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How to Train Your Dragon

Armenia's Velvet Revolution in an Authoritarian Orbit

ABSTRACT This article examines the issue of democratic breakthroughs in highly geopoliticized, fractured regions in the post-Soviet space. While recognizing the political challenges of democratic transitions in such regions, it investigates specific conditions conducive to effective democratic openings in such regions. Using a case study method, it focuses on Armenia's Velvet Revolution in 2018, which successfully challenged the previously-entrenched authoritarian regime in the country. This was particularly significant as it occurred in Russia's security orbit. Armenia has been firmly wedged in Russia-centric regional organizations, in parallel to the deep bilateral ties between the two countries developed since the Soviet collapse. This article argues, first, that the efficacy of nonviolent civil disobedience campaign played a key role in ushering a peaceful democratic breakthrough. This strategy is also credited for explaining Russian restraint as the events unfolded throughout the year. Second, it also highlights the specific form of Armenia's authoritarianism and the institutionalization of the state that it had produced. It posits an autocrat's dilemma: greater state institutionalization to defend the "soft" authoritarian system at some point becomes a liability. This dual-track approach to the study of Armenia's Velvet Revolution, the civil society and the state, is also used to explain Russian restraint as a factor in this case. The article concludes with a brief application of this dual-track transition model to the unyielding mass protests in Belarus, also occurring in Russia's security orbit.
KEYWORDS Armenia, revolution, Belarus, Russia, fractured regions

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Cold War, democracy promotion (Scott & Carter, 2016; Gilbert, 2020; Carothers, 2020) quickly emerged as a central foreign policy tool for the Euro-Atlantic powers in the post-communist world. In the first two decades after the Cold War, the Western powers enjoyed significant access and leverage in shaping the political systems and societies in the newly independent states (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This expresses in their funding structures and their support of the nascent civil societies, political parties, civil service training, to name a few (Carothers, 2020; Obydenkova, 2007). However, with resurgent Russia in the Putin era, the Western levers of democracy promotion, particularly in the post-Soviet space, quickly became liabilities for these new states. Largely top-down, such policies became intertwined with geopolitical

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push-and-pull between the West and an increasingly assertive Russia (Carothers, 2020; Sakwa, 2017; Ohanyan, 2018d; Broers & Ohanyan, 2020; Orenstein, 2019). Carothers (2020) explains that geo-politicization of democracy promotion by the Western policy makers has translated into support for particular short-term political preferences in target countries, at the expense of fostering more durable democratic processes and institutions. He also cautioned that this trend of geopoliticized transitions is likely to intensify as efforts to counter the global projections of Chinese and Russian influence increase.

Two examples of geopoliticized transitions in the post-Soviet space stand out. Both Ukraine and Georgia have experienced such geopoliticized democratic breakthroughs, with distinctly pro-West/anti-Russia flavor. It is against this backdrop that the color revolutions in the post-communist space started to be perceived by the Kremlin as a threat. The extensive Western support and the prevalence of international contexts in ushering democratic openings worked to bolster this perception. Putin saw color revolutions as "not genuine popular risings but chaos instigated and manipulated by the anonymous outside forces" (Skak, 2016, p. 324). Since we completed this manuscript, the protests inside Russia itself, led by poisoned and currently imprisoned Alexei Navalny, also gained momentum early in 2021. They have since been suppressed by the Kremlin, which depicted them as another attempt at a color revolution orchestrated by the West (Gabuev, 2021).

The Putin factor was indeed powerful in geopoliticizing and securitizing democratic breakthroughs when they did occur. Color revolutions were linked to instability and civil unrest within the strategic security culture within the Kremlin (Skak, 2016). The Putin factor in geopoliticizing the color revolution is indisputable, but the Euro-Atlantic system also contributed directly to this dangerous dynamic of geopolitical push-and-pull. As a result, this has derailed and weakened democratic breakthroughs when they did occur. Promises of NATO accession to Georgia and Ukraine (Kyle, 2019; Art, 2016), prospects of EU membership in the Western Balkans (Bechev, 2018; Sakwa, 2017), negotiations with the Eastern Partnership Agreements (Ohanyan, 2015), often carried out case by case, have all worked to rupture the immediate and still-fragile regional fabric between post-communist states. These policies, from the Balkans to the South Caucasus, incentivized integration with European institutions, often at the expense of building more immediate regional connectivity between these states (Ohanyan, 2015, 2018c). Democratic breakthroughs and consolidations as a result have become more difficult in regionally fractured neighborhoods. This is a strategic miscalculation for the Euro-Atlantic policy community, when considering the deeply regional dimension of democratic consolidation (MacCallister, 2016).

In the South Caucasus such regional fracture is perpetuated by the Western pull of Georgia, Turkey's alliance with Azerbaijan, and Armenia's security orientation and formal alliance with Russia. In this triad of pairs, Armenia's Velvet Revolution stands out as a political divergence of sorts within the dyad: it was a democratic breakthrough in an authoritarian orbit. And despite strengthening the democratic pole in the South Caucasus, by forming a democratic dyad with neighboring Georgia, the democratic dividends from regionally stronger democratization (MacCallister, 2016) failed to register in the Western policy discourse.

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The case of Armenia's Velvet Revolution in 2018 is significant for understanding the prospects of democratic breakthroughs in fractured regions at a time when Western appetite for democracy promotion is at its weakest. In this article, we are asking how democratic breakthrough occurred in Armenia, which, while engaged with the Euro-Atlantic structures, was firmly embedded in Russia's authoritarian orbit partly because of its security considerations with neighboring Turkey. This article also seeks to explain the "Russian restraint" as a factor: contrary to expectations, the Russian soldiers never left their bases during the Velvet Revolution. The deliberate efforts from the incumbent government to pull in Russia against the protestors also failed.

This article offers a two-pronged analysis to explain the Russian factor and the democratic breakthrough in Russia's authoritarian orbit. We argue that, first, the specific strategy of nonviolent disobedience worked to bring out large numbers into the streets. The fabric of the civil society matters, we argue, which is necessary but perhaps not a sufficient condition for completing authoritarian breakdowns. The second factor we submit as also critical is the "stateness" dimension where such democratic breakthroughs take place (Coleman & Lawson-Remer, 2013; Ohanyan, 2020b). We argue that the specific nature of Armenia's authoritarianism from which the Velvet emerged was essential for the peaceful outcome. In contrast to Belarus, to be discussed below, Armenia's authoritarianism was "soft." This was a competitive authoritarian system, which rested on increasingly institutionalized state agencies, deployed to deepen and consolidate authoritarianism in the country. Yet, as we show in the article, faced with unprecedented mass-scale peaceful disobedience campaigns, the institutions, crafted for authoritarian survival, worked against the very goal for which they were deployed.

The article starts with a brief sketch of events during the Velvet Revolution, and places it in the global comparative context. It then presents the dual-track transition approach to understanding the Velvet Revolution and Russian restraint as a factor. The article analyzes the civic roots of the Velvet Revolution. It then examines the nature of Armenia's authoritarian system and the state institutions it had created for regime survival. This is followed with the section on Russian restraint as a factor. Building on this dual-track transition model, the article offers a discussion on Belarus, also wedged in Russia's geopolitical orbit, where mass protests continue at the time of this writing.

