

Armenia: “Develop Immunity Against Violence”

Wednesday 15 November 2023, by [MANVELYAN Yuri](#), [Posle/После](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2023).

Why do the South Caucasus countries need to learn to think and act collectively? Why do protesters against Russian autocracy need to show solidarity throughout the post-Soviet states? How can Armenia get away from Artsakh (Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh) - centricity and the total Russian-language media flow? We asked these questions of Yuri Manvelyan, an Armenian journalist and an editor of Epress

We recorded this interview about a month ago and talked, in particular, about the unacceptability of military rhetoric regarding the settlement of Karabakh. The act of military aggression committed by Azerbaidjan halted such talks and did away with the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh). The Putin regime, which has withdrawn from the conflict due to the war in Ukraine, is trying to turn the tragic events in its favor. They say that the government of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, having leaned towards Western countries, deprived itself of a powerful ally and therefore lost its control over the disputed area. This narrative is being used by pro-Kremlin forces inside Armenia, while they bring protesters in front of the country's government building and call for a change of power. This once again demonstrates that the Kremlin, even when declaring itself an ally, thinks exclusively in terms of colonization and territorial expansion. There are grounds to believe that Armenian democracy will survive, but what will be the future fate of the Karabakh Armenians? It is an open question; it's a painful one, too. It seems UN forces are needed to solve it, an international mediator could ensure the rights of the Karabakh Armenians in the event of their reintegration.

The Putin regime has never been interested in resolving the conflict in Artsakh/Karabakh. How do you assess Russia's role in the conflict? And how has it changed in the context of the war in Ukraine?

By saying the “Putin's regime,” we are shortening Russia's role in this conflict. The policies of the regime, which extend to the Caucasus region and the post-Soviet states, are not exclusively Putin's thing. We saw what was happening in Chechnya. In this sense, the “Putin's regime” existed long before Putin. It operates in the same scenario. Since the times of the Tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, the central government has been receiving reports [from the countries that were first part of the empire and then the Soviet Union], and has been using the same methods in their work.

[At the same time,] we [in Armenia] know very little about Ukraine, about Azerbaijan, even about Georgia, although the borders with the country are open. We don't just know little; our knowledge is mediated [by the Russian media]. A lot of information comes to Armenia in Russian. Language itself has content, so information comes along with that content. Even opposing opinions and criticism of the war in Ukraine are from a Russian-speaking context. As of today, the people who have been hurt by Putin's regime have public spokespersons, so their voices also reach here. We learned about the

disaster in Ukraine from these people.

There are Armenians left in Karabakh. Even though this is the territory of Azerbaijan, these people feel bad there, it is a problem that needs to be solved. They are being driven out of there. The logic behind this process goes like this: if Russia weakens, one can put pressure on it, and hence put pressure on Armenia and the people living in Karabakh. There is simply no hope of solidarity from the Azerbaijani side with the people on this side of the front. Direct contacts are the most difficult. We know for sure how to fight and hurt each other. Can't we just have an open conversation? When I mentioned not knowing each other, I mean that people know very little about what's going on. What is the attitude of people in Armenia towards the war in Ukraine? What do people in Russia think about the Karabakh conflict? The majority of them know very little and are not interested in what is happening.

You say how little people in the region know each other. For example, Armenia and Georgia have been historically and culturally close, but when I talk with Armenians about Georgians, I hear contempt. What are the reasons for mutual contempt and unwillingness to get to know each other?

We have joint activist projects, but the people [in Armenia] starting these projects do not have Georgia in the picture. There is a feeling that, in these regions, we live in an atomized way. We expect that France, the European Union, and Russia will help us. But [the countries of the South Caucasus] do not consider ourselves to be one region. [Although] we don't seem to be going to fight each other, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Turks, Kurds, Yezidis are going to live here. And one's position must include them all.

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Even my Armenian relatives, who live in the Stavropol Territory, when reflecting on something abstract as “the place of Armenians in the world,” try to put them in second place [after Russia]. And this way of thinking is completely inappropriate for life in this region. This is adequate for someone who thinks they live in a country whose capital is Moscow, and who is ready to join the central elite. This is the conflict: the struggle for artifacts, when one becomes an Armenian scholar, turns oneself into a fossil, and brands one country as if they were a tourist. This is what politicians say, they say, “Armenia is a brand, an open-air museum, a ‘crossroads of civilizations.’” No, guys, I live here, I am drafted into the military service, I am pressured by the police here, and I have to pay taxes, and send my kids to school here. For me, this is not a “crossroads of civilizations.”

