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***The re-composition of the post-Soviet
space: relations between Armenia and
Russia from 2018 to the present***

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ABSTRACT

The relation between Armenia and Russia has its roots in the 19th century and continues to play a crucial role in the geopolitical context of Caucasus region. This dissertation delves into Armenia's position within the reconfiguration of the post-Soviet space, aiming to shed light on the development of its relationship with Russia.

Central to this examination is the Velvet Revolution of 2018, considered a potential 'turning point' that sparked critical debate on Yerevan's ties with Moscow, and the prospect of Armenia shifting towards the West.

The thesis seeks to underscore Armenia's enduring and significant reliance on Moscow, persisting even after the collapse of the URSS.

The methodological approach adopted is grounded in historical analysis, exploring the roots of the bilateral relationship, and focusing on the impact of Tsarist and Soviet dominance on Armenian society. This historical reflection extends to the present day, evaluating the current state of the relationship in light of contemporary geopolitical framework, as well as outlining some future prospects.

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List of Abbreviations

CEPA Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement

CIS Commonwealth of Independent States

CSTO Collective Security Treaty Organization

CU Customs Union

DFCTA Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement

DSCA Delegation for the South Caucasus

EAEU/EEU Eurasian Economic Union

EaP Eastern partnership

EAPC Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council

EU European Union

EUMA European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia

EURASEC Eurasian Economic Community

GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO Non-governmental Organization

OECD Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development

OSCE Organization on Security and Cooperation

PfP Partnership for Peace

PM Prime Minister

RAO UES Energy Systems of East

SCP South Caucasus Pipeline

T.S.S.R. Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic

TANAP Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline

TAP Trans Adriatic Pipeline

UN United Nations Organization

UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USA United States

USAID United States Agency for International Development

USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

Introduction

The Caucasus represents one of the most complex and ancient areas of the world. The region, located in a geographical position on the border between Europe and Asia, has always been considered a 'frontier'. Today, it increasingly emerges as an area of strategic interest for several reasons; firstly, because of the significant natural resources in the area and, secondly, because it operates as a transit corridor for them between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Moreover, the ethnic and linguistic diversity that characterises the Caucasus has shaped the region's destiny, making it a crossroads of peoples and cultures thousands of years old, but also an area of conflict and rivalry.

Located in the South Caucasus is Armenia, a country with a history dating back thousands of years. Since ancient times, Armenia has been a country rich in culture and with a very ancient history, as evidenced by the invention of the alphabet in the 5th century. Nevertheless, the Armenian people have always played a significant role in trade between East and West.

Moreover, Armenia's geopolitical position makes the country a point of convergence between neighbouring regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Russia, all of which have played an important role in shaping and defining Armenia's history and today continue to influence the stability of the region.

Armenia's evolution is closely linked to the history of its relations with Russia, which played a crucial role in determining the country's destiny. The convergence between the two countries became clear from the 17th century, when Armenians began to

perceive Russia as a possible ally against Persian and Ottoman expansion, in the name of their shared Christian faith. It was then with the conquest of the Southern Caucasus by the Russian Empire that Armenia came into direct contact with Russia.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the relations between the two countries, particularly in the context of the post-Soviet space. Armenia, which first became part of the Tsarist empire and later of the Soviet Union, became independent in 1991.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Armenia and Russia continue to be strong, not only in light of the shared common history, but also because of a strong dependence on Russia.

Armenia does not benefit from a favourable geographic position, being landlocked, lacking significant natural resources within its territory and, above all, not enjoying good relations with some of its neighbours, in particular Turkey and Azerbaijan, with which it fought the Nagorno Karabakh conflict for thirty years.

In this context, relations with Russia have developed considerably, leading to an asymmetry in the relationship between the two countries: Yerevan has been increasingly economically, energetically and militarily dependent on Moscow.

Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of the post-Soviet space has led to a high level of interest in the Caucasus area by global and regional actors, causing Russia to pay special attention to what it considers its 'backyard'. Thus, what is called by some a version of the 19th century 'Great Game' is happening again. In this sense, the choice of this topic stems from the desire to better understand the dynamics of international relations in this complex region and the

geopolitical importance that the Caucasus has been assuming recently. Analysing the relations between Armenia and Russia allows the challenges and opportunities that characterise the post-Soviet space to be grasped.

Central to the analysis of this paper is the Velvet Revolution of 2018, which can be seen as a turning point in Russian-Armenian relations. This event, characterised by peaceful protests, led to the fall of Serzh Sargsyan's government and the rise to power of Nikol Pashinyan. The political change raised questions about Armenia's possible departure from the Russian sphere of influence and a potential shift towards the West.

This analysis is elaborated in five chapters, aimed at answering the research question: *"What is Armenia's attitude towards relations with Russia and how has it changed concerning the Russian Federation's post-Soviet space recomposition project?"*

In the first and second chapters, a historical excursus is treated in order to explain the convergence of the relationship between Russia and Armenia and how it developed first during the tsarist empire and then during the Soviet period.

The third chapter highlights the difficult post-Soviet period for the countries of the South Caucasus, characterised by instability, institutional vacuum, corruption and conflict. Nevertheless, it highlights the region's international importance, not only because of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, but also because of the energy resources present.

The fourth chapter analyses Russian foreign policy towards its former Soviet neighbours and Armenian foreign policy, examining how the latter falls in line with the Russian project.

Finally, the fifth chapter aims to highlight the ‘turning point’ of 2018; it analyses how the Velvet Revolution may have affected relations between the two countries. To conclude, there is a Q&A with an international expert, who kindly answered several questions and provided future perspectives on the topic.

The methodology adopted in this work is based on a historical analysis extending to the present day. Through the use of different sources, including Russian and Armenian, and both historical and contemporary sources, it is intended to provide an overview of relations between Moscow and Yerevan. Finally, interviews were conducted with experts in the field who contributed to the analysis by offering a current perspective with qualified opinions. One international relations expert is quoted in the final Q&A with his name, while another expert in international relations and Armenian foreign policy preferred to remain anonymous, ensuring an authentic contribution.

CHAPTER I : From the beginning

1.1. Historical contextualization and convergence of the Russian-Armenian relationship

Armenia is a nation with a thousand-year history and a crucial geographical location.

Geographically, the nation is located in western Asia, bordering Georgia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, Iran to the southeast, and Turkey to the west.

The region boasts a predominantly mountainous landscape: it consists of several high plateaus and mountain ridges, among which Mount Ararat, now located in Turkey, is the highest and most famous mountain in Armenia, at 5,137 meters high.

Armenia's geographical position is of crucial importance in the context of regional relations, as it lies at a point of convergence between three influential powers: Iran, Turkey, and Russia¹. Throughout its history, each of these nations has played a significant role in shaping Armenia's political destiny. The country's strategic location places it in a sensitive position, exposed to the interests and geopolitical dynamics of these regional powers. This geographical intersection has not only helped define Armenia's political history but continues to influence international relations and stability in the region.

