

# PARADOX OF POWER: RUSSIA, ARMENIA, AND EUROPE AFTER THE VELVET REVOLUTION

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August 2019

## SUMMARY

- Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution swept old elites out of power, but, unlike Ukraine's Maidan revolution, had no broad effect on relations between Russia and the West.
- Armenia lacks friendly neighbours in its immediate region, and it remains heavily reliant on Russia.
- Russia is a dominant presence in the country but finds itself in a 'paradox of power': it wishes to avoid turning Armenian opinion against it, especially since 2016 revelations about Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan.
- The government and public wish to loosen ties with Russia, strengthen them with Europe, and improve relations with neighbouring countries, including Iran.
- Europe should break out of its self-imposed 'ring of restraint' with Armenia by increasing its technical support, something it can do without provoking Russia.

## Introduction

In a turn of events unprecedented for Armenia, a year ago opposition parliamentarian Nikol Pashinyan led a wave of demonstrations that forced the resignation of the then prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan. The main trigger was Sargsyan's attempt to prolong his hold on power after serving as president for ten years. Over the course of 11 days of popular protest, Pashinyan applied pressure to the government by displaying personal charisma, tactical acumen, and political leadership. This stood in stark contrast to the entrenched ruling elite now tumbling before him and the crowds.

The incumbent Republican Party eventually conceded to demands for an extraordinary parliamentary election, in early December 2018. That election was a rare free and fair ballot in Armenia – one in which Pashinyan's bloc, My Step, secured an [overwhelming majority in the new parliament](#). Despite holding power for more than a decade, the Republican Party was unable to meet even the 5 percent threshold to secure representation.

This was the culmination of Armenia's Velvet Revolution. But the country now faces two main challenges, both of which have implications for its future relationship with Europe and Russia. The first challenge is in how Armenia entrenches democratic norms and institutions, thereby fulfilling the important domestic goals of the new government and meeting the ambitions that the European Union avows for countries in its neighbourhood. The second is for Yerevan to manage its relationship with Moscow so that it does not hinder these domestic ambitions: it needs to maintain or improve its precarious situation in the South Caucasus while also obtaining greater freedom of manoeuvre beyond its own region, including in relations with Europe.

Unusually, the revolution did not possess a strong geopolitical element – either in the form of active involvement in its processes by third countries or in terms of it signalling a strategic change in geopolitical direction. No Maidan was this. But, quietly, for a number of years now, Armenia has been slowly edging out from under Russia's shadow. This was true under Sargsyan too. Will it remain true now? The new government has little experience to draw on in terms of pre-existing

contacts in Moscow; and, in any case, it sees domestic concerns as its priority. During the revolution, Russia recognised its own limitations and refrained from straying beyond them. Indeed, a paradox of power now hangs over its considerations in Armenia: Russia is only able to press its small ally so far before the situation risks acquiring a geopolitical character it did not have previously.

This paper explores the context that Armenia currently finds itself in, examines how it is likely to navigate its relationship with Russia and neighbouring states, and sets out what the EU should do to assist Armenia in the coming years. Underlying both the revolution and Armenia's evolution towards a looser relationship with Russia is the significance of the non-violent change of government. This impressive 'people power' victory is not only an inherent threat to the Russian preference of more vulnerable, less legitimate, and more authoritarian partner states – it is also a critical validation of European ideals of pluralistic, truly representative democracy based on free and fair elections. Helping ensure the sustainability of Armenia's choice would, therefore, also represent a success of Western resolve and commitment.

## **A tough neighbourhood**

The Velvet Revolution arose out of discontent with the previous government and, as such, had a strong domestic focus. This concentration on internal issues over any suggestion of shifts in foreign policy or strategic orientation reassured Russia that, unlike Georgia or Ukraine, Armenia's change of government would remain guided by a degree of prudent predictability and consistency. This was later reflected in the Pashinyan government's [official five-year programme](#), adopted in February. In terms of its goals, the government has stated its intention of fighting corruption, overturning the inordinate market share and commodity-based cartels of the previous oligarchic system, and establishing a more level playing field for business. The country is also faced with troubling poverty, with one in three Armenians living below the official poverty line.