THE VELVET REVOLUTION IN SKETCHES

Understanding the political identity of Armenia's Velvet Revolution is more than a scholarly exercise. From the early days of this protest movement, the incumbent forces tried to portray it as a "color revolution," in an effort to paint the movement as externally orchestrated and therefore painting it as illegitimate. This tactic was done both to trigger a Russian response and to discredit the movement politically. Indeed, in a country with deep security ties with Russia, such framing of the Velvet Revolution was designed to securitize and geopoliticize the movement (Ohanyan, 2020b).

"Velvet is not a color" (Ohanyan, 2020b, p. 25) and the dual-track nature are at the heart of this largely "color-blind" democratic breakthrough. Indeed, the Velvet

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Revolution worked in two dimensions: the state and the civil society. The strategy of nonviolent disobedience was applied by the movement leaders with great discipline. It helped to grow the numbers and pull out socially and economically diverse segments of the society throughout Armenia. As such, in terms of the tactics and the strategy of mass mobilization, the Velvet Revolution was a replication of numerous other nonviolent protests movements from around the world, from Chile, Poland, to the Philippines, which took place in the last quarter of the 20th century. Importantly, the second track of this democratic breakthrough relates to the strength of the state institutions (Kraxberger, 2007), achieved under the previous authoritarian system. Designed to deepen the control of the incumbent Sargsyan regime and the Republican Party that he led (Broers, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2010), highly institutionalized state structures worked against the goals of authoritarian preservation for which they were created. The movement did not challenge the state, and developed within this "flawed but formal" constitutional order (Ohanyan, 2018a, 2020b).

Taking this dual transition into account, we argue that both factors at the level of the civil society and the state apparatus limited the menu of choices for Serzh Sargsyan. They also explain Russian restraint as a factor. Together, they enabled the impossible: an authoritarian parliament, dominated by the majority of Serzh Sargsyan's Republican Party, was forced to vote the movement leader and a parliamentary opposition member Nikol Pashinyan as prime minister. This was a dramatic culmination of the Velvet Revolution in May 2018.

Indeed, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia started as a response to a familiar tactic of constitutional engineering, used by incumbent authoritarian leaders in hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet space for regime survival. In the past, this strategy has been applied by Georgia's Saakashvili and Russia's Putin, and currently is advanced by Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko. Prior to the Velvet Revolution, Armenia was a stable competitive authoritarian system (Levitsky & Way, 2010) where the government relied on democratic institutions to consolidate its grip on power (Hess, 2010; Payaslyan, 2011). The incumbent president, Serzh Sargsyan, was in his second, and final, term in power. A year before the Velvet Revolution, in 2017, the Sargsyan government pushed through a constitutional change via a referendum, which transitioned Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary system.

Sargsyan and his party consistently stated that the constitutional change and the transition to a parliamentary system were carried out to strengthen Armenian democracy. He rejected claims that he would use the constitutional change to step in the role of the prime minister, thereby overcoming the problem of term limits in the previous system (Iskandaryan, 2018). And yet, he proceeded to do just that. On 11 April he announced that he would seek the nomination from his Republican Party, which dominated the parliament, to step in as prime minister (Iskandaryan, 2018). Inspired by Gandhi's nonviolent disobedience campaign and his "salt walk," parliamentary opposition member Nikol Pashinyan was already into the second week of his march, walking from Armenia's second-largest city, Gyumri, to the capital (Demytrie, 2018). By the time he arrived in Yerevan, people had started to come out in large numbers, chanting for Sargsyan to step

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down (*The Economist*, 2018). After the Sargsyan resignation, the parliament, dominated by Sargsyan's party yet facing insurmountable pressure from the public, ceded to opposition demands and voted movement leader and parliamentary opposition member Nikol Pashinyan to the post of prime minister.

The Velvet Revolution in a Comparative Context

In terms of its deeply civic roots, and higher levels of "stateness," which we discuss below, the Velvet Revolution differs from the geographically proximate post-Soviet color revolutions in Ukraine (2004) and Georgia (2003), or the Arab Spring movements that erupted as spontaneously in the 2010s. In terms of its civic fabric, its grassroots and organic nature, led by civic groups of highly diverse composition, the Velvet revolution had a distinctly Latin flavor. As such, it echoed the democratic, and often impacted, transitions in Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ohanyan, 2018a, 2020b). And in terms of its stateness,

> the condition of stateness has been significant both in terms of its coercive and co-opting dimensions. The strong coercive apparatus and the ruling party structure since Armenia's independence, while it thwarted opposition movements, also created the basic institutional foundations of the state. (Ohanyan, 2020b, p. 41)

The civil roots of the mass protests expressed in the backdrop of relatively high levels of stateness, enabled by three decades of "soft" authoritarianism, are the two defining dimensions of the democratic breakthrough. These two dimensions also work to explain Russian restraint, discussed later in this article.

Bunce and Wolchik (2018) have shown that the type of an authoritarian regime can shape the form and the content of the contentious politics challenging it. The higher levels of repression result in fewer avenues of political protest: large-scale waves of popular uprisings tend to result in deeply entrenched authoritarianism. Bunce and Wolchik have argued that the Arab Spring protests followed this pattern, resulting in few democratic gains after the protests died down. With an exception of Tunisia, the lack of preexisting civic roots diluted the political impact from the protests. Indeed, political uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, and Syria lacked a partner in strong political parties and civil society leadership, both to manage the movements and to consolidate the fragile opening the protests had created (Angrist, 2013; Stephan & Linz, 2013). The Western democracy promotion projects in this region were diluted, often by the recipient governments, in favor of security promotion, in the post-9/11 world. The Arab Spring unfolded in highly securitized settings as a result (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017), where democracy has been viewed as a security threat. In addition, the oil-rich Arab states in the region had succeeded in co-opting much of the fragile civil society structure in their countries, which evolved to support the governments mostly on nonpolitical service provision projects (Hassan, 2011).

Similar to the Middle East, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia also unfolded in a highly securitized context, in the backdrop of an unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in a fractured region, and in Russia's security orbit. But in contrast to the Arab Spring, civil

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society developed largely independently from the government, which lacked the resources and the capacities to co-opt these actors.

In terms of the grassroots, diverse, and bottom-up strategy of mass mobilization, the Velvet Revolution resembled the democratic transitions in Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The parallel is manifest in various forms, and the diversity of civic groups moving the protest is important in that comparison. For instance, in the case of Argentina, coordinated mobilization of human rights groups with the victim groups from the Dirty War (1976–83), along with labor and business groups, diversified the movement, deepening its civic roots and adding to its long-term power as a movement. Similarly, facing severe economic crisis, grassroots and incremental civil society mobilization succeeded in a peaceful transition of power from the military regime to the reformers (Pio, 2013). A wave of social mobilization in the manufacturing heartland proved critical for the political takeover of the trade unions by the reformers. As in Argentina and Brazil, human rights groups were important actors, working from below, both during the mass protests and in consolidating the fragile democratic gains thereafter. Similar to Argentina and Brazil, where transnational human rights activism enabled democratic transitions, in the case of Armenia, its large diaspora was mobilized (Cavoukian, 2020), adding global pressure on the incumbent government in Armenia during the Velvet Revolution.