Moreover, it is crucial to point out that Armenia is one of the constituent nations of the Caucasus region, the huge mountainous

¹ A. MIRZOYAN (2010), *Armenia, the regional powers, and the West: Between History and Geopolitics*, Springer, New York, p.9

region stretching between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The region has always represented one of the oldest and most culturally complex areas in the world. Its history has been shaped for centuries by interactions, clashes, and influences from different civilizations².

While the Caucasus has emerged as an area of great strategic importance in the contemporary geopolitical context following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, its current prominence should not obscure its complex historical and cultural dimension.

Indeed, the complex historical background of the region reflects an area characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and historical diversity. First of all, the ethno-linguistic situation in the Caucasus is very complex: the region is home to many ethnic groups, such as Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Chechens, Ossetians, Circassians, Kabardins, and many others³; this ethnic diversity is certainly also reflected in the variety of languages spoken in the region and the different customs and traditions. However, the extreme religious diversity is a further factor of complexity: while the peoples of the North Caucasus are almost all Sunni Muslims, with the exception of the Russians and Ossetians, the South Caucasus, or Transcaucasia, is inhabited by both the Azerbaijani Shia Muslims and the Georgian and Armenian peoples, who are Christians. The importance of Christianity for these two

² Ibidem

³ For a discussion on the topic, see FERRARI A.(2008), *Breve storia del Caucaso*, Carocci, Roma.

populations should be stressed, as it is an element of great importance and national identity.

Certainly, in order to understand the history and present of the Caucasus region, it is essential to emphasize how it conventionally constitutes the geographical border between Europe and Asia. The Greater Caucasus Mountain range, which lies to the north of the region and extends for more than a thousand kilometers, helps to define the perception of a border between the European and Asian zones. It is noteworthy that in this case the condition of the 'border' goes beyond mere geography: this border condition is not limited to a mere geographical distinction but profoundly influences the development processes of its constituent parts, i.e. Cis-Caucasus and Transcaucasus. Despite sharing common elements, both regions have experienced profoundly different political and cultural developments.

In the North Caucasus, the peoples have arrived at their present status as essentially tribal entities, characterized by a limited capacity to form broader political organizations. This situation can be attributed to extreme ethno-cultural fragmentation, the consequences of violent encounters with the nomadic peoples of the steppes, and the lack of developed political structures, as Ferrari points out⁴.

In the South Caucasus, by contrast, the presence of more homogeneous ethnic communities and proximity to the complex structures of the Middle East have favored the development of state formations since ancient times, as evidenced by the kingdoms of

⁴ FERRARI A. (2008), cit. p. 19

Georgia and Armenia. However, none of these entities managed to extend their influence over the entire region or to create a unified political space. It was not until the Russian conquest that the Caucasian space was integrated into a single political system.

The epochal Russian conquest, acting as a turning point and watershed in the history of the Caucasus, not only incorporated the Caucasus space into a single political system but also triggered an intricate web of interactions between Russia and Armenia, the roots of which are deeply intertwined with the very evolution of this mountainous region.

The evolution of the Caucasus is intrinsically linked to the history of interactions between Russia and Armenia, and it plays a crucial role in Armenian history. Armenians are an ancient people with one of the oldest civilizations in the world, characterized by a strong historical and cultural antiquity. Their cultural traditions, which date back thousands of years and were accentuated by the invention of the national alphabet at the beginning of the 5th century, have helped shape their identity⁵.

Armenia has a rich cultural and historical heritage. The Urartu Empire, dating back to the 7th century B.C., is considered the first civilized people to have lived in Armenia⁶. The Armenian people, of Indo-European origins, were mentioned by Herodotus⁷ in his work 'Histories' in the 5th century BC and later by Xenophon⁸.

⁵ For completeness, see FERRARI A. & G. TRAINA (2020), *Storia degli Armeni*, Il Mulino, Le vie della civiltà, pp. 224

⁶ MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1955), *The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia, 1920-1936*, A study of Planned Cultural transformation, p. 7

⁷ See Erodoto, Storie libro V in RUGGIERO R.(1999). *Erodoto, V, 49-54: esercizi di critica verbale*. L'Antiquité Classique, 68, pp. 23–33.

⁸ WALKER C. (2021), in *History of Armenia* reports that Xenophon passed through Armenia and recorded the local custom of drinking beer through a straw.

Nonetheless, many trade routes passed through Armenia: the ancient country was on the silk and spice trade routes connecting the East with the West⁹. From ancient times, Armenians had established contacts with the Russian world, mainly through trade activities, dating back as far as the Kievan era. The presence of Armenians was felt not only in the commercial activities of other countries, but also in the political sphere. An emblematic example is one of the first Persian ambassadors to Venice in 1471, who was the Armenian Mirat¹⁰. However, it was then over the following centuries, especially from the 16th century onwards, following the complete incorporation of Greater Armenia into the Islamic political and cultural context, that many Armenians embarked on a long and significant emigration process, giving rise to the formation of important Armenian colonies. In particular, the migratory flow of Armenians to the Russian Empire was robust and regular, involving mainly merchants and craftsmen.

The Russian Empire, with crucial centers such as Moscow and Astrakhan, represented an important stage in the Armenian diaspora until the 18th century¹¹.

Russia's direct entry into the Caucasus occurred during the 16th century, following the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1556, thus opening the way southwards. However, it was only from 1600 onwards that Armenians began to focus their attention on Russia, perceived as a possible ally against Persian and

⁹ KARAKASHIAN M. (1998), *Armenia: A Country's History of Challenges*, Journal of Social Issues, 54: 381-392., p.382

¹⁰ ZEKIYAN L. B. (1978), *XoĠa Safar Ambasciatore Di Shāh 'Abbās A Venezia*. Oriente Moderno, 58(7/8), 357–367, p.357

¹¹ FERRARI A. & TRAINA G. (2020), cit., p. 101

Ottoman threats. It was precisely the Christian faith shared between Armenians and Russia that constituted a fundamental point of convergence¹². This period marks a direct and important point of contact between Russia, the Caucasus and the Armenian population. During the 18th century, ties between Armenia and Russia strengthened on economic, cultural, and political fronts. The foundation of new Armenian colonies on Russian territory, such as Nor Naxijewan in 1779¹³, is evidence of the deepening relationship. Russia thus became an important point of reference for the Armenian diaspora.

The conquest of the South Caucasus between 1800 and 1829 represented a pivotal moment, bringing about a radical change in the history of the Armenian people and the intensification of relations with the Russian people. The connection between the history of the Caucasus, the Armenians, and ties with Russia was further consolidated with the impact of the Russian conquest in 1800, marking a decisive chapter in the complex web of interactions between these historical entities.

It was, however, the conquest of the South Caucasus that represented a crucial moment: occurring between 1800 and 1829, it brought about a radical change in the history of the Armenian people and the history of relations between them and the Russian people.