But Armenia is still plagued by institutional weakness and vulnerability. This weakness is most evident in the lack of a truly independent judiciary and the related absence of the rule of law. And the vulnerability stems from a new

parliament that has little, if any, legislative or regulatory knowledge. Indeed, the government's focus on the domestic agenda also comes from its recognition that foreign policy is not just a largely secondary priority. It is also an area in which the prime minister and much of his government have little experience. For now, the government's main interest remains in deepening democracy and opening up the closed political system.

However, the revolution has had little effect on Armenia's foreign policy challenges. Armenia's immediate geopolitical context is still a difficult one for the country and its population of 2.9 million people. Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Iran are its only direct neighbours; and it remains involved in a long-simmering war with Azerbaijan. This conflict centres on the Armenian-populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, whose security and military demands both determine and distort Armenia's political and economic trajectory. During a "four-day war" between the sides in April 2016, Azerbaijan performed well – and it emerged that the Russians had been selling arms to the country.

Azerbaijan and Turkey together blockade Armenia. While "[football diplomacy](#)" between Armenia and Turkey made global news a decade ago, progress lately has stalled. Somewhat surprisingly, in recent times Azerbaijan has made some diplomatic overtures over Nagorno-Karabakh but, for now, the border remains closed. Armenia has adapted to this situation of encirclement, not least through increased dependence on Russia – even though the countries do not share a border.

This difficult situation has also meant that, over the decades, Armenia has strengthened its links with Georgia and Iran. The latter – a far larger country – has been of particular significance to Armenia. Indeed, Iran is Armenia's only stable and friendly immediate neighbour. Trade between the two has soared recently. Armenia's membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) allows it to offer Iran an important transit platform for reaching the much larger markets of other EEU member states. There are similar dividends in the transit role the country can play for Western engagement with the Iranian market. As a bridge between Iran and elsewhere, and as an EEU bridge to Russia and other trading partners, Armenia has relatively strong relationships with these countries that provide it with some options. A broader strategy of regional and international

engagement is open to the Armenian government should it wish to pursue it.

Armenia has taken care not to challenge Russia outright in the last year and a half – and, indeed, since the two countries became independent in 1991, they have been close partners and allies. The countries have long been signatories to a bilateral treaty, but it is common for voices on either side to characterise the relationship as a “strategic partnership”. Despite this, over the decades, the Armenian government and population began to notice the extent to which the relationship had become less of a partnership and decidedly one-sided. The Sargsyan administration was not oblivious to this and, in fact, became keenly aware of the public’s discontent following the revelations about Russia’s arms sales to Azerbaijan. For its part, the Sargsyan government stood its ground when it could – as seen in its refusal to accede to Moscow’s demand for recognition of the “independence” of the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the wake of the August 2008 Russian war with Georgia. And, as president, Sargsyan was committed to securing a rare “second chance” at restoring Armenian relations with the EU after being forced to sacrifice Armenia’s Association Agreement with the bloc in 2013 under Russian pressure, signing the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in late 2017. This overdependence emerged in a “3G” form, with Armenia a recipient of: guns and other discounted weapons; gas supplied at below-market levels; and goods, as both a major trading partner and with Russia as the primary destination for Armenian migrant labour, which is the [largest source of remittances to Armenia](#).

## **Guns**

Armenia has relied on Russia as its primary friend in its own neighbourhood, and its main security provider, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A large driver of this is Armenia’s insecurity, which stems from its conflict with Azerbaijan. The reliance on Russia that has emerged is asymmetrical and lacks the parity of a true partnership. Indeed, Armenia has a unique role as the sole Russian ally in the region, as the only host of a Russian military base, and as the only South Caucasus country to belong to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation. That said, Russia’s transformation into the primary weapons supplier to Azerbaijan led to a rather surprising crisis in Armenian-Russian relations. The Armenian government responded rather emotionally in its frustration at what it saw as

Russian betrayal.

## Gas

For landlocked Armenia, the country's energy insecurity has been driven by a reliance on cheaper, subsidised gas imports from Russia. The appeal of subsidised Russian gas, which Armenia has traditionally imported at a price of roughly \$150 per thousand cubic metres, has been too attractive to refuse. Yet, as a reflection of the underlying tension between Moscow and the new government in Yerevan – and hinting at the Kremlin's preference for probing and even pressuring the Armenian leadership – there are now concerns over the possibility of higher gas prices.