To sum up, similar to the Latin American transitions, Armenia's Velvet Revolution was driven by social forces from below, rather than top-down by the political elites, or the externally funded NGO sector, as has been the case in post-Soviet color revolutions (Jones & Baumgartner, 2006; Cheterian, 2008; Broers, 2005). The Latin dimension of the Velvet Revolution is evident both in the social roots of the movement (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2014; Paturyan, 2020) and in the relative strength of state institutions, which enabled the peaceful transition and subsequent democratic breakthrough. This is in contrast to the Rose Revolution in Georgia, for instance, where the democratic transition broke out against an overall weak state at the time. We now turn to discuss both dimensions of the democratic breakthrough, before examining the impact of this dual-track transition on Russian restraint as a factor in this transition.

THE DUAL TRACK OF THE DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH IN ARMENIA

In qualifying democratic transitions, absolute and relative measures of democratic transitions have been developed within the relevant scholarship. Bogaards (2010) explains the former as one synonymous with a change of category, effectively understood as a dichotomous conception of democracy. Munck (2001) refers to such transitions as critical steps when a country passes a threshold as it introduces competitive elections with mass suffrage for the main offices in the country. Such dichotomous and absolute measures of a democratic transition obscure more than they reveal in the Armenian case. In contrast, approaches that assess democratic transitions in terms of a degree, define democracy and its absence as two endpoints on a spectrum (Bogaards, 2010; Sartori, 1991).

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Within the post-Soviet context, Armenia's Velvet Revolution was refreshingly un-revolutionary. As one of the authors has argued elsewhere (2018, 2019, 2020), "Velvet is not a color": the Velvet Revolution did not challenge constitutional order and the administrative state that supported it, despite the deeply flawed nature of that order. Emerging from a soft authoritarian system, the Velvet Revolution was quite continuous, particularly in terms of its civic capacities and processes, which have been developing for a few decades. As a soft authoritarian system, it also stands out with regular elections, albeit with compromised integrity. Studies have shown that polities that participate in regular elections, even if flawed, are better positioned for democratic consolidation after they experience a democratic breakthrough (Ohanyan, 2020b).

Armenia's Velvet Revolution was also continuous in terms of its stateness variable: state capacities carried over post-Velvet, albeit transmitting range of authoritarian vestiges into Armenia's post-Velvet politics. Indeed, much of the scholarship on democratic transition argues that the stability of state institutions is a prerequisite for effective democratic transitions (Milačić, 2017; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schmitter, 1995). Yet, many others have argued that democracy and state-building co-evolve in those states that are democratizing in the 21st century. "No democracy, no state" (Mazzuca & Munck, 2014, p. 1221) is more reflective of the political predicament of democratization processes in much of the post-Soviet world, including Armenia and Georgia (Ohanyan, 2021).

Democratic breakthrough as a concept developed in this work captures the dual-track nature of Armenia's revolutionary moment in 2018. It refers to Armenia's democratization process as a matter of degree, and builds on the continuities within the civic space as well as the state apparatus that shielded the mass protest and ensured its nonviolent nature in the short term. These continuities were reflected in the pre-Velvet soft authoritarian system, which for decades kept the civil protests separate from electoral politics and political activity. The Velvet Revolution as a breakthrough was expressed in the convergence of the two previously separate tracks of politics. It is the demolition of the institutional wall between civic protests and political-electoral activity throughout 2018 that constitutes the breakthrough in an otherwise continuous transition.

Commensurate with this process of continuity has been the post-Velvet Revolution political system's capacity to address constitutional and political crisis through legal, institutional, and electoral means. In the aftermath of the 2020 War, for example, complications rose between the Army's chief of general staff demanding the prime minister's resignation and the prime minister subsequently firing the country's top general (Kopalyan, 2021). This crisis in civilian-military relations, however, was addressed institutionally, as the former chief of the general staff sought to address his grievances through the courts. Similarly, after months of protests by opposition parties that snowballed into a political crisis, this crisis was constitutionally fused by initiating snap parliamentary elections which took place in June 2021, thus utilizing electoral mechanisms to resolve lingering political problems (Ohanyan, 2020c; Ohanyan & Stronski, 2021).

As a democratic breakthrough, the Velvet Revolution transformed Armenia's political culture, as it empowered the citizens by showing the effectiveness of nonviolent,

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experiential and participatory politics as a winning strategy of political change. Despite continuities within the stateness dimension of the democratic breakthrough and the authoritarian vestiges it created, since 2018 Armenia's state-building project moved from being top-down, technocratic, and controlled by a single party, to one of being contested through the civil society, electoral processes, and party politics. It is this state-building from below that will be highly consequential for Armenia's democratic consolidation prospects for years to come.

The Civic Sources of the Revolution

The movement leaders relied heavily on the civic fabric of the movement as they worked to shield geopoliticization and political "coloring" of the Velvet Revolution. They went out of their way to highlight the organic and grassroots nature of the mass scale political protests. They signaled early, clearly, and consistently that the movement was focused on domestic problems of governance and rights, rather than on grand geopolitical orientations of East and West. Nikol Pashinyan, during the mass protests, worked hard to craft and manage the movement as devoid of geopolitical dimension (Ohanyan, 2018a). In the immediate aftermath of Serzh Sargsyan's resignation, Pashinyan held a press conference with international journalists, famously stating that "our movement isn't pro-West or pro-Russia" (Gadarigian, 2018), thus reconfirming his position that the Velvet Revolution was unequivocally Armenia-centric. To further assuage possible Russian concerns, Pashinyan declared that Armenia will continue its membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and would continue meeting all obligations toward Russia. Framing and managing the movement as organic and homegrown rather than as imported and manufactured were essential to keeping the movement peaceful, while sustaining and growing the large-scale mobilization. This strategy was key in keeping the people involved, and Russian soldiers in their bases (Ohanyan, 2020b). The effective application of people power was critical for Russian restraint: going against the people in a country where Russia enjoys significant levels of goodwill would have been politically shortsighted for the Kremlin.

The strategic application of nonviolent disobedience was evident early on (Pinckney, 2018), which was essential in growing the number of protesters from diverse segments of the society, particularly the women (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012). Instead of aggregating in one of the two main and familiar spaces for large-scale protest, the protesters were spread out, self-governing, and coordinating closely. Closing streets became a signature move to paralyze the city.

Pinckney (2020), building on the work of Ackerman and DuVall (2006), has identified three engines driving the nonviolent disobedience campaign in the context of the Velvet Revolution: unity, strategic planning, and nonviolent discipline. Pinckney highlights the unifying messaging as the first driver. Protesters came from almost all segments of Armenian society, gender-balanced, with women at the forefront of the disobedience campaign. Civil society leaders played a role toward building the unifying messaging, central to getting more people out to protest, march, and close streets. Pinckney notes the banging of pots and pans at eleven o'clock each evening, which was a tactic borrowed

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from the *cacerolazo* protest against Augusto Pinochet in Chile in the early 1980s (Pinckney, 2018; Huneeus, 2009).

The second engine of the movement was the strategic planning and the learning tactics from the past protests against previous governments. One example of strategic planning is the complete change in the spatiality of the protests. Opting for a dispersed strategy, rather than concentrating in public spaces, the protesters increased their geography of discontent and the visibility of the movement in Yerevan. In addition, such a strategy undermined the disruptive potential from the government, which had built strong security forces over the years to crush public protests. Redeploying from square to square, alley to alley, made it challenging for the security forces to suppress the movement by force (Ishkanian, 2018).