¹² FERRARI A. (2008), cit., p.53

¹³ FERRARI A. & TRAINA G. (2020), cit., p. 138

1.2 The conquest of the South Caucasus

The Russian conquest of the South Caucasus is a clear continuum of events that took place in the late 18th century¹⁴. This crucial period outlined the conditions and dynamics that would radically transform the region, setting the stage for the annexation of Transcaucasia. When the new Russian Emperor Alexander I ascended the throne and, after much hesitation, confirmed the annexation of eastern Georgia to Russia, the whole conquest of the Transcaucasian region began. The annexation of the whole region took place in a very confused and controversial way¹⁵: the conquest was very long and to some extent exhausting, lasting about three decades and marked not only by hostilities and local uprisings but also by a constant war with the Persians and the Ottomans.

The main motivations that drove the Russian Empire to conquer the South Caucasus were, at least in the beginning, economic: the Empire wanted to profit from the control of Transcaucasia, which was rich in raw materials¹⁶, and to be able to establish part of the Russian industry there. However, the Russian Empire struggled and took a long time to find a policy suited to the complex local reality.

¹⁴ Some of the main events include the first expedition to the South Caucasus organized by Peter the Great in 1722, the plan for a second expedition in 1783 that failed again, and the entry of the Russian army into the region in 1791, followed by its withdrawal. See DE WAAL T. (2019), *The Casucasus: an introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York.

¹⁵ FERRARI A. (2005), *Il Caucaso: popoli e conflitti di una frontiera europea*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma, p.35

¹⁶ The Caucasus region is rich in raw materials such as oil and natural gas, mainly in the Azerbaijan area. See International Energy Agency (2023), *Report on Azerbaijan*, available at <https://www.iea.org/reports/azerbaijan-energy-profile/overview>

From a political point of view, the years between 1804 and 1813 were among the most difficult. A highly aggressive policy on the part of the Russian Empire exacerbated the serious misunderstandings between the local elites and the Russian authorities. It should be stressed that the region's geographical, ethnic, and religious complexity must be taken into account. Indeed, the Russian military and officials were characterized by corruption, arrogance, and a lack of respect for local traditions, not to mention a lack of knowledge of the complex environment in which they were operating and the fact that they were mostly involved in repressing the Muslim population living in the mountains.

On the other hand, the Russian Empire pursued an effective policy of co-opting local elites, a policy that had already been implemented with the Tatars. This policy consisted of gaining the loyalty of local elites through various means, such as government and administrative positions or participation in local institutions. This policy was used extensively by Mikhail Voronkov¹⁷, who, when he was appointed by Nicholas I to govern the regions of southern Russia, replaced the previously common Russian officials with members of the local elite. In Transcaucasia, in particular, Voronkov not only co-opted the elites into the imperial administration, but also imposed on Russian officials an attitude of respect towards the local population.

¹⁷ Mikhail Semenovich Voronkov (1782-1856) fought brilliantly against Napoleon in his youth and was awarded with the title of *namestnik*, i.e. viceroy of the Caucasus region. See URUSHADZE A.T. & SULABERIDZE Z.N. (2020), *The Caucasian Viceroy Michael Vorontsov and his Fraction*, Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History, vol. 65, iss. 2, pp. 375–391.

Voronkov's policy had positive results: trust was established between the Russian authorities and the local population, and the region grew economically and culturally. As a result, Transcaucasia was organically integrated into the empire and began a process of significant development. Voronkov was particularly popular with the Armenians and Georgians: as Urushadze and Sulaberidze note, “*he was able to create a reliable patronage network that excluded opposition and formed the basis of the viceroy's regional autocracy*”¹⁸. The local population that supported the viceroy included the Georgian princely clans, including the Orbeliani family, and Armenian merchants. Voronkov succeeded in making the region prosperous and loyal, thus consolidating the Tsarist conquest.

The reaction of the local populations to the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia was, on generally positive: although the assessment of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus is rather complex, it was positive, especially for the Armenians and Georgians.

The Armenians welcomed the arrival of the Russians in Transcaucasia as it brought considerable benefits. Tsarist troops facilitated the settlement of thousands of Armenian refugees from Turkey and Persia in the newly acquired Russian lands. Furthermore, vast areas previously occupied by Muslims were allocated to the Armenians¹⁹.

¹⁸ URUSHADZE A.T. & SULABERIDZE Z.N. (2020), cit. p.375

¹⁹ LIBARIDIAN G. J., (2004), *Modern Armenia: people, nation, state*, Transaction Publishers, p.5

First among the factors that made the conquest a positive one was the common Christian tradition between the Armenians and Georgians and the Russian Empire, which allowed them, after centuries of forced insertion into the Islamic context, to be inserted into a Christian state.

For the Armenians, their integration into the Russian Empire brought significant benefits. From 1828 onwards, the Armenian Apostolic Church became an important point of reference for the tsarist government, which consolidated its spiritual authority and granted privileges to the Armenian community, also thanks to the entry into force of the ‘Statute of Polozenie’²⁰. By strengthening the spiritual authority of the See of Ejmiacin, the tsarist government hoped to exert its influence over the Armenians of Persia and the Ottoman Empire²¹. Nevertheless, according to the Polozenie, the Katholikos of the Armenian Church had to be confirmed by the tsar before assuming office²².

Secondly, another factor that allows us to define the incorporation of the Armenians into the Russian Empire as positive is the demographic factor: studies²³ carried out in the light of the demographic data published by the 1897 census, the first to be carried out according to modern criteria, show us that the

²⁰ The Polozenie Statute was decisive for the Armenian community in the Russian Empire because with it, the Armenian Apostolic Church was declared free to perform its spiritual functions and protected by the state. With the statute, the full possession of the Church of all its properties, free of taxes, was recognized. The regulated relations between the Armenian community and the tsarist state until 1917. See MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1995), cit.

²¹ FERRARI A.& G. TRAINA (2020), cit. p. 141.

²² MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1955), cit., p. 21

²³ PIPES R. (1959), *Demographic and Ethnographic Changes in Transcaucasia, 1897-1956*, Middle East Journal, vol. 13, no. 1, 1959, pp. 41–63.

percentage of Armenians living in Eastern Armenia in that year was much higher than before the Russian conquest, with approximately 1.1 million inhabitants.

The most controversial but sometimes most interesting aspect concerns the cultural sphere: the inclusion of Armenians within the Russian empire allowed them to become part of a process of modernization and Europeanisation that probably would not have been possible otherwise. The spread of modern culture was made possible mainly thanks to the school system, sometimes favored by the *Polozhenie*, which encouraged the Church to establish primary and secondary education schools. The *Polozhenie* mainly regulated the Armenian parish school system by stipulating that schools should be under the supervision of the bishop of the diocese and that their programs should be submitted to the Minister of the Interior of the Empire²⁴. In any case, the programs had to include the Russian language, history, and geography.

However, many wealthy Armenians preferred to study in Russian schools or universities, such as those in St. Petersburg or Moscow and were exposed to European culture through various channels. A Eurocentric 'intelligentsia' emerged, *“eager to rescue Armenian society from centuries of Asian and Muslim darkness, economic and cultural backwardness”*²⁵.