Do you mean the so-called “great sea to sea Armenia”?

Yes, internal militarization of the region's borders is absurd, expensive, dangerous, and requires a huge annual tribute in terms of people and money. It is happening despite the independence of the region and prevents a response to possible aggression in the region. The political and social fields lack the understanding of where we live.

It is crucial here [in the countries of the former USSR] not to isolate processes. There is no [a separate] Armenian revolution, [a separate] Armenian process. No, the processes are connected. A lot of mistakes were made after the developments of 2018 when we had the so-called “Velvet Revolution.” Nikol Pashinyan joined this movement, but he did not understand that the developments in Armenia, and especially the precedent of its democratic revolution had a great influence on the situation in Azerbaijan. As a result, his team put the revolution into a parochial box and branded the Armenian revolution as the [“Velvet Revolution.”](#) Whether the next one will be

“pink,” “orange,” or something else, the point is that the processes in the countries are very interconnected. Our revolution was bloodless, however, blood was shed two years later in Karabakh. The Maidan Revolution in Ukraine seemed relatively bloodless, [although we must remember about] the [“The Heaven’s Hundred Heroes,”](#) recognizing those killed in the revolution. Now we see how much blood is being shed. In Belarus, all the people took to the streets, everything was there for a revolution — and suddenly we saw how alone these protesting people, communities, and countries were.

[This is because] there is no solidarity towards the protests in other countries. Pressure on us is quite international: there is no problem for the Russian special forces to come here or to Belarus and beat up the protesters and help with propaganda. But resistance is never international. In this sense, the region from the Black to the Caspian Sea needs to [develop] a sense of autonomy that at the same time would respect borders and sovereignties. Ignoring borders and sovereignties is the habit of the Russian state. When we consider the national state to be evil, the Russian national state is an utter evil in this sense.

Armenia was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet state, it was a colony in fact. Now it is an independent state, but the Kremlin does not give it the opportunity to develop independently. In your opinion, what needs to happen for Armenia and the Caucasus region to pursue an independent policy and move away from Russian autocracy?

The discourse of Armenian nationalism was formed and developed during the Soviet period, after World War II. The Bolsheviks were the ones to indulge in nationalism and betray their comrades, and then the Union was divided into national units. And Russian-ness dominates in this discourse. These nationalisms developed in the Soviet Union in the interests of the Party’s general line. And to this day these sorts of nationalism have been running counter to the independence movement. The nationalist and right-wing groups in Ukraine had the most Kremlin agents. It’s the same here, as well as in Georgia. Russian influence is always there in far-right parties and groups. Therefore, the process of [gaining] independence for the region is long and faces daily opposition. Attempts at regional independence are doomed without the solidarity among those who live nearby. We lack this solidarity in the public space; we always want to jump over, skip our neighbors, and appeal to Sweden, for instance. Even the Karabakh conflict, we should remember, includes at least two parties, Armenian and Azerbaijani. However, all [mainstream] rhetoric goes like this: Armenians must reach an agreement with Armenians. Armenians from the diaspora or smart Armenians from Moscow will come, and we will reach an agreement together. No, it won’t be like that, as it is not an Armenian-Armenian issue. If oligarchy is a problem (as it is in all the post-Soviet states), then let’s see who the main oligarchs are in our region. We should fight this together.

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Still, a lot of resources are spent to justify the violence, and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s, which is still going on today. The Azerbaijanis were driven from here, the Armenians were pushed away from there. If political life was not oppressed by security forces, autocracies, and oil and gas people, then, naturally, the most significant rallies calling to protect the Karabakh Armenians would have been in Baku. The same thing should happen here when Azerbaijani villages are attacked. But this is not the case, there is no immunity against violence.

I think this is an important idea of identifying oneself not through a small national state, but through a region, a community. It is unproductive to think only about joining with some large and strong ally.