For example, Russia's state-affiliated Gazprom energy monopoly imposed a sudden price rise in January 2019, increasing the wholesale price of gas from \$150 to \$165 per thousand cubic metres. The Armenian government was well prepared for this, however, and avoided passing the increase on to domestic consumers – instead persuading the Russian-owned gas distribution network in Armenia to absorb the new cost. But that success may be short-lived, as Armenian officials [expect a further rise in the price rise of Russian gas](#), perhaps timed to coincide with a planned state visit to Armenia by Vladimir Putin in October 2019.

To offset this dependence on Russian gas imports, and to address any future price hikes, Armenia has looked elsewhere for at least a limited alternative source of energy. Iran has been central to this effort. For more than a decade, Armenia has imported natural gas from Iran in a barter arrangement that has relied on the provision of Armenian surplus electricity in exchange for the gas supplies. But the level of Iranian gas imports – consistently, around 500 million cubic metres annually – has been marginal in comparison to the roughly 2 billion cubic metres of gas imported from Russia. Russian gas is also of higher quality. Still, Armenia has already initiated the construction of a third high-voltage transmission line connecting the Armenian and Iranian power grids. Once it is completed, in 2020, the line will allow Armenia to triple its electricity supplies to Iran. Gazprom will not be easily persuaded to accept any new competition over its market dominance in Armenia, however. And, given the policies of the Trump administration, Armenia may also face an [unprecedented challenge](#) in pressure from the Americans not to

strengthen its ties with Iran.

## Goods

Armenia and Russia have a closely entwined economic relationship that began in the 1990s, when Russia acquired key sectors of the Armenian economy. Alongside the close energy relationship, Russians own significant parts of Armenia's transport and telecommunications sectors. This ownership persists to this day, demonstrating the extent of Armenian dependence on Russia.

Trade and economics will dominate any Armenian thinking about a new relationship with Russia. Armenia joined the EEU after Russia successfully [pressured it to abandon its planned Association Agreement with the EU](#). And, according to Armenian government data, in January–November 2018, Russia and other EEU states accounted for **26 percent** of Armenia's foreign trade, compared with the EU's 25 percent share of the total. Yet, in the broader context of Armenia's rather weak position within the EEU market, in 2017, a meagre 0.7 percent of Armenia exports went to Belarus, while 0.1 percent went to Kazakhstan and virtually none of them went to Kyrgyzstan. Russia is far and away Armenia's primary trade partner.

Still, the longer-term economic situation in Armenia looks bleak, largely because of the limits to growth imposed by external constraints, including closed borders, a weak manufacturing base, and the readjustment of the country's direction of trade after joining the EEU. Indeed, EEU membership may soon come to carry as many burdens as advantages for Armenia: a set of initial exemptions from the higher EEU tariffs is scheduled to begin expiring, and to affect around 800 types of Armenian goods and other products, next year. This will be further exacerbated by the government's lack of a strategy to manage, or at least mitigate, the resulting economic damage. The Armenian government has yet to decide whether to fight the expiration of the exemptions and seek to renegotiate, or to formulate a plan to counter, the negative impact on exporters. Ongoing disruption of the country's mining sector has also damaged investor confidence. Moreover, remittances from Russia to Armenia are in decline – partly because Western sanctions on Russia have harmed the jobs market there, thereby reducing opportunities for Armenian migrant labour. However, for the moment, Armenia's economic relationship with

Russia remains one that is close to dependence. With Armenia having made few substantive moves to broaden its range of trading partners lately, this situation appears unlikely to change – and, therefore, unlikely to help Armenia loosen its overall relationship with Russia.

## **Russia's paradox of power**

Armenia matters to Russia. The country is a key foothold for Russia in the South Caucasus but, in recent years – including before the Velvet Revolution – Moscow's approach towards goings-on in Armenia has become largely permissive. This is not to say Russia has not sought to exert a degree of influence, if not control, over Armenia: in 2016 a career Gazprom official, Karen Karapetyan, became Armenia's prime minister, following a two-week hostage stand-off in Armenia in July that year that worried Russia. Karapetyan's purpose was to offer Moscow a degree of confidence that their man was on the scene, while keeping a lid on Armenia's desire to reduce its dependence on Russia, in light of the growing revelations about Russia's interactions with Azerbaijan.

