self-destructive interstate conflicts.

The Armenian political leadership tended to place great weight on the Eastern Partnership, regarding it as an ambitious and mutually obligating initiative, designed to translate the EU’s lofty neighbourhood policy goals into tangible outcomes in the South Caucasus and beyond. The Association Agreement per se was treated as a long-desired path to deep and comprehensive partnership with the EU¹³.

Meanwhile, Armenia’s abrupt U-turn - the shift from the Association Agreement with the EU to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has produced puzzle and incomprehension particularly among EU officials, desperately looking for clarifications regarding the country’s perplexing decision¹⁴.

This put in the spotlight the considerable gaps between Armenia’s normative pursuits and geopolitical constraints under which Armenia’s seemingly perplexing decision was made. The major

¹² **Serzh Sargsyan**. Speech by President Serzh Sargsyan, Op. Cit.

¹³ **Terzyan A.**, The EU vs. Russia in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia: the fragility of normative power or the power of Russian coercion?. *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2017 pp. 195-196.

¹⁴ EU Wants Clarification from Armenia, Asbarez, 2013,

<http://asbarez.com/113548/eu-wants-clarification-from-armenia/>[Accessed 10 Apr. 2017].

gaps between Armenia's normative pursuits and strategic priorities are vividly manifested in President Sargsyan's following assertion: "our choice is not civilizational. It corresponds to the economic interests of our nation. We cannot sign the Free trade agreement [DCFTA] and increase gas price and electricity fee three times?"¹⁵.

A question arises of what are the key characteristics of Armenia's strategic friend and more specifically the core factors that have led to Russia's treatment as indispensable ally.

Political and security dimensions of the friendship: the portrayal of the strategic friend

In contrast to the EU, which has been largely framed as the civilizational choice in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia, Russia has been chiefly portrayed as strategic security ally. Essentially, Armenia's geopolitical plight, fraught with the 'frozen' Nagorno Karabakh conflict and acute constraints stemming from the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade, has significantly contributed to Russia's treatment as 'friend in need' in its dog-eat-dog neighborhood.

'We are living in a region entangled in a web of consistent hatred and warmongering rhetoric, a region full of threats and hazards. Some countries even question the right of the Armenian people to live on their historical land. The probabilities of military conflicts in our region are rampant'¹⁶.

It is in this context that Russia is broadly perceived as a pivotal security ally in Armenian political thinking given Russian-Armenian security relations.

A close scrutiny of Armenia's foreign policy discourse leads to distinguishing the following core notions, around which the overall conception of Russia has revolved particularly since 2008: pivotal

¹⁵ **Terzyan A.**, *The EU vs. Russia*, Op. Cit, p. 191.

¹⁶ **Serzh Sargsyan.** Statement by the President of Armenia, Chairman of the Republican Party of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the 14th RPA Convention, 2012, <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2012/12/15/Address-by-Serzh-Sargsyan-at-the-14th-Republican-Convention/> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2017].

security partner¹⁷, strategic ally¹⁸, major great power, ‘a greater involvement of which in the region will benefit Armenia’¹⁹, etc.

Arguably, the treatment of Russia as strategic ally has been deeply ingrained in Armenian political thinking and public consciousness, rather than being a product of manipulation.

Remarkably, 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”²⁰.

Nevertheless, the conception of Russia has experienced major fluctuations in Armenian foreign policy discourse since its independence in 1991 and predated pan-Armenian movement for independence. More specifically, Russia’s deep-rooted portrayal in Armenian strategic thinking as Armenia’s irreplaceable ‘saviour’ was questioned profoundly in the wake of the Soviet Union’s gradual dissolution. Armenia’s ‘big brother’, Russia, suddenly degenerated into its foe, which would tremendously strangle independent, free and democratic development of Armenian statehood²¹. This occurred gradually, and intensified in the later stages of the Nagorno-Karabakh

¹⁷ **Serzh Sargsyan**. Statement by President Serzh Sargsyan at the Extended Meeting Held at the RA Ministry of Defense, 2013, <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2013/01/15/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-session-Ministry-of-Defense/>. [Accessed 14 May 2017].