Armenia will still have to join somewhere. Armenia needs gas that comes from Russia through Georgia. It also comes from Iran, but Gazprom bought the pipeline long ago so it would in no way be an alternative to Russian gas. There is also Azerbaijani gas. The oil company of Azerbaijan is the number one taxpayer in Georgia. The influence of Azerbaijan will still be great regardless of whether there is war or peace. But there are no civil groups that would say that it is unnecessary to fight but to promote the gas pipeline instead. Through Karabakh, for instance. In fact, South Caucasian inclusive separatism can spread to the east of Turkey, the south of Russia, and the north of Iran. Everywhere these are the outskirts of former empires, where, as in Russia, the security forces dominate. But it would be great if something humanitarian, and human-centric is built in the region. The south of Russia might well join in, for the sake of quality medicine, and education, for safety reasons. But it is absurd to expect an equal relationship with the Turkish elites, Russian or Iranian authorities. Even though these countries have different economies, they have similar illnesses — nostalgia and imperial phantom pain. They deem the countries of the Caucasus region as their outskirts. These are their diseases, we shouldn't contract them here, shouldn't be proud of capturing new territories. This is not us.

The situation in Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] is a sensitive matter. To my knowledge, only a few journalists/activists have gone out on a limb and said publicly that the military solution to the conflict is not the only one. Can and should non-military solutions to the Karabakh situation be proposed publicly?

That is the only way worth thinking about. We have a lot of priorities to deal with, and people in camouflage are not the ones to seek help from. They will only stand in the way and demand more funding. Over half of the deaths in the Armenian military forces have to do with internal conflicts rather than with enemy action.

The “Armenian” solution to the Karabakh situation meant that there should be no Azerbaijanis there. Since 2020, we have seen Armenians being pushed away and forced out of Karabakh. That is the continuation of the pogroms and ethnic cleansing of the late 1980s and early 1990s. There was no significant resistance to those processes at that time, and no initiatives, parties, or movements to protect non-Armenians in Armenia or non-Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijan have emerged over the years of independence.

Of course, there will remain a number of loyal and helpless Armenians in Karabakh to be exploited by the current Azerbaijani authorities to paint a better image in the media. The current Azerbaijani authorities don't want any disloyal citizens of a “different” origin. We see what they do to the dissenting Azerbaijanis and how they use war and the image of the enemy to suppress resistance. We learn about the situation in Azerbaijan from people who often pay with their freedom and life for providing that information. Armenia has experienced that; in 2018, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets against those who had come to power and made fortunes in war.

The fight against oligarchs is as relevant in Georgia as it is in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Without solidarity between the people in the region, that resistance will keep breaking against wars that perpetuate the power of oligarchs and the dependence on imperial ambitions.

From Russia's perspective, the 2020 war was a special operation to deploy troops to Azerbaijan, the only country in the South Caucasus that had no Russian military presence. As is usually the case in our region, this is done by exterminating the local population. Today, Karabakh Armenians are a human shield for the Russian army and those accommodating it in Karabakh and Armenia.

When I talk to Armenians, I often see their rejection of Ukraine because it had helped Azerbaijan during the 2020 war. Can Ukraine's actions in that conflict and Putin's

aggression be treated separately?

Even if you don't know much of the Ukrainian context, it is still clear that there is a certain country with its military leaders being dead certain that the neighboring country is not a country at all. Which side is easier to associate with when you hear things like that? Things suggesting that before the Russian empire came there was no Ukraine, no Ukrainian language or culture?

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Now, who are we for? Russia when we go there and are stopped by a police officer? It's all the same. “We built cities, factories, power plants for you, so we can destroy them, too.” All that rhetoric is applied to this region, too; for Moscow, the locals are all gooks that look the same. As for Ukraine helping Azerbaijan — well, I don't know. Russia is the main supplier of weapons to the region and to Azerbaijan.

Let's look at the pre-war situation. Immediately after the 2018 revolution, questions arose — what to do with the law enforcers, how to reform the justice system? It turned out Russia's experience was not just outdated; it was neither needed nor applicable.

Almost every week we have a press briefing by some Iranian studies expert. There are experts in Azeri, Turkish, and Georgian studies, but no Russian studies experts. Why not? I guess, there's something colonial to it.

It is extremely hard to articulate the left agenda in the former Soviet Union because the prevailing idea is that abandoning autocracy requires a pro-Western neoliberal path. Is this agenda present in Armenia?