The growing dynamism and unpredictability of the situation on the ground in Armenia, including the sight of tens of thousands of youthful demonstrators, led Russia to proceed with caution. With neither the United States nor the EU playing any demonstrable role on the ground, it avoided a direct policy of engagement on the Armenian street, [eager to avoid provoking a reaction in the West](#). Any heavy-handed Russian response would have likely harmed Russia's standing within Armenia and triggered greater instability.

The receptive and restrained Russian approach reflected an unusual degree of delicacy and sophistication. Armenia's poor air connections to, and distance from, Russia may have also contributed to this. These factors combined to diminish Russia's capacity for power projection and sustained influence in Armenia, especially given the appeal of EU engagement – as most clearly expressed through the institutional policies of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

However, the Velvet Revolution still poses a challenge to Russia. Armenia now stands out as an example of non-violent change, in contrast to Russia's preferred political model of authoritarian rule by its [favoured clients and partners throughout the post-Soviet space](#)



. From this perspective, any success in democratisation, and any achievements in transparent and accountable governance, could yet [encourage civic activists and opposition parties elsewhere](#). Moreover, Pashinyan and his young, largely Western-educated, team were free of any taint of corruption. The pronounced popular support for them suddenly exposed the lack of legitimacy of many, if not all, other leaders of post-Soviet states. Indeed, [ordinary Russians' markedly increased interest](#) in the Ukrainian presidential election this year will not have escaped the Kremlin's attention.

Despite its wait-and-see approach thus far, Russia could remain active in exerting influence in Armenia; and it may well be able to do so without turning public opinion there against it. Russia lacks soft power options to choose from in Armenia – for example, there are no significant pro-Russian political parties or figures there. But one option for Moscow will be to revert to a more indirect and less visible approach, drawing on the structural leverage it enjoys in Armenia. This would consist of a move to maximise its wide array of diverse instruments of influence. These include: the prices of discounted Russian gas and weapons exports to Armenia; the vulnerability of Armenia's sizeable seasonal and migrant labour force in Russia; and even pressure on Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's control of key sectors of the Armenian economy strengthens its structural leverage. In this way, Moscow could continue to safeguard its power and position regardless of the nature of any government in power in Yerevan. This seems to be the most likely scenario for Russian policy on Armenia. It would allow Russia to remain within the bounds of the paradox of power while still exerting influence in the country.

## **Europe's ring of restraint**

If Russia has adopted a wait-and-see approach thus far, so has Europe. But Europe could go further and, in a sense, mirror Russia by doing more than it has until now without provoking a negative reaction from Russia, which also remains keen to avoid escalation.

Europe and Armenia have engaged in various levels of formal cooperation since Armenia became independent. The most recent accomplishment in this area is the successful negotiation of CEPA under Sargsyan. Indeed, his efforts to achieve

greater strategic balance did not encounter Russian resistance. CEPA was an indication of Moscow's acceptance of Armenia strengthening its ties with Europe.

However, the revolution is one of the most important opportunities since 1991 for Europe to make a real difference to Armenia's future trajectory. Alongside the process of distancing itself from Russia that Armenia was already engaged in, the combination of the revolution and the recent transformation of the Armenian system of governance – from a presidential system to a parliamentary one – means that more than three-quarters of parliamentarians are first-time legislators. Despite their energy, enthusiasm, and sincerity, the learning curve is steep and it will take them time to overcome it. Equally, Pashinyan's sweeping electoral victory has led to something akin to the country's long-standing informal tradition of one-party rule, with little significant political opposition in the new parliament. In a promising move, the Bright Armenia political party chose to enter opposition rather than remain within the My Step bloc. But the lack of more effective institutional checks and balances poses serious concerns for deeper and more pluralistic democratisation.

Still, from a European perspective, the Velvet Revolution represents a vindication of core European values thanks to the successful application of non-violent tactics and unusually disciplined and coordinated 'people power' rallies and demonstrations. Protesters mobilising against years of entrenched corruption and a serious lack of democracy represented a refreshing display of civic activism over apathy. This affirmation of European ideals also deepened as protest leaders took care to follow the constitutional path to political change.

Actively putting resources and energy into assisting Armenia in this transition would showcase the impact that EU efforts can have. Armenia could become an exemplar within the EaP. Were the Armenia–EU relationship to strengthen, this would likely also support Armenia’s efforts to achieve greater strategic balance. Given Moscow’s ongoing circumspection in its relations with Yerevan, an EU programme of technical, democracy–strengthening support would be both viable and hugely beneficial. The EU should move quickly to provide political support and capacity building. It has been too slow to do so thus far. The EU can help sustain Armenia’s democratic transition by encouraging a vibrant and diverse political scene to flourish.