¹⁸ MFA of Armenia, Bilateral Relations: Russia. Available at: <http://www.mfa.am/en/country-by-country/ru>. [Accessed 20 June 2017].

¹⁹ **Serzh Sargsyan**. Statement of President Serzh Sargsyan for the Mass Media on the Results of the Meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, 2016, <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2016/08/10/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-statement-in-Russia-10-08/> [Accessed 13 Apr. 2017].

²⁰ **Mirzoyan, A.**, *Armenia, the regional powers, and the West: between history and geopolitics*. Springer, 2010, pp. 23-24.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 25-28.

movement²². One of the prominent leaders of the national movement, Levon Ter-Petrosyan regarded centuries-long reliance on Russia as delusional and self-destructive. Therefore, in early 1990, attached critical importance to standing up for national interests and fiercely opposed any encroachment motivated by imperial chauvinistic policies of Russification²³.

Nevertheless, the outright anti-Russian propaganda started to decline shortly after the restoration of independent statehood. Azerbaijani and Turkish menace prompted Armenia's leadership to rethink its initial anti-Russian attitudes. Ter-Petrosyan started to advocate for strengthening Armenian-Russian ties, drawing on the two countries' backgrounds:

The break-up of the Soviet Union does not blunt the unity, which has emerged as a means of coexistence over centuries... it is no secret that for a long time, Russian culture was the only way of interacting with world civilizations for all the nations in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union²⁴.

The biggest 'impediment' to Armenia's development evolved into a 'model' friend, which has an important role in enhancing stability in the turbulent Caucasus region. The fluctuations of Russia's perplexing and ambivalent conceptions lead to the following conclusion: from the outset it has been chiefly conceived as a security partner, whose role is indispensable in Armenia's double blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Therefore, Armenia's adherence to Russia has been determined by regional level constraints and challenges, rather than identity-related drivers. Research suggests that the enemy images of Azerbaijan and Turkey have been pivotal to changing the perception of Russia in Armenian political thinking. In essence,

²² **Terzyan A.**, The Evolution of Armenia's Foreign Policy Identity: The Conception of Identity Driven Paths. Friends and Foes in Armenian Foreign Policy Discourse" in *Values and Identity As Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, ed. KornelyKakachia and Alexander Markarov, "UNIVERSAL" 2016 pp. 145-146.

²³ **Ter- Petrosyan L.**, *Yntrani: Eluytner, Hodvacner, Harcazruycner* {Selected Speeches, Articles, Interviews, Archives of the First President of the Republic of Armenia}, Erevan, 2006, p.34.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 401.

alliance with powerful Russia and loyalty to the ally has been deemed instrumental in tackling traditional security threats facing the country.

Put simply, Armenia's political elite and society have tended to attach critical importance to Russia as a 'hard power' actor, which holds the potential to enhance small and vulnerable Armenia's resilience against Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Consistent with this rhetoric, second President Robert Kocharyan tended to give great weight to Russia and its strategic partnership with Armenia, chiefly in terms of its security-related implications and military build-up during his presidency from 1998 to 2008. "Russia is the most powerful state across the post-Soviet space in economic and military terms. Russia is our pivotal partner..."²⁵. In Armenia's foreign policy discourse, security-related references are unequivocally linked to the "Russia-first" approach. All other European and Euroatlantic security actors, whether the European Union or NATO, take a back seat to Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The National Security Strategy of Armenia (2007) notes:

The importance of Russia's role for the security of Armenia, the traditional friendly links between the two nations, the level of trade and economic relations, Russia's role in the Nagorno Karabakh mediation effort, as well as the presence of a significant Armenian community in Russia, all contribute to a strategic partnership²⁶.