Thus, the positive character of the incorporation of the Armenian population into the Tsarist Empire can hardly be denied. In summary, the incorporation of Armenians into the Tsarist Empire

²⁴ MATOSSIAN M. A. K (1995), cit. p.48

²⁵ FERRARI A. (2005), *La cultura russa e il Caucaso. Il caso armeno*, in *Studi Slavistici* II, p.146

represented a positive phase in their history: the common religious tradition, the co-option of local elites, and demographic support facilitated a transition that, although complex, contributed to the socio-cultural progress of the Armenian community within the Russian Empire.

Chapter 2: The Soviet Period

2.1 From imperial policies in Transcaucasia to the Soviet period

The territory of Armenia has always been a crucial node in the intricate political dynamics of the Caucasus region. From its annexation to the Russian Empire in the 19th century, through the revolutions and changes that defined the Soviet period, Armenia has experienced a series of political transformations that have shaped its identity.

While the Russian conquest of the Caucasus may be seen as an advantage due to the complex geopolitics of the region, it is crucial to recognize that this historical development also represented the beginning of a phase of significant change for Armenia.

As Russia aimed to expand its influence in the region, the tsarist government implemented a new policy of Russification. Under Alexander II, who represented a dynastic state, ethnic and cultural diversity within the empire was largely tolerated, with an emphasis on integration rather than elimination of local customs²⁶.

The Russian tsars' policy of cultural assimilation in the 1880s had a profound impact on the Armenian community, resulting in irreversible changes.

From the 1880s onwards, the Russian Empire implemented policies of cultural assimilation in order to consolidate control over the Caucasian region. This period marked the beginning of an era of authoritarian and 'Russifying' policies towards the Caucasian

²⁶Ibidem

peoples, resulting in a significant change in relations with the region's inhabitants.

In Armenia, tsarist policies, outlined as a reaction to the proliferation of Armenian nationalism²⁷, must be understood in the broader context of an era of social and political transformation.

The political shift adopted by Alexander III was primarily an attempt to address the growing revolutionary threat during the transition period between the 19th and 20th centuries. The increasing instability was caused by the growing gap between the rich and poor, difficult living conditions, and the lack of significant social reforms. The population became dissatisfied and discontented. In this context of instability, several revolutionary movements emerged with the aim of promoting socialist, Marxist, and nationalist ideas.

In this context of revolutionary ferment, Armenian nationalism experienced significant growth, led by a new generation of Armenian intellectuals. Armenian students who had travelled abroad to study returned to Transcaucasia with new ideas and influences acquired during their education in Europe. These Armenian intellectuals were different from the traditional scholars of classical Armenian language and biblical literature. They embodied a new type of thinker, oriented towards secularism and nationality. They developed a sense of 'Armenization' and a feeling of duty and obligation towards their less fortunate compatriots across the border in Turkey²⁸.

²⁷ MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1995), cit., p. 77

²⁸ SUNY R. G. (1993), *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*. Indiana University Press, p.44

The first Armenian political organizations emerged from the circles of Armenian students and intellectuals in Russia and Europe and were characterized by nationalist and revolutionary fervor. One such organization was the 'Society of Patriots', which was founded in Moscow in 1881, along with other student circles that advocated for a revolutionary social program²⁹.

These years also saw the birth of the major Armenian political parties. First and foremost was the 'Armenekan' party whose aim was to 'win for the Armenian the right to govern himself through revolution'³⁰. Far more important were the still-existing Marxist-inspired 'Hntchakian' party and the 'Armenian Revolutionary Confederation' or Dashnaktsutiun, which, founded in 1890, united several currents of thought: nationalists, liberals, and socialists, all united by the goal of liberalizing Turkish Armenia³¹.

The tsarist government viewed these organizations as a threat to regional stability and responded with repressive measures.

The Russian Empire's actions, particularly against the Armenians, aimed to quash opposition and maintain control over society and institutions. To achieve this, the empire implemented restrictive and severe policies that also undermined the central and fundamental element of Armenian life: the Church. Although it never displayed any signs of hostility towards the government, it began a policy of hostility towards the Church, considering it to be "*a rallying point*

²⁹ MATOSSIAN M. A. K (1995), cit, p. 79

³⁰ SISAKIAN A. (1981), *Questione Armena ? Per Puntualizzare La Situazione Attuale: Schizzo Di Una Sintesi Storica*, Oriente Moderno, 61(1/12), 21–41, p. 27

³¹ MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1995), cit, p. 80

*for separatist Armenians and an obstacle to the conversion of Armenians to Russian Orthodoxy*³².

In the following years, Russian centralisation policies had a severe impact on the Church. Armenian parochial schools were suppressed, and teachers were required to pass a Russian exam to obtain a teaching certificate. Furthermore, around 500 schools attended by 20,000 students and with 900 teachers were closed³³, which hindered the progress made in previous years. In 1903, the Armenian clergy experienced a peak in the harshness of policies when all their property was confiscated, aided by the unilateral abrogation of the *Polozhenie*. These restrictions caused growing discontent among the Armenian population, as well as fueling the formation of new Armenian revolutionary organizations.

The 1905 Revolution marked a turning point in Russian history, as demands for reform and popular protests shook the entire Russian Empire.

In Armenia, the effects of Russification and growing nationalist aspirations led to a significant response to the calls for change. During the Revolution of 1905, Armenian political organizations, including the Armenian Hunchakian Social Democratic Party and the Armenian Dashnaktsutiun Socialist Revolutionary Party, actively participated in an attempt to advance their demands for autonomy and national rights.

³² From MATOSSIAN, M.A.K, cit., p. 71 “*Land-hungry Armenians in Erivan gubernia were offered lands immediately if they embraced Russian Orthodoxy; Orthodox priests visited Armenians in prison and told them they would not be sent to Siberia if they joined the Russian Church*”.

³³SUNY R. G. (1993), cit., p.45

They sought to exploit the chaos, but their involvement was not successful in achieving their goals. The Russification of the 1880s played a significant role in the rise of Armenian nationalism, which ultimately led to their involvement in the revolutionary events of 1905.

Transcaucasia between 1903 and 1905 was the scene of strikes and anti-government unrest, culminating in an assassination attempt on Governor General Golitsyn, where he was seriously injured³⁴.

The Caucasian region also saw clashes between Armenians and Tatars in present-day Azerbaijan in the summer of 1905, fueled by political and ethnic tensions. The Tatars, less culturally modern, poured resentment on the Armenians, who had instead developed greater political awareness. These conflicts escalated into clashes that took on the dimensions of war, claiming thousands of victims from both communities³⁵.

The situation was managed with more restraint by the new Prince Vorontsov-Dashkov, viceroy of the Caucasus from 1905 to 1915. His administration tried to reconcile the loyalty of the Armenian community by returning their property to the Church. However, despite his more conciliatory attitude, the arrest of Armenian nationalist leaders in 1908 testified to the continuing tension between Armenian aspirations and the repressive policies of the Russian Empire. The Bolshevik presence was also limited, with arrests and repression between 1908 and 1914, but the situation in Armenia remained relatively stable until the following years.