The third engine of the movement (Pinckney, 2018) was the nonviolent discipline, which played a key role in building up the numbers in the streets (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012). Pashinyan was clear and consistent in loudly denouncing any violence (Pinckney, 2018). Having learned from the prior two decades of protest, the movement leaders were fully aware that any breakdown of the nonviolent discipline would allow the government to justify repression, both domestically and internationally.

There has been no shortage of conspiracy theories surrounding this peaceful and bloodless democratic breakthrough, including in Armenia. The Velvet Revolution was perceived as having come out of nowhere. Yet, this effective mass mobilization campaign was a learning outcome and a culmination of years of public protests in Armenia, large and small, issue-focused or post-election protests, which have defined Armenian political culture since its existence as a new, post-Soviet state (Ishkanian, 2018; Ohanyan, 2018a, 2020b). Indeed, despite the stability of its authoritarian system, levels of political protest have been classified as highest within the post-Soviet space (Broers, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In addition to the solid NGO sector and strengthening capacities of civil society organization in the post-Soviet period, Armenia had deep historical legacies of civic organizations (Zolyan, 2000; Broers, 2020). The political protests in support of Nagorno-Karabakh's self-determination, a majority-Armenian enclave within Soviet Azerbaijan, are credited as the first major political wave that challenged the Soviet authorities and exposed the limits of perestroika reforms started by Gorbachev (Zürcher, 2009).

"Bringing the State Back in" and Russian Restraint in Armenia

As we argue in this work, the civic dimension only partially explains the democratic breakthrough and Russian restraint as a factor in it. The stateness, and the type of authoritarianism on which it has been built, is as critical in explaining democratic outcomes in Armenia. More specifically, we argue that the institutional variables, or a qualified conceptualization of stateness, provide an important causal and systemic explanatory framework in accounting for both the Velvet Revolution and the associated Russian restraint as a factor.

The "stateness" dimension, pre-Velvet, refers to the incumbent's organizational power, defined as "the scope and cohesion of state and governing-party structures" (Levitsky &

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Way, 2010, p. 23). This definition tracks well with traditional measures of state capacity, albeit it does not capture the level of state autonomy from societal pressures (Evans & Skocpol, 1985; Fukuyama, 2013). Therefore, in tracking "stateness" we also relied on the ability of the government to steer development and transformation processes toward market economy and democratization. To this end, we utilized the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). Some of the measures of "stateness" studied in this work include the monopoly on the use of force, no interference from religious dogmas, and basic administration. Additional variables of "stateness" that we tracked relate to the governance index developed by BTI: international cooperation, consensus-building, resource efficiency, and steering capability (BTI Transformation Index, 2021).

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes (competitive authoritarian) in the post-Soviet space have methodically relied on the concept of the strong state (Tsygankov, 2014) to secure regime continuity. This has often translated into high levels of coercive capacity of the government and, in the case of Armenia, was also expressed in deep integration of the dominant party into state governance. Inherited from the Soviet legacy, the concept of establishing "the strong state" refers to the strengthening of the state's security apparatus to secure domestic stability.[1] The consequence, however, has been the strengthening of the security apparatus, or the "power ministries," at the expense of the quality of administrative governance and the "steering capability" of the government toward sustained development. The security dimension, nonetheless, has remained the main priority, as the inheriting of the post-KGB infrastructure and the strengthening of the power ministries have pushed post-Soviet governments to rebuild the strong state (Taylor, 2013). The process of establishing the strong state with strong coercive apparatus (Broers, 2020) assumes a process of institutionalization, whereby the institutions constructed by authoritarian elites become pillars of governance and stateness.

The given paradox, or assumed anomaly, lies at the very heart of this contradiction: while institutionalization of the authoritarian toolkit allows for regime survival, the very process of institutionalization also limits the scope of authoritarian governance, thus puncturing regime stability in times of political crisis. In addition, parts of the institutionalization of state governance in the case of post-Velvet Armenia (Ohanyan, 2019), have predictably emerged as authoritarian vestiges (Loxton, 2021). In particular, the Velvet Revolution did not challenge the constitutional order, which was a tactical advantage that contributed to the peaceful transfer of power. However, that very same

1. In the context of Russia, Tsygankov provides a three-tiered assessment of the strong state: (1) The strong state is the central construct in Russia's political history. (2) The historical reproduction of the strong state in Russia is a rational response to the country's circumstances, specifically its security dilemma and inter-elite conflict. (3) Russia's current political situation, and post-Soviet development, is one of a crisis of strong state rule—meaning that Russians historically have always had political power concentrated in the executive—and while this was diluted after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been doing just this in the last 20 years: building a strong state system (Taylor, 2013). This process of building the strong state has proven consistent across the board in the post-Soviet space. This conception of building the strong state remains structurally consistent with Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of "organizational power," whereby power is concentrated within the executive and the wide-ranging toolkits of the state's formal and informal apparatuses are utilized to secure domestic stability and regime continuity.

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constitutional order, an authoritarian vestige, currently challenges processes of judicial transition and institutional reform in the country (Ohanyan, 2019).

In cases of comparative authoritarianism, or hybrid regimes, institutions further restrict the options of the ruling elite with respect to utilizing the state's tools of coercion. In the case of the Velvet Revolution, the institutions of the strong state, which were built to insulate the hybrid regime from instability during crises (Loxton, 2021), actually produced the opposite effect. What accounts for the reverse, or unintended, effects of institutionalization upon the strong state and authoritarian stability? The answer lies in the concrete temporal process of institutionalization itself, the extent to which structural equilibrium was generated or maintained within the created institutions, and the degree to which institutional goals and self-interests were addressed within institutional decision-making during times of crisis. To account for an institutionalist interpretation of the Velvet Revolution, the mid-range theory of historical institutionalism is applied in this section.

The strength of Armenia's institutions, which, ironically, the Sargsyan administration played a big role in developing, actually served as an important bulwark against the Administration's potential ability to clamp down on the Velvet Revolution (Kopalyan, 2018b). Within this context, the institutional strength of the state's bureaucracies, and the relative level of professionalism of its high-ranking technocrats, curtailed the number of options that the Sargsyan government had in the face of crisis. Specifically, inter-institutional competition over interests and objectives, coupled with institutional self-interest, produced important levels of institutional safeguards that obstructed the extra-institutional powers of the executive (Weaver & Rockman, 1993, Blackburn, 1972; Block, 1987; Evans & Skocpol, 1985).

In our dual-track approach, historical institutionalism serves as an auxiliary theory that gauges the magnitudes of stateness through qualitative tracing of institutionalization. Qualitative levels of institutionalization are indicative of the legal and constitutional characteristics of stateness. This signifies, in relative terms, the delimiting of autocratic characteristics within institutionalized state structures, making them less conducive to authoritarian control. The continuity of such modality of institutionalization, undertaken through time, follows a process of path dependency (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992). At the macro level, the quality of stateness is understood by the importance of asymmetries and distribution of power, as these remain intrinsic to the operationalization and development of institutions (Ikenberry, 1994). Institutional changes, as outcomes of the institutionalization process, are gauged through the concept of critical juncture (Gourevitch, 1986; Krasner, 1984; Skocpol, 1979), as this accounts for how institutions develop, adopt, interact, and evolve along a path of political and economic processes (Thelen, 1999).