The concept of strategic partnership in Kocharyan's discourse was not full of identity-related or cultural references. Rather, it focused chiefly on shared economic, political and military interests.

Consistent with his predecessor, Sargsyan has never questioned the vital importance of the Armenian-Russian strategic partnership, which is viewed as fundamental to enhancing national

²⁵ **Kocharyan R.**, *Eluytner ev harcazruycner {Speeches and Statements}*, Yerevan, 2011, p. 272.

²⁶ Republic of Armenia National Security Strategy, 2007, Available at: http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf [Accessed 7 Aug. 2015].

security. Moreover, Sargsyan framed Russia as ‘the core player in our region in security issues’²⁷.

Even though no identity-related reference has been attributed to the Armenian-Russian partnership, it has been viewed as the most important and indispensable factor for the maintenance of stability and security in the South Caucasus: "The Armenian-Russian strategic partnership will remain the pivot of Armenia’s security, which through the twenty years of independence has proved its viability. Within this context, we attach the utmost importance to our membership to the Collective Security Treaty Organization"²⁸.

In essence, Armenia’s European identity and the pursuit of European integration have been outweighed by the "Russia-first" approach. The strong emphasis on the Armenia – Russia security alliance has precluded Armenian political parties from opposing the country’s membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union; rather they tended to defend the decision by asserting that the acute regional challenges facing the country prompt to boost Armenia's strategic partnership with its indispensable security partner, Russia, in all possible spheres²⁹. Unsurprisingly, Sargsyan, along with other high-ranking officials, justified Armenia’s membership in the EAEU chiefly in terms of its security concerns. Meanwhile, Armenia-Russia security partnership and the fact that Russian troops are located across the Armenian-Turkish border gives Armenia a sense of security in its volatile neighbourhood.

Remarkably, shortly before Armenia’s U-turn, Russia set out to intensify military cooperation with Armenia’s fiercest foe,

²⁷**Serzh Sargsyan:** Russia is a core player in our region. Armenpress, 2011, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/652530/serzh-sargsyan-russia-is-a-core-player-in-our-region.html> [Accessed 20 Sep. 2017].

²⁸**Serzh Sargsyan.** Statement by President Serzh Sargsyan at the extended meeting held at the RA Ministry of Defense, 2013, <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2013/01/15/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-session-Ministry-of-Defense/> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2017].

²⁹Ruling Party Says Customs Union Decision Meets Armenia’s National Interests, Armenianow, 2013, http://www.armenianow.com/news/48249/armenia_ruling_party_customs_union_russia [Accessed 7 Feb. 2016].

Azerbaijan, in the form of supplying Russian military hardware worth \$4 billion³⁰. The scenario of the Azerbaijan-Russia boosting military cooperation produced worries through Armenia and reportedly influenced its decision to join the EAEU.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the heavy fighting eruption between the Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces in April 2016, President Sargsyan expressed his discontent with Russian military hardware supply to Azerbaijan and implicitly questioned the depth of the Armenian-Russian alliance. He particularly noted that: “Russia never played for Armenia the role that Turkey plays for Azerbaijan.”³¹.

Furthermore, in his subsequent statements, Sargsyan markedly hardened his position on the security ally, asserting that there could be no peacekeeping role for Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh³².

Remarkably, in a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on April 6, 2016, Sargsyan exposed the severe pain caused by Russia, and Armenia’s vulnerability to Moscow’s coercion:

Russia is our strategic partner indeed and we are in the same security structure – Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it is naturally painful for us when Russia sells arms to Azerbaijan. But, as you understand, our abilities to influence the process are limited³³.

Obviously, Sargsyan’s ‘updated’ position towards Russia indicated the disillusionment with its coercive policy. Rather than

³⁰In Baku, Putin Brings Gunboats Along With Diplomacy, Eurasianet, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67392> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2015].