³⁴ FERRARI A. (2008), cit, p. 77

³⁵ HOVANNISIAN R. G. (1971). *Russian Armenia. A Century of Tsarist Rule*, *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 19(1), 31–48, p. 44

2.2 From the First World War to the Soviet period

With the outbreak of the First World War, Armenia's destiny was profoundly changed: successive events led to a significant change in relations with Russia. In this context, Armenia found itself at the center of a series of political, social, and territorial transformations. When World War I broke out, Armenians under the Russian Empire were naturally called upon to support the Tsarist forces, while many other Armenians supported the war effort by enlisting as volunteers.

Although the war with its devastating consequences was a traumatic interlude in the lives of Armenians, the most tragic moment in Armenian history is the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire. The symbolic date of the horrific event is 24 April 1915, when several hundred prominent members of the Armenian community were arrested in the city of Constantinople. However, the first local massacres had already taken place³⁶. What followed was a period of unprecedented suffering, of unprecedented atrocities characterized by violence, forced deportations, starvation, mistreatment, and loss of life³⁷ that deeply marked the history of the Armenian people. The Armenians, in a context of chaos and change, found themselves at the center of a series of crucial political developments.

³⁶ The defense of the city of Van and the events of 8 April in Zeytun. See SISAKIAN A. (1981), cit.

³⁷ It is difficult to establish the exact numbers of people involved in the genocide due to limited official documentation of the time, most of which is now held by Turkish archives. However, it is estimated that at least 600,000 Armenians lost their lives. See FERRARA A. (2016), *Lo Sterminio degli armeni ottomani cent'anni dopo*, Il Mulino, v. 19 n.1, p. 147-164

Out of this context of suffering came the February Revolution, which led to the fall of Tsarism.

The revolution marked a turning point, leading to the creation of a multitude of local power centers and governing bodies³⁸, such as the 'Special Committee of Transcaucasia', which brought together representatives of the different populations of the region, Georgians, Armenians and Azeris. Nevertheless, the Parliament ('Sejm') was established.

In this context, Armenia faced not only enormous socio-economic challenges, but also a region riven by ethnic conflict and dependent on Russia, which had descended into civil war.

In 1918, the Parliament voted for the independence of Transcaucasia from Russia through the creation of a Transcaucasian Republic, but this was short-lived and had no control over either southwestern Transcaucasia, which was occupied by the Turks, or eastern Transcaucasia, which was controlled by the Bolsheviks³⁹.

The Transcaucasian Republic lasted only a month, as Georgia soon became independent with the help of Germany. Armenia followed suit on 28 May 1918.

For the first time in centuries, Armenia found itself as an independent republic with a democratic government but led mainly by the leaders of the Dashnaktsutiun party⁴⁰. Its independence was officially recognized in 1920 when the outcome of the war was now in favor of the Bolsheviks.

³⁸FERRARI A. (2008), cit., p. 86

³⁹MATOSSIAN M. A. K.(1995), cit., p. 123

⁴⁰MARTIN T. (2001), *The affirmative action Empire: nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923-1939*, Cornell University Press, p. 15

Despite its formal independence, Armenia was in an extremely precarious situation: before the war, the country had imported two million pud of wheat, but with the interruption of imports, agricultural production in 1919 was only 37% of pre-war levels, and industry only 13%⁴¹.

The population was starving and sick, and by the spring of 1919 an estimated 20% died of starvation or disease⁴². The Armenian government's response included requisitioning surplus bread in the name of saving the nation and distributing land liberated from the Muslims to Armenian-Turkish refugees.

The Armenian Republic also had to contend with external enemies to establish its borders and ensure its survival. At the Paris Conference, the Armenians claimed the eastern districts of the Ottoman Empire and remote Cilicia. But the greatest threat came from within the Ottoman Empire, where the Turkish insurgency led by Mustafa Kemal was gaining momentum. In 1921, weakened by war, famine and economic collapse, Armenia fell under Bolshevik control and became a Soviet state. Its borders were negotiated by Stalin, who annexed the historic mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Nakhichevan region to the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

⁴¹ MATOSSIAN M. A. K. (1995) cit., p.128

⁴² FERRARI A. (2008), cit., p. 86

2.3 The Soviet era

Armenia's entry into the Soviet regime marked a crucial chapter in its history, ushering in a new phase of political, social and economic transformation. In the period following the First World War and the brief experience of the independent Armenian Republic, the country faced a series of challenges that led to a change in its history⁴³.

The Sovietisation of Armenia had a profound effect not only on the political structure, but also on the culture, national identity and future prospects of the Armenian nation.

During the Sovietisation of Armenia, a crucial chapter in its history, the politics of nationalities became intertwined with territorial redefinition and participation in the Transcaucasian Federation in 1922. While the Soviet Union promoted the apparent autonomy of the republics, Armenia found itself negotiating its cultural identity in a context of increasing centralization in Moscow.

During this period, borders were redefined, and social and economic relations were shaped. In 1936, with the end of the federation, Armenia became a Soviet republic, marking a new beginning marked by profound political and social changes. Agricultural collectivization, the closure of religious institutions, and the promotion of communist values affected daily life, while the Armenian Church underwent significant changes.

⁴³ The Sovietization of Armenia deeply penetrated the nation, shaping the political structure through ideological control, changing the national identity through the promotion of communist values, and influencing the culture, economy, and education system in a context of adaptation to Soviet directives. See MARTIN T. (2001), cit.

However, this period was not without its darker events, as evidenced by the violence of 1937-1938, when Armenia was caught up in Stalin's purges. This period of Sovietisation, with its intertwining of politics, territory, and violence, indelibly shaped the destiny and identity of the Armenian people.

During the tumultuous period from 1914 to 1922, Armenia was plunged into a profoundly devastating state: The atrocities of the First World War, the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire and the socio-economic difficulties during the brief existence of the Armenian Republic made those years a time of extreme suffering. In April 1922, it was reported that more than 200,000 people were in a state of extreme hunger; if the socio-economic data of previous years were alarming, those of 1922 highlighted the appalling state of the Armenian polity, which was forced to manage with less than 60%⁴⁴ of the grain production intended in part to feed the population.

In this context of despair, the Soviet occupation was viewed with relief by many Armenians, perhaps hoping for positive change or the end of an era of suffering⁴⁵.

The new communist regime, installed in Armenia, faced a number of challenges, which consisted mainly of restoring order, reorienting Armenian nationalism towards communist goals, ensuring the predominance of the pro-regime classes, and expanding the mass following, particularly in rural areas⁴⁶,

⁴⁴ Ibidem

⁴⁵ FERRARI A.& G. TRAINA (2020), cit., p.180

⁴⁶ It should be noted that securing a consensus among the peasants meant having the consent of the majority of the amenable population at the time.

considering Armenia's distinctiveness compared to other regions of Soviet Asia⁴⁷.

In order to put an end to the instability in the country, the communist government began by eliminating the civilian and military members of the previous Armenian 'Dasnak' government and all elements that could undermine the stability of the new government, i.e. those considered anti-Soviet.