In this framework, institutionalization assumes the consolidation of institutional arrangements, which, barring external shocks or exogenous irruption, are expected to persist and institutionally self-perpetuate (Mahoney, 2003; Pierson, 2003). Collectively, institutionalization is qualified as a structured legal and political process that addresses puzzles of timing and temporality in politics (Orren & Skowronek, 1994), with

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institutional emergence, and degrees of institutionalization, being by-products of historic processes and power constellations (Thelen, 1999).

Indeed, the BTI index on stateness and governance for Armenia in 2016–20 reveals slight fluctuations on the governance variable (discussed earlier) but steady high levels on stateness (hovering around 8 out of 10 points), defined as monopoly on the use of force and basic administration. In Belarus, the levels of stateness as coercive force also have been consistently high in this period, but its levels of governance over the years have been much lower than those in Armenia. While core indices of stateness for the Armenian case have been steady over the years, the BTI reported a marked improvement on all measures of democratization and stateness in Armenia in 2018–20. This trend was also supported by a spike in Armenia's tax-to-GDP ratio, reported by the World Bank, which indicates stronger capacity of resource extraction and formalization of the economy. We now turn to a qualitative discussion on the stateness variable in Armenia, preceding the Velvet Revolution.

An important indicator of institutionalization in our stateness framework is the extent to which institutions develop their own interests and goals. This, in turn, addresses how institutions become political and social forces in and of themselves. Historical institutionalism, then, assumes that pertinent institutions of the state either have formally institutionalized or are in the process of consolidating institutional arrangements. In the case of Armenia, our criteria qualify three main structures as pertinent institutions: the Army (external security apparatus), the Police (internal security apparatus), and the Justice Ministry (internal administrative apparatus). The qualification and selection criteria for these three institutions are based on our assessment of the state's coercive capabilities. Since the objective is to gauge democratic breakthroughs, these selected institutions were fundamental in determining outcome: success or failure of the Velvet Revolution's democratic breakthrough was contingent on the performance of these institutions. Consequently, the degree of institutionalization of these structures remains crucial to the limitations that were placed upon the pre-Velvet ruling elite, as some of these institutions had become social forces in and of themselves, as opposed to simply being the instruments of individuals or the personalistic tools of certain elite actors.

The Army, for example, remains the most institutionalized state structure in Armenia's political system. Though instances of graft, corruption, or other such matters were prevalent, the Army, however, remained in the service of the country and did not bend to the whims of any single political actor or actors during times of political crisis. Accordingly, when mass protests spread abruptly in 2018, there were wide-ranging questions of whether Armenia's military would intervene. These questions assumed a personalistic and non-institutionalized understanding of Armenia's bureaucracies. The Army's refusal to interject itself, at any level, into domestic politics confirms the stipulated precepts of historical institutionalism. Armenia's Army, as an institution, has its own interests and objectives, and as such, intervening in domestic, political developments would have fundamentally been counter to its institutional interests. While noting the limitations and gaps with respect to available information, we apply deductive analytical assessments to qualify inferences vis-à-vis institutional behavior. Consequently, we deduce that the

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military brass exercised extensive restraint in preserving the Army's institutional interests. The refusal of the defense minister at the time, an acolyte of Serzh Sargsyan, to politicize the armed forces, the absence of the general staff from commenting or signaling on developments, and the complete absence of any movements by generals, garrisons, or troops stationed in the capital from any form of involvement is highly indicative of the institutionalized interests of the Army.

This is an important and notable change from developments that took place on 1 May 2008, when mass protests broke out against the rigged elections orchestrated by the Robert Kocharyan administration, the purpose of which was to secure the election of Serzh Sargsyan. During this period, the Kocharyan administration was in the process of building a strong state, and to this end, the process of institutionalization was at its nascent stages, and the Army had not been formally institutionalized. In this context, the lack of institutional safeguards made the Army susceptible to personalistic and informal channels of power, whether this came from the executive or generals loyal to the executive. The outcome was the insertion of the armed forces into the domestic political theater, where the military was used to quell public protests, resulting in the death of 10 Armenian citizens. The under-institutionalization of the Army in the 2000s made the March 1 tragedy possible. But the formal institutionalization of the Army by 2018 completely precluded such developments from happening.

The institutionalization of the Armenian Army can be qualified by its professionalization and transnational partnerships. From the outset, the initial officer corps were composed of Soviet-trained officers or nonprofessional soldiers. The subsequent professionalization of the Army began the process of institutionalization. The Vazgen Sargsyan Military University (MOD/Republic of Armenia, 2021), through a relative meritocratic system, produced a new generation of professionalized and institutionally-trained soldiers. Armenia's participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), advanced training and educational programs (NATO, 2012), and consultations on defense and security sector reform (Tonoyan, 2013) strongly contributed to the "institutional aspects of domestic defense reforms" (Abrahamyan, 2017). The Kansas-Armenian National Guard Partnership Program, a bilateral agreement with the US Department of Defense, has been instrumental in providing military education, ethical training, and program development for democratic civil-military relations. Collectively, the evolution in professionalized training, international collaboration, and sector reforms methodically contributed to the institutionalization of the Army.

The Police (this also included Interior Ministry troops during the Velvet Revolution), on the other hand, as a pertinent bureaucratic structure, was not as institutionalized as the Army when the Velvet Revolution broke out. However, during the past decade under the Sargsyan administration, it was under a path dependency of robust institutionalization. Thus, while the process was well underway, the magnitude of institutionalization, or the relative lack thereof, qualified the Police as having been partially institutionalized. Namely, its institutional arrangements were in place and in process of being consolidated, but full institutionalization had yet not been completed. In this context, the Police had developed specific elements of their own institutional interests and goals. However, this

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magnitude of partial institutionalization was not sufficient at this stage to insulate the Police from the extralegal influences and pressures of the Sargsyan regime. At the same time, the fact that partial institutionalization had taken place in the last decade again demonstrates the difference in the behavior of this institution when compared to its behavior during the mass uprisings of 2008.

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the Police slowly began a process of institutional insulation, whereby the institution served the interests of the ruling elite, but only to a certain degree. Thus, corruption, fabrication of evidence, and intimidation continued, but previous acts of severe human rights violations, torture, extra-judicial killings, and collective political persecutions, to a very large extent, ceased as an institutional practice. Thus, an incremental increase was observed in police integrity (Ivkovich & Khechumyan, 2013) and a more qualified understanding of institutional rules and norms (Khecuhmyan & Ivković, 2015). Further, structural changes were undertaken from 2012 (Police of the Republic of Armenia, 2014), and by 2016 important systemic reforms were made, specifically in the fields of personnel training, public service, and public-police relations (Police of the Republic of Armenia, 2016).

The intense push by the Sargsyan administration for Police reforms from 2011 forward are contributed to several factors: (1) EU pressure over Eastern Partnership talks; (2) the Sargsyan administration's desire to emulate the success of neighboring Georgia's police reforms model; (3) for budgetary reasons, decrease police corruption and institutionalize automated collection of fines; (4) enhanced training, increased hiring of women, and "community policing" to improve public relations; and (5) acquiescing to pressure from civic society. The relative success of these institutional reforms resulted in the government and Chief of Police Vladimir Gasparyan to avoid encroaching on police interest or infringe and dilute institutional norms, thus demonstrating that the institution of the Police had developed institutional interests and goals of its own (Shahnazarian & Light, 2018).