³¹Armenian President: “Russia is our ally, not patron,” Mediamax, 2016, http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/karabakh/17631/?fb_comment_id=1079724282091415_1079933415403835 [Accessed 10 Apr. 2017].

³²Bloomberg.com, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-24/caucasus-war-may-resume-at-any-moment-armenian-president-says> [Accessed 3 Apr. 2017].

³³**Serzh Sargsyan.** President Serzh Sargsyan’s remarks at the joint press conference with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, 2016, <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2016/04/06/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-meeting-with-German-Chancellor-Angela-Merkel/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2017].

aiding its friend in need, Moscow added fuel to the fire by equipping Azerbaijan with ample weaponry and ammunition to ‘wreck’ Armenia. Nevertheless, Sargsyan’s critical position did not lead to significant changes neither in Armenian foreign policy discourse nor in Armenian-Russian relations. Moreover, the former President tended to express his vast support for the most disputable and ambivalent aspects of Russian foreign policy, ranging from issues such as the Ukrainian crisis to that in Syria, etc.:

We highly value Russia’s role in the world and particularly in our region where numerous processes, which have their impact on stability and security, are going on. Armenia has been watching closely the intensive foreign policy contacts of the President of Russia... I am confident that Armenia only benefits from a greater involvement of Russia in our region³⁴.

Overall, the portrayal of Russia as Armenia’s irreplaceable security ally in the face of regional hostilities, along with the above - mentioned scenarios of a hypothetical future prompted the Armenian political leadership to treat the Russia-led path as a rational and inevitable decision. To sum up, in Armenian foreign policy discourse Russia has been broadly framed as a pivotal security partner, security ally and even the core security actor in the region. Yet it is impossible to underestimate the importance of Russia’s huge economic grip on Armenia, and its translation into political tools for influencing country’s behavior.

The asymmetry of Armenian-Russian ‘friendship’: A glance at ‘material’ forces

The question of what core factors and circumstances have contributed to Russia’s unequivocal treatment as indispensable ally in

³⁴ **Serzh Sargsyan.** Statement of President Serzh Sargsyan for the Mass Media on the Results of the Meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, 2016, <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2016/08/10/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-statement-in-Russia-10-08/> [Accessed 13 Apr. 2017].

Armenian political thinking, provokes a critical inquiry into the economic landscape of bilateral relations. Essentially, the shift in the Russian leadership's foreign policy thinking from 'liberal ideas' to geopolitical and particularly pragmatic geoeconomic realism in the early stage of Putin's presidency³⁵ significantly determined policy priorities towards the newly independent CIS states. The desire to restore Russia's 'greatness' and in particular to consolidate control in its traditional 'sphere of influence' prompted Putin to renew and promote the so-called 'CIS project'. It came down to tightening the Russian grip in its backyard, aimed at shielding it from 'unwanted intrusions' and suppressing the CIS states' pro-Western foreign policy pursuits³⁶. To this purpose, the Russian leadership emphasized the necessity of expanding Russian capital, strengthening ties with political leaders, as well as retaining and reinforcing its military presence in CIS countries. Russia embarked on the takeover and monopolization of strategic economic and energy infrastructures in the CIS countries as a powerful tool for influencing their behaviour³⁷. The renewed 'CIS project' worked out particularly well in Armenia where, unlike neighbouring Georgia, it produced significant outputs over a relatively short period of time. More precisely, Armenian and Russian Presidents came up with the so called 'assets-for-debt' swap that would gradually but immensely step up Russian influence in the Armenian economy since the fall of 2001³⁸. The recipe is simple: in exchange for a write-off of its around \$100 million debt incurred since 1991, Armenia agreed to transfer strategic state-owned assets to

³⁵ **Thorun C.**, Explaining change in Russian foreign policy: the role of ideas in post-Soviet Russia's conduct towards the West, Springer, 2008, p. 28.

³⁶ **Skak M.**, Russia's New "Monroe Doctrine," In Russian foreign policy in the 21st century, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 138-154.