Above all, he implemented a policy of nationality. The so-called 'korenizacija' policy aimed to strengthen the nationalities within the Soviet Union. The basic aim of this policy was to make Soviet power more 'native', 'intimate', 'popular', and 'understandable' through the use of native languages and the action of local cadres. Economic equality, infrastructural development, technology, and cultural development were the key elements of 'korenizacija', especially in the less developed regions of the former tsarist empire⁴⁸.

In Armenia, in particular, the policy of nationalization consisted primarily of using Armenian members of the government, i.e. the same practice of co-opting elites that had been used in the Russian Empire, but this time Armenians were co-opted into the communist ruling class. Nevertheless, the maintenance of the Armenian language in both administration and education was an important part of this policy: in this way, the communist government recognized and 'protected' the country's ethnic groups both culturally and administratively.

⁴⁷ MATOSSIAN M. A. K.(1995), cit.

⁴⁸ CURTIS G.E. & LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (1995), *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division Library of Congress.

The policy of entrenchment completely overturned the traditional policy of the Russian Empire, which had always tried to avoid the establishment of ethnically based governorates in order to avoid the strengthening of national identities⁴⁹. It should also be noted that all three countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, were inhabited by many ethnic groups that also belonged to neighboring republics: the Armenian people, for example, had traditionally developed their activities in places outside the Soviet republic. Clearly, such a policy could not be entirely satisfactory in this context.

When the nationality policy led to new territorial divisions and the territories of Nakhichevan and Upper Karabakh were given to Azerbaijan, its unsatisfactory nature became clear⁵⁰.

Officially, Armenia became part of the founding pact of the Soviet Union, along with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, when it was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic (T.S.S.R.) in 1922, along with Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Armenia's incorporation into the Transcaucasian Federation, i.e. the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic (T.S.S.R.), was a crucial chapter in its post-war history, making it an integral part of this new federative arrangement. This move, driven by the goal of establishing closer ties between the peoples of the region, as emphasized by Miasnighian⁵¹, the President of the Armenian Soviet Republic, marked a period of significant change. Miasnighian's

⁴⁹ FERRARI A. (2005), cit.

⁵⁰ The territorial division envisaged by the Soviet government caused enormous discontent among the Armenians, giving rise to issues that continue to affect relations between the Transcaucasian regions today.

⁵¹ U. F., & A. G. (1922), *Caucaso ed Armenia*, Oriente Moderno, 2(4), 236–240.

vision, reflected in his statements to Yerevan, emphasized the emerging brotherhood between the communities of the Caucasus and attributed much of this progress to the successful implementation of the federal system. In this context of cooperation between the Transcaucasian peoples, past differences began to recede into historical memory, underlining the unifying potential of such a federative approach.

This federation lasted only 15 years, however, and in 1936 Armenia became an autonomous Soviet republic, marking a new stage in its development within the Soviet Union.

The Armenian Soviet Republic could boast a very high level of education: from the 1920s and throughout the Soviet period, the government put a great deal of effort into the school, making it an “*organ of socialist education*”⁵². Educating young people for the USSR meant helping to create a population that shared the principles of the Soviet regime; furthermore, giving citizens access to education meant improving their social conditions and reducing socio-economic disparities among the population, in line with socialist thinking.

The literacy rate of the population of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic at the beginning of the Soviet period, in the 1926 census, was 27.8%, and the literacy rate of the Armenian population in that year was 34.6%. By the 1939 census, these figures had improved considerably: in the Armenian Soviet

⁵² MATOSSIAN M. A. K.(1995), cit. p. 172

Socialist Republic, thanks to Soviet reforms, 73.8% of the total population of both sexes were literate⁵³.

Obviously, education was no longer entrusted to the Church, whose property was confiscated in the early Soviet period and which was persecuted for a long time. Even during the years of the Stanslian purges, between 1936 and 1938, Xoren I the Katholikos, was among the thousands of victims of Soviet terror.

The repression of these years was only partially reversed after the Second World War, and especially after Stalin's death in 1953: indeed, the period after Stalin's death was marked by a relaxation of cultural restrictions, as well as population growth: from the first Soviet census in 1926 to that of 1970, the population had increased to 1.6 million⁵⁴. To some extent, population growth may also have been dictated by an improvement in economic welfare. Indeed, from the 1930s, after the terrible period of integration and forced collectivization of land promoted by Stalin, until the 1980s, the Armenian economy experienced good growth and industrial and urban development.

A study⁵⁵ of a sample of people revealed a positive perception of prosperity during the Soviet era, particularly when respondents were asked to describe life under the Soviet regime, the current situation and their idea of an ideal society. Nostalgia for the Soviet

⁵³ PEDRONI F. (1956), *Sviluppo e situazione attuale dell'istruzione pubblica nell'Unione Sovietica*, Genus, 12(1/4), 182–201.

⁵⁴ Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, *A Brief Historical Review On Population Censuses Conducted In Armenia*, available at [99486503.pdf \(armstat.am\)](#)

⁵⁵ KESHISHIAN, F. & HARUTYUNYAN, L. (2013), *Culture and Post-Soviet Transitions: A Pilot Study in the Republic of Armenian*, International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society, 26(4), 369–392.

years was evident, as many people felt that this period represented a time when life seemed 'simpler' and 'better organized'.

During the Soviet years, the government was seen as an active supporter of the arts and sciences and provided assistance with basic needs. Access to quality education was free, which contributed to a general sense of well-being. This period was described by some respondents as a time when there was significant support for culture, creativity and intellectual development.

Moreover, the years between 1960 and 1970 were seen by some participants as an 'Armenian renaissance'. This period was characterized not only by general prosperity but also by the opportunity to openly address and discuss the Armenian Genocide for the first time. This suggests that, in addition to the material aspects of prosperity, the Soviet era may have been seen as a period in which Armenian society had the freedom to explore and address important aspects of its history and identity.

When Gorbachev was elected in 1985, the new leader faced a disastrous economic situation in the Soviet Union: centralized planning was proving inefficient, industry was stagnating and the agricultural sector was unable to meet the growing demand for food⁵⁶.

Nevertheless, the weakening of the repressive nature of Soviet power since Stalin's death, and with Gorbachev⁵⁷ himself, reawakened national issues.

⁵⁶ For a more complete picture with real data on the economy of the 1980s see SALVINI G. (1991), *Gorbachev: From The Crisis Of Efficiency To The Crisis Of Survival*. *Il Politico*, 56(3 (159)), pp. 473-484.

⁵⁷ Gorbachev softens party authority and centralism to attract his reforms.

Although the Soviets considered the nationality issue to be 'one of the regime's successes or points of least weakness', the nationalist forces had not been reversed, but were “*smoldering under the ashes*”⁵⁸.

In 1988, one of the main issues that stimulated a broad Armenian nationalist movement was that of the Upper Karabakh⁵⁹.

In particular, Armenians claimed this territory with great insistence because they were concerned about the demographic decline⁶⁰ of Armenians in the region, but also because they feared restrictions on the Armenian language and culture⁶¹.

In 1988, the people of Karabakh formed the Karabakh Committee, which demanded unification with the Republic of Armenia. At the same time, Armenians, taking advantage of the greater freedom brought about by the Glasnost and Perestroika policies, held mass demonstrations in favor of unification.