Though these broad-ranging reforms professionalized and institutionalized the Police in relation to the decade before, such institutionalization remained partial due to two main factors. First, while institutional norms drew a red line regarding acts of torture and human rights violations, no such red lines existed for instances of corruption, nepotism, or relevant types of illegal activities. And second, though some form of ruling elite pressure was prevalent upon the Police, and police commanders were "connected to multiple power centers in the regime," the institutional leadership was "autonomous" and thus balanced institutional self-interest against the interests of the regime (Shahnazarian & Light, 2018, p. 105).

These developments offer a nuanced understanding of institutional behavior, and bring about an important question: Why didn't the Police violently disperse and terminate the popular movement of 2018, considering the fact that they had more than sufficient resources to do so? And, more specifically, if Prime Minister Sargsyan had given the order, would the Police have undertaken such action? The partial institutionalization of the Police in the last decade offers suggestions: whereas ten years ago in the events of 1 March 2008, the Police behaved quite brutally in following the orders of

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then-President Robert Kocharyan, it may be assumed that the relatively more institutionalized Police under the Sargsyan administration were not going to follow such orders. Due to limited data, sufficient empirical evidence is missing to provide a clear picture of what exactly transpired behind the scenes. However, by triangulating analytical considerations of institutional behavior, we can extrapolate that the Police understood that undertaking orders where there is a high probability of loss of life—as well as unpredictable consequences—would be against its institutional interests.

Further, noting that institutional self-perpetuation is the norm, as an institution, the Police were cognizant not to surpass a certain red line in the type of behavior that they are willing to engage in. Consequently, the administration, at the public level, did not receive any positive signals from the institution of the Police when the subject of the possible use of brute force against the people became a subject of public discussion. The overwhelming show of restraint by the Police remains commensurate with these developments. Collectively, what was informally possible ten years ago was no longer formally possible during the Velvet Revolution, and for this reason, the relative institutionalization of the Police curtailed the options that the Sargsyan administration had in attempting to preserve its regime.

The Justice Ministry was the least institutionalized state organ when the Velvet Revolution erupted, and, accordingly, it was the most active institution in serving the interests of the Sargsyan administration as well as being in the forefront of political persecution in the country. From a simple correlative observation, there is an obvious directional relationship: the more institutionalized the institution, the less the Sargsyan administration was able to rely on, and the less institutionalized the institution, the more the Sargsyan administration was able to rely on. The judicial system had undergone perhaps the least degree of reform or development in the last ten years, exhibiting unclear institutional arrangements, and thus functioning under a patronal network that accommodated the demands of the executive through two institutional actors: judges and prosecutors.

The Sargsyan government attempted two waves of judicial and legal reforms, one during the 2009–11 wave (Arlis, 2009) and another in the 2012–16 wave, neither of which "led to systemic reforms, nor to increase of the public trust in the judiciary, or to rooting out corruption practices within the courts and the law-enforcement bodies" (MOJ/Republic of Armenia, 2019). The commissioner for human rights of the Council of Europe reiterated these concerns in its 2015 report, stating the significant levels of corruption in the judiciary, lack of judicial independence, direct ties between the ruling elite and judges, and the willingness of judges to impose heavy sentences on regime opponents (Muiznieks, 2015). "Report on Human Rights Practices," published by the US Embassy in 2017, confirmed and summarized these developments, addressing the subjugation of judges to political pressures from various levers of the executive branch and the lack of judicial institutional norms (US Embassy/Armenia, 2017). The Council of Europe's European Committee on Legal Cooperation affirmed the same findings in its 2017 survey, addressing the lack of trust and professionalism in both judges and prosecutors, while reifying the lack of institutional transparency and accountability (Council

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of Europe, 2017). Metrics from Freedom House's "Nations in Transit" data corroborate the premise that Armenia's justice system remained under-institutionalized and primarily served as an extension of the ruling regime. Multi-year reports continuously demonstrate the judicial system's lack of "autonomy from the executive" (Freedom House, 2017), with bribery and leveraging of political influence common at all "levels of the judicial system" (2018). Aggregate metrics from 2015 until the Velvet Revolution consistently rate "judicial framework and independence" at 2.5 out of 7, with 1 having lowest level of democratic progress and 7 the highest. Collectively, the lack of institutionalization of the Justice Ministry remained a by-product of its systemic servitude to the political interests of the executive.

It is within this broader context that this institution lacked a coherent sense of institutional norms, interests or objectives. Due to lack of formal institutionalization, or complete under-institutionalization, the Justice Ministry did not function as an institution but, rather, as an arm and extension of the ruling elite. From the lens of historical institutionalism, since this institution lacked agency, it also lacked substantive relevance in functioning as an actual institution. Unable to institutionally self-perpetuate, it functioned within a patronal framework of personal interests and informal networks. It is for this reason that the Justice Ministry was more active in its commitment of obstructing the democratic breakthrough than any other state institution: it willingly fined, imprisoned, and persecuted at the behest of the Sargsyan government.

From the methodological lens of process tracing, the causal indicators accounting for the Velvet Revolution rest in the magnitude of institutionalization within the pertinent institutions and, more importantly, within the institutions of the security apparatus. Critical juncture, in this context, explains why Armenia's pertinent institutions did not collapse or fully acquiesce to the demands of the Sargsyan administration: institutions were able to absorb the shocks of political change, as they adapted in conjunction with their institutionalized interests. Institutions that become legitimate legal-political forces in of themselves, that is, have undergone magnitudes of institutionalization and developed institutional interests commensurate with legal and constitutional standards, are the strongest variables that explain the puzzle of how the Velvet Revolution allowed for a democratic breakthrough, or how the hybrid regime system collapsed.

RUSSIAN RESTRAINT: FROM PEOPLE POWER, POLICY, AND THE PARLIAMENT

The prevailing discourse on democratic breakthroughs in the post-Soviet space assumes two general narratives: Russia views these as "color" revolutions and works against them, and attempts at democratic breakthroughs fail, leading to continuity of regime cycles (Hale, 2015). Both of these assumptions are challenged by our findings with respect to the Velvet Revolution. As we argue below, the civic depth and the level of institutionalization of statehood are also affected by the modality of hybrid regime (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002) and the type of constitutional system a country has adopted. We contend that Russia refrains from directly interjecting itself into political systems that have undergone increased levels of institutionalization and possess vibrant civic societies.

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Whereas in patronal and under-institutionalized systems external stimuli produce immense effects, such is not the case within institutionalized systems that have been depersonalized and are thus less sensitive to external stimuli. The relative distribution of power within such societies, within the institutionalized bureaucracies as well within wide-ranging social groupings, complicates and increases the risk propensity for intervention by outside actors. Russia's restraint may be qualified, in this context, as being one of risk aversion: involvement may actually be counterproductive to Russian interests. Our findings indicate that Russian intervention is more likely in rigid hybrid regimes, or authoritarian regimes, where power is centrally concentrated, civic society is suppressed, and the probability of successful Russian pressure upon the system meets Moscow's cost-benefit calculations. In loose hybrid regimes, with higher levels of institutionalization and strong presence of civic society, Moscow's cost-benefit assessments tilts toward risk aversion and nonintervention. The one exception to these criteria is if there is an explicit and direct threat to Russia's interests, where the movement seeking a democratic breakthrough specifically qualifies its movement as being anti-Russian, such as Euromaidan. With this overt and blatant exception, Russian restraint is the norm.