## **Armenia: Looking north and west**

How should Armenia respond to this situation? Will Moscow leverage its structural advantages to stop Armenia reducing its overdependence on Russia? Could the Armenian government still carry out its domestic reform programme in such circumstances? The answer to these questions is that Armenia has the chance to continue loosening its ties with Russia while also strengthening those with Europe. Doing so will help it both at home and abroad.

This absence of geopolitical meaning was central to enabling the Velvet Revolution to play out on Armenia’s terms, but the foreign policy–shaped hole in the domestic debate means that Armenia’s place in the regional and international order may not receive the attention it should. The new government has made the domestic agenda its priority: it has set out its stall as committed to the goals of deepening democracy, reforming the closed political system, and improving the economy. And the population is weary and wary of economic sacrifice at home and happy to not have to think too much about foreign policy.

This is a fundamental weakness of the prime minister and much of his government, which has little demonstrable expertise and even less experience in foreign policy. The first and most obvious obstacle to the government is its relative lack of prior relations with Moscow or with Russian officials. Indeed, from Moscow’s perspective, the political demise of the formerly subservient Armenian elite was a big loss of key clients. Not only had it lost its man in Karapetyan – however weak

he proved to be – Pashinyan was known to the Kremlin only for his calls for Armenia to leave the EEU as an opposition member of parliament. Establishing cordial, close – but not too close – relations with Russia will be the order of the day. Reflecting the difference in making such statements as an opposition deputy and the necessity of statecraft once in power, Pashinyan quickly backtracked and affirmed his commitment to the EEU, seeing the trade bloc as an essential element of his effort to reassure Moscow that the change of government in Armenia does not, and will not, imply any shift in geopolitics or in the country’s strategic orientation. Yet, despite these verbal assurances, the looming context of geopolitics, and Russia’s gravity, remain inescapable and undeniable considerations for Armenia – no matter the new political discourse.

Armenia can use numerous structural advantages in this endeavour. The country is the only member of the EEU that has a strategic agreement with the EU. This greatly improves its position. It is also the only stable partner of a re-emerging Iran. Armenia should, therefore, enhance its strategic significance by adopting a more innovative role as an economic bridge to, or commercial platform for, larger markets. Indeed, it can exploit the EEU’s need for greater legitimacy and credibility, stressing the importance of CEPA as an avenue for institutional engagement and cooperation. Armenia’s geographical location is often a problem for it. But, in this instance, Armenia could simultaneously leverage its stable and friendly relations with Iran, its proximity to the Middle East, and the benefits from the possible reopening of the closed border with Turkey.

Russia is likely to remain bound within its own paradox of power, and this should enable Armenia some latitude to increase its engagement with Europe. Crucially, this will also provide the government with space to consolidate its reform agenda at home. In this sense, it would be a great error for the Pashinyan administration to neglect its international standing, even if both the government and voters instinctively feel that they should focus their energy on matters at home. Europeans, meanwhile, should engage with Armenia to help it make progress at home and be able to face outward at the same time.

## Seven ways Europe can help Armenia – without angering Russia

To assist post-revolutionary Armenia in addressing these challenges, the EU should follow seven specific policy recommendations:

*Technical expertise.* The Armenian government has a pronounced lack of experience, meaning that it has an immediate need for technical expertise. The provision of this expertise should be based on the precedents of the EU Advisory Group and the EU twinning programmes in Armenia, with an added focus on the EaP as well. This is especially important to the achievement of three distinct objectives: establishing a process of public policy formulation and implementation processes; sustaining reform beyond the initial period of excitement and enthusiasm; and overcoming the limitations of an absence of institutional memory and a lack of transitional guidance during the handover of power. There is a precedent for the provision of such European technical expertise: the EU Advisory Group was successful in providing experts on temporary secondment, albeit while predominantly benefiting officials and professionals who no longer serve in the Armenian government.

*Legislative training.* As three-quarters of the new parliament are first-time legislators, they would benefit from parliamentary exchanges, study visits, and legislative training in the areas of parliamentary oversight, the role of committees, and the drafting of legislation. Several EU member states provided this training in the past, but the majority of participants were from the Republican Party and are no longer in parliament. The identification of appropriate and promising individual members and committee chairs, as well as key staff, would help improve the efficacy of such legislative training and exchanges.

