

Moscow Worries Armenian ‘Velvet Revolution’ Could Lessen Its Leverage Over Yerevan

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Protests in Yerevan (Source: KUNM)

Armenia has been in the grips of a mass public protest movement since early April, when opposition leader and member of parliament Nikol Pashinyan launched street demonstrations and strikes in cities all over the country against former president Serzh Sargsyan’s attempt to be named the next prime minister (see EDM, [April 23, 24](#)). With Sargsyan’s Republican Party holding a majority in the legislature, the constitutional reforms of 2015—which shifted the country from a presidential to a parliamentary system—would entitle Sargsyan to hold onto power as head of government for an indefinite period once his presidential mandate expired in 2018. Sargsyan ruled Armenia for ten years as president. The movement, which encompasses the vast majority of Armenian citizens and

representatives of the 10-million-strong Armenian diaspora, transformed into a “Velvet Revolution,” or as some put it “an uncolored revolution,” leading to Sargsyan’s resignation on April 23.

But after Sargsyan stepped aside, the acting prime minister, Karen Karapetyan (a former chief executive of Gazprom’s fully owned Armenian subsidiary, who has long surrounded himself with support from Russian oligarchs), refused to accept the conditions of a peaceful transition of power to the opposition. To reinforce these counterrevolutionary measures, Samvel Karapetyan (no relation to the Armenian head of government), a powerful Russian billionaire of Armenian origin, almost immediately traveled to Yerevan to visit the interim prime minister. Notably, he was accompanied on his trip to Armenia by a team of pro-Russian technocrats with business interests in the Caucasus country. The Russian delegation apparently arrived in order to supervise the regrouping of the ruling Armenian political elite and to help reinforce Karen Karapetyan’s grip on power (Azatutyun.am, April 24). Samvel Karapetyan is on the United States Department of the Treasury’s “Kremlin list” of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s closest allies. He has long acted as an effective tool to maintain Armenia’s political-economic dependence on Moscow (see [EDM](#), October 14, 2015).

While Russia’s official position vis-à-vis the mounting anti-governmental protests in Armenia was initially somewhat vague or muted, the news of the resignation of Sargsyan—Putin’s ostensibly reliable Armenian ally—was received in surprisingly positive/neutral terms by Moscow ([Komsomolskaya Pravda](#), April 24). This reaction contrasted sharply with the Russian political elite’s past hyper-sensitive responses toward recent examples of anti-regime mass protests around the world. Moreover, since the 2013/2014 EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine, Moscow has reportedly started to categorize any protests—especially ones calling for a change in the local leadership or ruling regime—as “color revolutions,” a category that explicitly gives Moscow the “right” to intervene under the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s (CSTO) “Collective Security Strategy 2025” (Odkb-Scto.org, October 14, 2016). Therefore, Russia’s apparent restraint regarding Sargsyan’s stepping down suggests that either Moscow foresaw this outcome, or was counting on an even more loyal and Russia-dependent local politician to take over and restore order.

The situation in Armenia further escalated on April 24, when Karen Karapetyan canceled the pre-scheduled meeting with Nikol Pashinyan to discuss forming a new government. The opposition leader, in turn, called for renewed protests ([The Armenian Weekly](#), April 25). Russian state-controlled media outlets launched into a coordinated information campaign to discredit Pashinyan, his team and the Velvet Revolution movement, labeling it “another Maidan” directed by the West ([Vzglyad](#), April 25; [1tv](#), [Life.ru](#), April 26).

The two Karapetyans apparently failed to preserve the Republican Party’s seemingly unshakeable position: the ruling majority in parliament first rejected (on May 1) Pashinyan’s candidacy to be the next prime minister, and then, suddenly, accepted it under heavy pressure from protesters ([Armenpress.am](#), May 2). Many considered this a victory over the ruling political elite as well as a blow to Russia’s domination over Armenia. However, it is too early to presume that Russian pressure on Yerevan has been vanquished for good.

In recent days, Kremlin-connected media again reverted to more neutral rhetoric toward Pashinyan and his movement, possibly out of a growing realization that no Western hand is in fact behind the crisis. This continued vacillation coming out of Moscow can best be explained by Russia’s “bitter experience” with the Ukrainian EuroMaidan in Ukraine. It is likely that in the aftermath, the Kremlin devised a grand strategy for how to tackle evolving regime-change crises with purported links to the West. And if so, this playbook presumably brings together coordinated information-propaganda and soft and hard power options in one operative portfolio. But faced with the situation in Armenia—where the opposition leaders consciously organized, channelled and regulated society’s anger toward the non-violent overthrow of the ruling regime in line with the constitution and, most importantly, without Western interference—Moscow found itself deeply perplexed about how to respond ([RIA Novosti](#), May 2).

In trying to navigate the fast-moving situation gripping its South Caucasus ally, Russia sees no clear win-win options but rather a bad precedent for its own citizens, who may try to replicate Armenia’s Velvet Revolution at home. Moscow also likely fears potential future shifts in Armenia’s foreign policy. Though Pashinyan has pledged to follow and respect his country’s obligations toward Russia, he also asserted that Armenia’s foreign policy should strictly take

declared Armenocentrist national interests as the point of departure. This nuance may explain Moscow's continued mistrust of and mounting concerns about the "uncolored revolution," regardless of Pashinyan's clear commitments to uphold the multi-dimensional strategic alliance with Russia.

For now, Russia continues to hold critical leverage over Armenia. The Kremlin has been able to keep Armenia profoundly vulnerable by pushing the latter toward an economic model marked by limited competition as well as by embedding trans-national criminal-oligarchic forces within its corrupt authoritarian-leaning ruling elite. This factor substantiates Moscow's deep-seated distrust toward the potential policies Pashinyan's team will pursue after entering office. Even though the protesting opposition's leadership deliberately avoided touching on foreign policy issues and tried to keep the movement predominantly inward-looking, Russian anxieties have grown. Pashinyan repeatedly stated that, under his rule, Armenia's current foreign policy orientation will remain unchanged (Panorama.am, April 30); however, Moscow's continued primacy inside Armenia is threatened by his eagerness to dismantle the oligarchic order and to undermine the pre-existing domestic economic monopolies through effective reforms. In other words, Pashinyan's overriding target is to subdue and disrupt this very framework through systemic reforms, which would inherently diminish Russia's heavy influence on Armenia's domestic politics and economy, even without the latter country's departure from the Moscow-controlled Eurasian Economic Union or CSTO.