The modality of Armenia's hybrid regime, which promoted increased levels of institutionalization and tolerated the exponential growth of civic society, made this political system during the Velvet Revolution less vulnerable to Russian intervention. Since loose hybrid regimes produce more institutionalized political systems, whereas rigid hybrid regimes produce more personalized and less institutionalized political systems, Russian restraint, or preference for intervention, is better understood. Further, loose hybrid regimes allow for the relative growth of civic society, whereas rigid hybrid regimes severely restrict the growth of civic society. Since institutionalization and growth of civic society complicate the distribution of power and political capital within society, Russia's calculations also face restraints when dealing with loose hybrid regimes during crises. In this context, loose hybrid regimes, with increased institutionalization and engaged civic society, make democratic breakthroughs more feasible. We argue that Russian preference for intervention is commensurate with securing regime cycles, but since this is not tenable within loose hybrid regimes during times of large-scale political crisis, Russia restrains itself from intervening.

Another important indicator for Russian restraint, and consistent with our assessments of domestic power distribution (or power dispersion), is the type of constitutional system that the given state possesses during democratic breakthroughs. Hale (2015) argues that constitutions provide a window into the formation of power balances and distribution of powers within the patronal systems of the post-Soviet space. Constitutional systems are also crucial in allowing us to understand why democratic breakthroughs are offset by regime cycles. Patronal systems are primarily defined by "presidentialist" systems, where regime change is common, but system's change extremely rare. Thus, a leader may be removed, but the system remains mostly intact. For this reason, regime change is not the same as a democratic breakthrough; and this is why Hale (2015) defines regime cycles as the continuity of the patronal system under a new regime

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(pp. 178–181). Democratic breakthroughs, then, not only produce regime change, but also produce system's change, and in order for such change not to become a regime cycle, or invite possible Russian interference, the type of constitutional system becomes important.

Post-Soviet states have primarily been dominated by presidential constitutional systems, in some instances dubbed as super-presidential, due to the immense concentration of power. This has been commensurate with the formation of authoritarian or rigid hybrid regimes, since presidential constitutional systems are conducive to patronalism. Constitutional systems that have a divided executive, whereby power is dispersed between a president and a prime minister, are more conducive to competing power structures within the authoritarian system, since the focal points of power are split. Constitutional systems that are parliamentarian, on the other hand, are the least conducive to patronalism, for a parliamentary system leads to a "loosening" of rigid power structures, thus creating complex power configurations and distributing power to a wide range of stakeholders (Hale, 2015, pp. 76–82). Building on this framework, we contend that the "loosening" effect of parliamentary systems reifies the fundamentals of loose hybrid regimes, reinforces institutionalization, strengthens the efficacy of civic society, increases the likelihood of democratic breakthroughs, and thus produces outcomes that further disincentivize Russian interference.

DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH OR BREAKDOWN IN BELARUS?

Similar to Armenia (2018) and Kyrgyzstan (2005; Hess, 2010), which experienced democratic breakthroughs, Belarus is also a country that has been firmly, and perhaps much more deeply entrenched, in Russia's authoritarian orbit, with much deeper cultural pan-Slavic connections and decades-long economic dependency. Similar to Armenia, Belarus is also a member of Russia-led regional organizations. Since 9 August 2020, Belarus has remained in the midst of large-scale weekly protests against President Lukashenko, albeit at the time of this writing in spring 2021, the levels have gone down significantly, and Lukashenko remains bolstered and supported by the Kremlin. On 27 November 2020, Lukashenko announced that he will step down as president after constitutional changes limiting presidential powers take place (RFE/RL, 2020a). Opponents dismissed this statement as a tactic to buy time in order to continue with the violent crackdown of the protests. The situation in Belarus remains fluid, and detentions and crackdowns after each Sunday protest have become increasingly violent (Zlobina, 2020).

This comparison of Armenia and Belarus is limited in scope. While advocating for dual-track approaches to explain democratic breakthroughs in illiberal alliance systems, at this point the comparative treatment of Belarus and Armenia is intended to generate initial research directions for a more comprehensive comparison. This early comparison is also promising in understanding the conditions of Russian restraint, or intervention, when democratic breakthroughs develop in its vicinity.

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Velvet Visions for Belarus

The similarities with Armenia's Velvet Revolution have been mostly limited to the patterns of mass mobilization in Belarus since the past summer. As in Armenia, the protests bubbled up from below, with clear nonviolent disobedience as its signature (Ohanyan, 2020a). The movement leaders continuously signaled—early, clearly, and consistently—that the movement's goals were domestic, directed at the incumbent president. As in Armenia, the movement leaders signaled that the movement is not a geopolitical-ideological one, and they sought to reach out to the Kremlin for dialogue. As the movement leaders worked to highlight the domestic roots of the uprising, Lukashenko consistently tried to create a boogeyman, pointing to fictitious threats from NATO troops at the border (RFE/RL, 2020b). In contrast to Armenia, where the Velvet Revolution was taking place in the backdrop of protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan (Broers, 2020; Ghaplanyan, 2019), Lukashenko lacked such a security factor. Instead, he worked to color the movement as a "color revolution" in an effort to discredit the movement by raising speculations of external/Western intervention in the country (RFE/RL, 2020c).

As in Armenia, the protesters have remained disciplined and true to the nonviolent strategy, despite the violent crackdown used against them. As in Armenia, the large number of women among the protesters as well as the leaders has reinforced the peaceful nature of the protests (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012), helping to grow the numbers in the streets. Women have been marching, donning the white-red-white bridal dresses, and using the flag colors of Belarus's short-lived independent statehood in 1918. Women were also central during Armenia's Velvet Revolution (Shirinian, 2020), with the "stroller" Moms blocking streets and paralyzing traffic as the most vivid example. In both cases this gender dynamic was important in creating a festival-like mood in the streets.

The "math of the protests" (Ohanyan, 2020a), however, has not been in favor of the people in Belarus. Chenoweth and Stephan (2012) have shown, through a quantitative study of more than 300 political campaigns throughout the 20th century, that close to 3% of the total population in a country needs to participate in a nonviolent protest for effective outcomes. At its peak, for a country with a population of 3 million, the numbers in Armenia reached 200,000 (Ishkanian, 2018). In Belarus, the numbers also peaked at 200,000, which has not been sufficient in a country with a population of over 9 million. Still, the protests in Belarus have spread throughout the country, and have remained consistent and significant despite the use of violence by the crackdown.

To reiterate, both cases share a range of similarities in terms of their mass mobilization and nonviolent disobedience tactics deployed against their governments. However, despite their shared legacies as post-Soviet states, both countries have been through different trajectories of political mobilization and civil society engagement in the post-Soviet period. Armenia, along with Ukraine, stands out as a case of frequent mass protests, large and small, in the post-Soviet period (Ghaplanyan, 2019). This is in contrast to the overall low levels of protests in the rest of the post-Soviet space (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Broers 2020). Regardless, the levels of opposition protests on their own fail to explain outcomes of authoritarian decline and democratic breakthrough.