³⁷ **Secrieru S.**, Russia's Foreign Policy under Putin: CIS Project. UNISCI Discussion Papers, (10), 2006, retrieved from <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76701018.pdf>

³⁸ Yerevan Moscow Debt Pact Extends Russia's Caucasus Influence, Eurasianet, 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav073002.shtml> (Accessed 19 Dec. 2018).

Russia, including six hydroelectric power plants³⁹. Moreover, in 2003, Armenia ratified an agreement that allowed Russian RAO Unified Energy Systems (UES) to take over the financial control of the Medzamor nuclear power plant, accounting for about 40 percent of Armenian electricity production⁴⁰. Overall, Russia took over around 90 percent of Armenia's power generating capacities. Besides, within the 'assets-for-debt' swap arrangements Armenia's largest cement factory was handed over to the Russian ITERA gas exporter in payment for its \$10 million debt for past gas deliveries⁴¹.

Indeed, the tightening economic grip on Armenia gave Russia political leverage to influence the country's behaviour. In October 2002, Armenia, along with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed the founding documents of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), thus confirming the strategic choice of the Russia-led trajectory. The Armenian-Russian military cooperation significantly intensified in the fall of 2003. On the eve of the Georgian 'Rose' revolution, Armenia signed a series of military agreements with Russia⁴². Over time Russia has significantly tightened its economic grip on Armenia. As a single country, Russia is the main external trade partner of Armenia, being the destination for 20 per cent of Armenian exports and source of 70 per cent of remittances⁴³. Russia also maintains lead in the realm of foreign investments in Armenia. According to official information, there are about 1,400 enterprises with Russian capital, which is over one fourth of all economic entities with involvement of foreign capital⁴⁴. Last but

³⁹ Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia With Debt Agreements, Eurasianet, 2003, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav050703.shtml> (Accessed 19 Dec. 2018).

⁴⁰ Russian Parliament Ratifies Debt Deal With Armenia, Azatutyun, 2003, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1571472.html> (Accessed 19 Dec. 2018).

⁴¹ Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia, *Op. Cit.*

⁴² Secrieru S., *Op. Cit.*

⁴³ Armenia Monthly Economic Update, World Bank Group 2015, Worldbank, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/armenia/armeniaeconomic-update.pdf> (Accessed 18 Dec. 2018).

⁴⁴ Presidents of Armenia and Russia recapped the results of negotiations, 2017, <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2017/03/15/President-Serzh->

not least, Russia is home to more than 2.5 million Armenian migrants, who are very sensitive to Armenian-Russian relations. Not surprisingly, the President of the Union of Armenians in Russia Ara Abrahamyan has warmly welcome Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, focusing specifically on its positive implications or at worst – the possibility to avoid repercussions for Armenian community in Russia⁴⁵. It is worth noting that, prior to Armenia's move towards the EAEU, Russia played its energy card by increasing gas prices for Armenia by 50 percent in April 2013, thus alarming possible economic repercussions of Armenia's European aspirations. Remarkably, gas price was reduced as Armenia decided to sign up to the EAEU. Armenia's energy minister, Armen Movsisyan stated outright that the Eurasian choice shields Armenia from gas price hikes⁴⁶. Remarkably, there has been a tendency in President Sargsyan's discourse to emphasize the hypothetical economic and political hardships that Armenia would suffer in case of deviating from strategic partnership with Russia. In legitimizing Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, Sargsyan used the strategy of a 'hypothetical future'. More specifically, given Armenia's huge economic and energy dependence on Russia, he particularly noted that the choice of the EAEU would shield Armenia from unwelcome surprises and economic repercussions⁴⁷. It follows that Russia possesses a bunch of economic and political tools for further tightening its grip on Armenia and influencing its policy preferences. Well acknowledging the-state-of-the-art, the newly-elected prime-minister Nikol Pashinyan would be wary of questioning outright

Sargsyanmet-with-representatives-of-Mass-Media-with-Vladimir-Putin/ [Accessed 20 Sep. 2017].