The lack of response from the authorities and the absence of repression provoked violent reprisals, notably an anti-Armenian pogrom in the town of Sumgait when Baku rejected Armenian demands.

This situation led to a deterioration in relations between Armenia and Moscow, as Armenians became increasingly disillusioned with Gorbachev's policies and Moscow's reluctance to act.

⁵⁸ MACCOTTA G. W. (1991), *Il problema delle nazionalità in Unione Sovietica*, Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali, 58(2 (230)), 163–182, p. 169

⁵⁹ This part of the territory was given to Azerbaijan by Stalin in 1924.

⁶⁰ As the years passed, the area was becoming increasingly empty.

⁶¹ CURTIS G.E. & LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (1995), cit.

CHAPTER 3: The Post-Soviet Caucasus

3.1 An Overview

The chaotic post-Soviet period in the Caucasus has been marked by a series of events that profoundly shaped the region's politics, society and economy. The collapse of the Soviet Union caused a tumultuous period of transition and the quest for new political, social, and economic identities. The region has been characterized by fragmentation, volatility, and uncertainty, continuing to experience political instability and socioeconomic difficulty⁶².

The complex process of the dissolution of USSR marked the end of an imperial setting and a profound changes in the socioeconomic structure⁶³. With the end of the Communist era in 1991, new independent Republics emerged in the South Caucasus -Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan - which faced unprecedented challenges in defining their own independent path⁶⁴.

3.1.1 A big vacuum

The end of the Soviet Union not only resulted in the independence of the Republics, but also triggered an economic and political shock that was unlike anything experienced before⁶⁵.

⁶² ARASLI J. (2007), *The Rising Wind: Is the Caucasus Emerging as a Hub for Terrorism, Smuggling, and Trafficking?*, Connections, 6(1), p. 6

⁶³ CHETERIAN V. (2008), *War and Peace in the Caucasus: ethnic conflict and the new geopolitics*, Columbia University, p. 7

⁶⁴ See BREMMER I. (2006), *The Post-Soviet nations after independence*, in After independence: making and protecting the nation in postcolonial and postcommunist states, The University Michigan Press, pp. 141-161

⁶⁵ PAUL C., CLARKE C. P. & CHAD C. S. (2014), *The Caucasus (1990–2012)*, In Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations, Supporting Case Studies (pp. 119–150). RAND Corporation.

The shock-wave persisted across the newly established former states, plunging them into dire economic conditions characterized by weakening economic output, decaying industries, and distorted production policies⁶⁶. Stemming from the Soviet command economy, which stifled market forces and disregarded consumer demand for nearly four decades⁶⁷, the South Caucasus faced particularly severe challenges.

The economic system of the ex- former Republics relied heavily on the Soviet core, which, in the immediate post-soviet period, was facing the most severe economic and financial crisis in contemporary times⁶⁸. Additionally, the lack of structures, laws, policies, industries, or bureaucratic knowledge⁶⁹ exacerbated the difficulties faced by the newly independent states.

The new Caucasian Republics not only lacked in structures and institutions but they also drew from their own pre-Soviet heritage; rather, their heritage influenced the new political movements, echoing the past⁷⁰.

In this context, the institutions of the Soviet Socialist Republics remained largely unchanged in the immediate post-Soviet period, albeit with a different label⁷¹.

Indeed, the inexperience of the new leadership often led to an uncertain definition of national interests, often based on historical memory and nationalistic identities⁷². Historical memory played an

⁶⁶ PAUL C., CLARKE C. P. & CHAD C. S. (2014), cit., p. 129

⁶⁷ Ibidem

⁶⁸ MORINI M. (2020), *La Russia di Putin*, Il Mulino, p. 144

⁶⁹ PAUL C., CLARKE C. P. & CHAD C. S. (2014), cit., p. 129

⁷⁰ CHETERIAN V. (2008), cit., p. 19

⁷¹ NATALIZIA G. (2014), *Sorranità Sfidata e Ambiente Internazionale: Le Transizioni Non Democratiche Nel Caucaso (1991-2003)*. *Il Politico*, 79(3 (237)), pp. 182–200.

⁷² Ibidem

important role in shaping national interests, as the Caucasian republics often looked to the past to define their identity and justify political choices.

Consequently, the aftermath of the Soviet period, was characterized by what some author described as a significant “vacuum⁷³”: the vacuum, emerged following the collapse of USSR, led a vast area in transition without a point or direction. The void created by the disruption of the USRR led to a period of transition for each of its ex-former states, which of them embarked on a unique path influenced by their internal differences. The transition period took different lengths of time for each states⁷⁴ to fully adapt to the situation and to evolve into a “State”.

In this context, migration from South Caucasus to other countries has increased significantly. According to the World Migration Report of 2000⁷⁵, between 1989 and 2000, approximately 9 millions individuals migrated within or between countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), such as Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Around 2.5 million people migrated to the West during 1990, driven not only by ethnic affiliations, but also by economic imperatives.

⁷²This concept is examined by KARAIA T. (2017), *Memory strategies in contemporary Georgia*, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Tbilisi, who highlights how in post-Soviet Georgia national memories are utilized in the state-building process.

⁷³PAUL C., CLARKE C. P. & CHAD C. S. (2014), cit., p. 122

⁷⁴TRENIN D. & DI PLACIDO L. (2006), *La Russia e la fine dell'Eurasia*, *Ventesimo Secolo*, 5(10), p. 72

⁷⁵International Organization for Migration (IOM) United Nations World Migration Report 2000, available at https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2000_edited_0.pdf

3.1.2 Corruption and organized crime

The void created by the collapse of the Soviet Union has led to a process of criminalization, organized crime, black economy and corruption in the South Caucasus⁷⁶, often exacerbating social instability and insecurity. In the absence of the structured governance of the Soviet era, corruption has become endemic.

According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index⁷⁷ corruption was rampant in the South Caucasus countries throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999 the score - which indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0-100, where 0 means highly corrupt and 100 means very clean - of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan was between 2.5 and 1.7. The score remained relatively unchanged - with scores between 2.5 and 1.5 in 2000 and between 2.9 and 2.3 in 2005 - until recent years, where gradual improvements have been noted⁷⁸.

Moreover, organized criminal groups became very widespread in the post-Soviet period, contributing significantly to shaping the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. As defined by the United Nations office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)⁷⁹ an ‘organized criminal group’ is characterized by its structured nature,

⁷⁶WILLIAMS P. (2003), *Criminalization And Stability In Central Asia And South Caucasus*, In O. Olikier & T. S. Szayna (Eds.), *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army* (1st ed., pp. 71–108). RAND Corporation, p. 71

⁷⁷Transparency International, Corruption Index, available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/ita>

⁷⁸Ibidem

⁷⁹United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) available at <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/definition-in-convention.html>

duration of existence, collective action aimed at committing serious crimes, and pursuit of financial or material gain.