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The nature and modalities of their respective authoritarian systems that the protesters have been challenging, the second track in our approach presented here, are particularly critical for understanding Lukashenko's political survival to date (November 2020), as well as the Kremlin positioning relative to the events in Belarus. In contrast to Armenia's "soft" and increasingly institutionalized hybrid regime under Serzh Sargsyan, Belarus's authoritarianism is "hard" and personalized around Lukashenko. Since coming to power as a member of parliament in 1994, Lukashenko has flirted with governing with a parliamentary faction, but has ended up consolidating his rule without establishing a political party to support his political base. Throughout his rule, he has worked to consistently derail, dilute, and destroy the modicum of democratic politics that emerged during the short few years of Belarussian politics in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Since 1996, the regime has become increasingly closed, and the obliteration of even shallow democratic institutions has continued unabated by Lukashenko. Whether denying registration to opposition candidates to contesting elections to bypassing constitutional term limits, Lukashenko has personalized his power and produced a poorly institutionalized and rigid authoritarian system (Lenzi, 2002). Lukashenko's unchecked political power, void of any ideological and institutional support, has been described as "sultanistic authoritarian" because the key bases of his political rule include a mixture of fear and support to collaborators (Eke & Kuzio, 2000). This "sultanistic authoritarianism" has been sustained by Lukashenko's personalized power, which he inherited as a Soviet legacy in form of Soviet Belarusian republican patriotism (Eke & Kuzio, 2000): grounded in World War II historical myths, it supported Soviet models of state-based economy, sustained by low levels of national identity expressions at the time. The suppression of civil society structures was essential for containing national identity mobilization that were taking place elsewhere in Soviet republics. Others also have argued (Lenzi, 2002) that in contrast to its neighbors, there was no independence movement in Belarus in the twilight years of the Soviet Union—a key driver for democratization down the road.

Lukashenko's authoritarianism was maintained by preventing economic liberalization reforms that swept other post-Soviet states at the time: the share of the private economy in Belarus in 1998 accounted for only 20% of GDP (in contrast to 50–70% in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) (Karbalevich, 2004). Centralized economic management provided the economic resources to Lukashenko in co-opting and suppressing any public dissent that would develop. The marginality of the private sector, and the centralized economic power management, allowed Lukashenko to prevent the rise of decentralized power bases. The weak private sector curtailed the rise of competing oligarchs, as observed in Ukraine and Armenia, but it also prevented any potential for political decentralization. The state in Belarus dominates the economy in ownership as well as in management. According to the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, over 70% of the economy remains in the hands of the state (EBRD, 2021).

Denuded of political power, state institutions, personalized, co-opted and coerced, have been enabled by the destruction of the nascent civil society and the small NGO

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sector that emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. The civic roots of any democratic breakthrough are key for tactical success during the protests, but also for sustaining any democratic gains that can emerge. In the case of Belarus, the international support from the US and the EU in favor of pro-democracy groups in Belarus was limited, often undercut and derailed by Lukashenko himself. As an international factor, this is in contrast to Russia's financial and political support for Lukashenko, which allowed him to consolidate his power in the first decade of his rule (Vanderhill, 2014).

No Russian Restraint for Belarus

In contrast to its position in Armenia, the Kremlin has been much more vocal and directly supportive of the Lukashenko regime. Whether Russia will continue its support of Lukashenko, or will work through processes of constitutional reform in favor of a different, but Russia-friendly, candidate, remains to be seen. It is undeniable, however, that Russia has operated more freely in Belarus, in terms of providing financial, military, and political support to the embattled Lukashenko regime. Russia's more assertive stance in this case, and its restraint in Armenia, is partly explained by the dual-track approach developed in this work. Despite sustained protests, the numbers remain low relative to the population size of the country. Importantly, the depth of the civic roots in the movement is also shallow, with Belarus having less experience with mass protests and mobilization since the Soviet collapse. Combined with the institutionally denuded and rigid authoritarianism of the Lukashenko regime, Belarus is more vulnerable to Russian intervention than Armenia has been. Still, similar to Armenia, no direct military response by Russia has been materializing in Belarus.

Simon Saradzhyan (2018a) contends that Russia's red lines for undertaking military intervention in its spheres of influence are met by two conditions. First, Russia is more likely to act militarily if its vital national interests are attacked, and second, when a particular democratic breakthrough is an attempt to "escape" and join a "hostile alliance." The Russian-Georgian War of 2008 and post-Euromaidan intervention in Ukraine support this framework. Thus, Saradzhyan (22018b) contends that "color revolutions" are "not enough by themselves to prompt Russia to stage either a covert or overt intervention," nor does Russia intervene militarily just because a post-soviet country is undergoing democratization. Others have supported this argument by pointing out that the Kremlin is a pragmatic rather than an ideological player, and its role in autocratic promotion is overstated (Way, 2015).

Indeed, this analysis is clearly applicable to the case of Russian restraint in Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution of 2005 as well as Armenia's Velvet Revolution in 2018. More specifically, as long as attempts at democratic breakthrough do not cross the domestic parameters and spill into geopolitics, Russian restraint remains the expected behavior. Belarus's location in Russia's western frontiers, next to Europe's eastern frontlines, makes the country central to Russia's national interests. This, in addition to domestic factors discussed in this section, makes Belarus more susceptible for Russian response, which, in this case, is not limited to military strategies.

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CONCLUSION: DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKTHROUGHS IN FRACTURED REGIONS

Attempted democratic breakthroughs in the post-Soviet space are taking place in regionally divided and fractured settings (Ohanyan, 2018d). Democratic breakthroughs in such unsettled regional security orders are vulnerable to geopoliticization between Europe and Russia (Orenstein, 2019; Ohanyan, 2018d). Many countries with hybrid systems in Eurasia are faced with the challenge of building and consolidating authentic democratic institutions in deeply divided geopolitical environments. Managing geopolitical competition in the post-communist space has become a critical component for effective breakthroughs and subsequent consolidations of democratic outcomes.

Indeed, fractured regions nourish authoritarianism and state weakness (Ohanyan, 2015, 2018c, 2018d). They embolden oligarchs and weaken the broad-based development of market structures. Poor regional connectivity also dilutes civil society potential, while elevating security as a dominant goal in domestic politics in countries attempting democratic breakthroughs. Armenia's Velvet Revolution, in a deeply fractured regional neighborhood, stands in contrast to Belarus, which is regionally in a more favorable environment, surrounded by democratic states, within and outside of the EU. The comparison reveals that strong civil societies and institutionally developed states are two critical ingredients toward democratic breakthroughs and consolidation in otherwise regionally fractured neighborhoods. This study has argued that Armenia's Velvet Revolution in Russia's security orbit, and in the deeply fractured region of the South Caucasus, was possible because of several factors. These included the deep civic fabric in the society; the disciplined application of nonviolent disobedience as a strategy of mass mobilization; and the institutionalization of state institutions, albeit driven by the political needs of the previous, "soft" and loose authoritarian system in the country.

This phenomenon of regional fracturing (Ohanyan, 2015, 2018d; Orenstein, 2019; Broers and Ohanyan, 2020) has been reflected in the Western top-down and heavily securitized democratic promotion strategies in Russia's vast vicinities. In contrast, bottom-up and grassroots democratic openings, within Russia's security orbit, have exposed the organizational and strategic limits of traditional democracy promotion strategies within the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Understanding the grassroots capacities of social movements, expressed in their civic and bottom-up drivers in democratic breakthroughs, is important in a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar. This is particularly so when the heightened geopolitical tensions and weaker Western capacities to protect democratic gains against authoritarian resurgence worldwide are considered. But it is the stateness factor that conditions Russian restraint, we argued, which makes external intervention quite costly for the Kremlin. "Bringing the state back in" is overdue in understanding Armenia's successful democratic breakthrough as well as the challenges faced by the people in Belarus in achieving the same. ■

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