⁴⁵ The President of the Union of Armenians in Russia welcomes the decision to join the Customs Union, Panorama , 2013, <https://life.panorama.am/hy/news/2013/10/10/araabrahamyan-mm/15384> (Accessed 19 Dec. 2018).

⁴⁶ Gas Price Reduced as Armenia Joins Customs Union, Asbarez, 2013, <http://asbarez.com/114797/gas-price-reduced-as-armenia-joins-customs-union/> (Accessed 19 Dec. 2018).

⁴⁷ **Terzyan A.**, The anatomy of Russia's grip on Armenia: bound to persist?. *CES Working Papers* Volume 10, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 237-238.

“Russia-first” approach. Rather, Pashinyan has emphasized the necessity of forging closer economic and political ties. As stated the Armenian prime-minister in the first meeting with the Russian President: We have things to discuss, but there are also things that do not need any discussion. That is the strategic relationship of allies between Armenia and Russia ... I can assure you that in Armenia there is a consensus and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenian Russian relations⁴⁸.

Remarkably, Armenia’s political leadership’s treatment of Russia as ‘best friend’ is largely congruent with the public opinion in Armenia. According to various surveys, Russia is regarded as a ‘friend in need’ and security ally in Armenian public consciousness. Russia has been ranked as the best friend, followed by France and Georgia⁴⁹.

In sum, given the economic and political depth of Armenian-Russian asymmetric relations, the power transition in Armenia is highly unlikely to lead to any considerable changes in the old discourse about country’s strategic ally. Therefore, the old discourse, shaped by a set of circumstances ranging from Armenia’s troubled neighborhood to immense economic dependence on Russia, is bound to continue. That said, in contrast to domestic political fluctuations, the landscape of foreign policy making is subject to a series of dire constraints that leave little to no room for revolutionary shifts and policy changes.

⁴⁸ 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-tellsputin-he-wants-closer-ties-with-russia-idUSKCN11F1A3>

⁴⁹ **Galstyan N.**, How to Deal with Armenia’s Geopolitical Trilemma? Examining Public Opinion. In: P. Bajor and K. Schöll-Mazurek, ed. *Eastern Chessboard. Geopolitical Determinants and Challenges in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus*. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015, pp. 212-213.

Conclusion

The analysis of the conceptions of friends and friendships in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia suggests that social forces, rather than ideational factors, such as ideas and beliefs have been instrumental in Armenia's choice of the strategic friend and ally. While the European Union has been broadly regarded as Armenia's civilizational choice and 'normative' friend, it has tended to take a back seat to the strategic friend Russia. In other words, the material forces seem to outweigh the force of ideas. The Armenian case is suggestive of the fact that even though the core features of true friendship are its emotional altruistic dimensions, without significant material-utilitarian and strategic interests involved, a bilateral partnership is unlikely to become affectively charged. Therefore, Armenia's huge economic and political dependence on Russia, coupled with the strategic security alliance has led to Russia's treatment as 'best friend' in Armenian political thinking and public consciousness.

Essentially, the long-standing Nagorno Karabakh conflict has significantly affected Armenia's perceptions of friends and allies. While Azerbaijan and Turkey have been unequivocally identified as foes, the necessity of standing up to the latter's hostilities and guaranteeing Armenia's security has led to Russia's treatment as 'friend in need' and indispensable security ally. Moreover, given the economic and political depth of Armenian-Russian asymmetric relations, the power transition in Armenia is highly unlikely to lead to any considerable changes in the old discourse about country's strategic ally. Therefore, the old discourse, shaped by a set of circumstances ranging from Armenia's troubled neighborhood to immense economic dependence on Russia, is bound to continue. That said, in contrast to domestic political fluctuations, the landscape of foreign policy making is subject to a series of dire constraints that leave little to no room for revolutionary shifts and policy changes.