In Armenia there are no large enterprises, the bigger part of the border is closed, the market is very small, there is high unemployment, large-scale migration, and employers mistreat their employees. Although emigration was never labeled that way, it has become the most massive political protest over the years. We are in a situation where we keep experiencing earthquakes. Who cares about agendas when we have to clear the debris, build wheelchair ramps, and buy wheelchairs? There's a humanitarian human rights sector, which is often apolitical. When it comes to discussing the matters of war though, they immediately refer to Artsakh, that is, Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. The grassroots agenda gets stuck in the thick of human rights activism that has become a whole industry over these years.

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Clearly, there is a social agenda there, and some prisoner-of-war's mother or blockaded Karabakh people may suddenly cry it out. If one puts social justice first, they have to think about and redefine seemingly non-negotiable ideas like “who my people are, why I need a state, who are my friends, and who are my foes.” This agenda is constantly oppressed by the “they-will-come-and-kill-us-all” fears. There's a lot of noise. And one has to make their agenda be heard in that noise. One has to say what the left agenda will mean for Artsakh. It's not all about Artsakh alone, people. Don't lie suggesting that everyone in this state is obsessed with Artsakh. The political dissident Paruyr Hayrikyan used to say that the fixation on Artsakh is devastating for our state. It absorbs everything.

Now, tens of thousands of Russians have moved here to get away from the war. So, people can go to Armenia if they are against war. But can those Azerbaijanis who oppose the war in Azerbaijan go to Armenia? Maybe some people from Iraq, some Yazidis, Turks, and Kurds will follow. We keep talking about the demographic crisis, by the way. People opposed to war are a good example. Let's make it a thing, let's promote it. Now, 12,000 Russians will be able to vote in Yerevan's local government elections. If one is a resident and has registration, one can actually elect the mayor of Yerevan. It will be very interesting. Now the Armenian state seems to be all for peace and all the good things. So let people come from all over. I think it would be good for self-defense, too. We will solidarize on the antiwar principle.

Of course, it's different for Ukrainians. I have friends in the Territorial Defense Forces there; there are artillery shellings every day. But even in that kind of situation, it is easier for me to picture myself in the trenches with the people [fighting] against war rather than with those fighting against the Ottoman Empire. President Kocharyan used to say that "we are genetically incompatible with Azerbaijanis." This is a man whose career began in the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. So much for that kind of rhetoric and ideological commitment.

Armenia is ranked high on the World Press Freedom Index. Russia is ranked one of the lowest. How much does Russia interfere in Armenia's internal politics through the media?

All the major channels are pro-Russian, it's commonplace. Even the anti-Russian agenda is built on Russian sources. I mean, the anti-Russian agenda never leads to the question: "Why don't we study Belarusian or Polish at the Slavonic University?" Okay, we already speak Russian; let's also study Serbian and Croatian. We would see there's also Polish literature; not only Russian. Even international news is brought via Russian-language sources.

"Don't lie suggesting that everyone in this state is obsessed with Artsakh"

Yes, freedom of speech is total; it is surely better than it used to be in the past. [But] the ex-presidents and officials have merely lost their administrative positions while keeping their fortunes and businesses, as well as their influence over the press. Their competitors didn't have TV channels. The current authorities don't have a TV channel either. The Armenian soft-science crowd clings to those in power and business and writes texts for them. And all those texts look backward, focusing on history. Business people and politicians can't speak about their way of life; it's a gangster way of life. But a businessman can speak profusely about the genocide or the thousand-year-old history, even though no one authorized them to do that. But they are eager to talk about those things, as they can't talk about anything else.

In this sense, Russia's influence has no competition. After 2018, many journalists from the presidential press pool lost their privileges such as being close to those in power, the ability to get someone out of going into the military service, to get a customs clearance, and to get an apartment. So, many journalists hold personal grudges about this situation. There is freedom of speech, and there is no censorship at the top, but who uses that freedom? Those who are angry about the privileges they no longer have. When hundreds of thousands took to the streets, it turned out that the journalists speaking on people's behalf disliked these very people and called them *hoi polloi* using the Armenian word for "chaff." They say the same about Pashinyan, too, that "he's from the countryside, he's illiterate." There's a lot of noise. And it's impossible to cut in. It's the freedom of rampant noise.

Yuri Manvelyan

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