*Administrative and regulatory reform.* In order to deepen and expand political reform, especially in the critical areas of legal and judicial reform, there needs to be more of an emphasis on administrative and regulatory reform, with key initial support from the EU to fully realise the government's goals. These areas have largely been neglected in recent years. This is also

important in terms of forging a more independent judiciary, raising the level and capacity of the civil service, and imposing higher standards of ethics in government. Moreover, programmes previously run by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ended with the forced closure of its office in Armenia several years ago.

***Institutional accountability.*** In the wake of Armenia's move to a parliamentary form of government, and with no significant opposition party in parliament, there is an absence of institutional accountability and checks and balances capable of introducing a degree of constructive competition. Addressing this will require a focus not only on creating a more independent judiciary but on expanding the power and authority of the presidency. The presidency could broaden its institutional role well beyond mere symbolism.

***Anti-corruption activity.*** The successor organisation to the Soviet-era KGB is the Armenian National Security Service. This service is the only body able to investigate corruption, including cases of "illegal enrichment". Aside from the obvious public perception problems of having a domestic security organ handle anti-corruption cases with little or no oversight, the weak role of the judiciary creates serious concern. To address this, the EU can train investigators in best practice in oversight and investigation processes.

***Incentivising innovation.*** France is set to donate a supercomputer to Armenia later this year. The Armenian government should seize this opportunity to introduce a new policy initiative to offer incentives for innovation, especially for the country's stagnant science and technology sector. After years of underfunding and neglect, such incentivised innovation policies, including preferential start-up taxes and access to venture capital, would help sustain the further development of the information technology sector and support accelerated entrepreneurship in this field. In this regard, only Europe can offer Armenia the necessary policy advice and patronage. Ireland's and Estonia's expertise may be particularly useful in this regard, with each being a small country with a strong record in this area.

***"More for more, Less for less".*** A final policy recommendation is to adopt a slightly modified EU policy of "more for more" to include a punitive "less for

less” approach to Armenia whereby the government is held to a higher standard. This would consist of a more conditional offer of EU financial aid and support for Armenia based on concrete objectives and demonstrable, measurable metrics and results from the reform programme in Armenia. Such incentives and rewards would be more helpful for both Armenia and the EU than the former policy of blind support.

Armenia should, in time, become freer to look both north and west – if it begins to take the steps it now can to make this happen. The present moment represents its strongest opportunity in years to establish new, strengthened links – with Russia, as well as with Europe.

Whether it will achieve this depends greatly on the performance and prudence of the government. Armenia’s new leaders need to move fast to produce results that meet the public’s high expectations. And, after ensuring a parliamentary election that was the first free and fair contest in years, this government’s noticeably more democratic credentials endow it with a greater degree of legitimacy than any previous administration. That greater legitimacy should allow it to sustain the momentum of reform and to deepen democratisation well beyond any danger of reversal.

But no Armenian government can accomplish this alone: public endorsement, civic participation, and European support are all prerequisites for success. So, the EU needs to take a new look at Armenia to understand the importance of it becoming a successful democratic state, enjoying strong institutions, and standing out as a country that embodies and projects stability in a volatile region. If Russia is currently bound by its own paradox of power, Europe needs to break out of its own, somewhat self-imposed, ring of restraint. Within its current confines, Europe maintains relations with Armenia that are cordial but do not bestow the full energy Europe could muster.

Geopolitics may have played no part in the Velvet Revolution but it would be a mistake for Armenian leaders to neglect their country’s regional and international standing. Geopolitical pressure will not go away. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and tension with Turkey continue to be deeply embedded features of Armenian politics. And, while the revolution marks a turning point in

the history of Armenia, it took place at a time when, even under Sargsyan, the country was already attempting to loosen Russia's embrace; Russia was not preventing Armenia from doing so; and Europe remained relatively distant from the evolving Armenia–Russia relationship. And, as Russia recognises the necessity for the EEU to have greater credibility and stronger credentials, Armenia has secured an important new instrument of leverage of its own. The country can, and should, seek to reorientate itself as a potential bridge between the EEU and the EU – as well as a bridge to Iran and beyond. Armenia's hand is relatively weak but it has a chance to play it well: a bold bid now would encourage its European partner, in turn, to play more forthrightly.

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