What contributes to the thrive of criminal group are several factors that can be identified in the region: Arasli⁸⁰ identifies the unstable political and militar environment, which generates demand for weapons, leading to their diffusion within war zones. Secondly, the precarious socio-economic conditions stimulate local emigration. Lastly, the strategic geographical position of the region facilitates the transit of drugs and migration from Asia to Europe. Lastly, the proliferation of black markets and illicit economic system has been observed by many analysts⁸¹ further complicating the socio-economic landscape.

3.1.3 From nationalism to internal conflicts

The dissolution of the Soviet Union ignited resurgent nationalist sentiments that had been brewing toward the end of the USRR. By the late 1980s, nationalism was already gaining traction, particularly in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, but it surged significantly in response to the legitimacy crisis of the soviet regime⁸². Nationalist dynamics could emerge as a response to the challenges of the post-Soviet transition, influencing the priorities and policies of the newly independent republics.

⁸⁰ARASLI J. (2007), cit., p. 9

⁸¹See GIRAGOSIAN R. (2009), *Networks of crime and corruption in the South Caucasus*, in *Caucasus analytical diget* n. 9, available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106085/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest09.pdf>

⁸² NATALIZIA, G. (2014), cit.

It is commonly asserted⁸³ that nationalism allows states to affirm themselves as indivisible units in relation to society and international actors. However, scholarly literature on nationalism and conflicts⁸⁴ often links nationalism as a cause of wars. Particularly in the analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalism is interpreted as a catalyst for ethnic conflicts⁸⁵.

Between 1998 and 2005, the Caucasus witnessed various internal conflicts: the first involving Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, while the second occurred in Georgia between 1989 and 1993, concerning the South Ossetia and Abkhazia region and the civil war in Tbilisi⁸⁶. In this context, Armenia developed strong nationalist tendencies⁸⁷ towards the end of the Soviet Union, and nationalism played a significant role in the dispute with Azerbaijan. It is important to note that nationalism is not the sole factor responsible for the conflict, but according to Konarzewska⁸⁸, causes can also be found in the anarchy of the social structures of the post-Soviet period. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, ethnic nationalism, as described "a commitment to a

⁸³ MARCONI M., SELLARI P., CERRETTI C. (2019), *Spazi e poteri; geografia Politica, Geografia Economica, Geopolitica*. S.l.: Editori Laterza, p.20.

⁸⁴ See SCHROCK-JACOBSON G. (2012), *The Violent Consequences of the Nation: Nationalism and the Initiation of Interstate War*, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56(5), 825–852. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414712>

⁸⁵ BARRINGTON L. (2009), *After independence: making and protecting the nation in postcolonial and postcommunist states*, The University Michigan Press, pp. 147.

⁸⁶ See ZURCHER C. (2007), *The post-soviet wars: rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York University Press.

⁸⁷ DOGRU A. (2015), *Nationalism and democratization process in Armenia: impacts of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue*, Akademik Bakis, p. 230.

⁸⁸ KONARZEWSKA N. (2012), *The role of nationalism in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*, *Studia Politologiczne* n. 23

group of (imagined) common descent”⁸⁹, developed as a substitute ideology for communism, influencing the definition of objectives and the identification of social mobilization⁹⁰.

However, it should not be overlooked the importance of other factors contributing to the instability in the country, but emphasis is placed on how nationalism and nationalist policies resurged in the period immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Indeed, nationalism is one of the sic factor indicated by Zurcher⁹¹ as elements causing instability in the country, and all these elements are traceable in the history of the Caucasus: low level of economic development, state weakness, opportunities for financing war, previous conflicts in the same area, complex ethnic geography, and mountainous terrain.

3.1.4 Security and global interests

During the 20th century and still today, geopolitics and energy resources are closely interconnected. The energy security is fundamental to ensure political hegemony, foster industrialization, and promote economical development⁹². Consequently, regions rich in energy are particularly influential in geopolitics as nations seek to ensure access to and control over the resources. In the specific case of South Caucasus, this dynamic is particularly evident.

⁸⁹ BREUILLY J. (2022), *Nationalism, national self-determination, and international relations*, in *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations*, ch. 30, pp. 481-497

⁹⁰ KONARZEWSKA N. (2012), cit., p. 417

⁹¹ ZURCHER C. (2007), cit., p. 17

⁹² TALIA I. & AMATO V. (2015), *Scenari e mutamenti geopolitici: Competizione Ed Egemoniane nei Grandi spazi*. Bologna, Pàtron, p. 53

The region is an important passage zone for raw materials: Azerbaijan is rich in oil and natural gas, and according to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy⁹³ it had oil reserves of 7 billion barrels at the end of 2022. Additionally, according to BP, it has around 2.5 trillion cubic meters of proven natural gas reserves. The South Caucasus passes through the Southern Gas Corridor, namely the group of gas pipelines SD1, SCP, TANAP, and TAP, which along a 3000 km route allows the conveyance of Caspian gas to Europe passing through Georgia⁹⁴. Oil and gas make up more than 90% of Azerbaijan's exports, with production increasing considerably in the 2000s following the discovery of the Shah Deniz gas field. In 2018, oil production was 30.8 million tonnes, and natural gas production was 19.2 billion cubic meters. Azerbaijan is also a major exporter of crude oil and natural gas⁹⁵.

In this scenario, the Caucasus has emerged as a place of extraordinary geopolitical interest, giving it a much greater relevance than in the past.

In this condition geopolitical interests of external and local powers have emerged, each driven by its own ambitions and strategic objectives in the region.

Initially, interests in the Caucasus region were mainly driven by local powers, with Russia playing a predominant role. This role has

⁹³Review of World Energy 2022 available at <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2022-full-report.pdf>

⁹⁴RZAYEVA G. (2023), *Expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor pipelines and future supplies to Europe*, The Oxford Institute for energy studies, paper n. 180, available at <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Expansion-of-the-Southern-Gas-Corridor-NG180.pdf>

⁹⁵International Energy Agency (2023), *Report on Azerbaijan*, available at <https://www.iea.org/reports/azerbaijan-energy-profile/overview>

remained significant to the present day, reflecting the internal dynamics and ambitions of the newly independent Caucasian republics. Russia's maintenance of a dominant role in the South Caucasus is due not only to the ties that have bound these regions to Moscow, but also to the competition that has intensified since the dissolution of the USSR with the United States and the European Union⁹⁶.

External powers, attracted by strategic interests in the region, have shown a commitment to strengthening statehood, economic development, and social cohesion in the region. Their presence has focused on promoting initiatives aimed at strengthening state institutions, stimulating economic activity, and supporting social dynamics, with the aim of contributing to sustainable growth and stability in the Caucasus region.

3.1.4.1 The European Union

The European Union's involvement in the Caucasus region has significantly expanded over the years, signifying its growing interest and commitment. Initially perceived as somewhat 'inactive'⁹⁷ in the region, with its presence primarily limited to economic and development aid programs, the EU began formal engagement in 1999 with the implementation of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. These agreements have since evolved into broader, more substantial partnerships.

⁹⁶FERRARI A. (2006), *L'evoluzione delle strategie russe nel Caucaso (1991-2006)*, ISPI working papers n. 5

⁹⁷See FRAPPI C. (2008), *La cooperazione alla sicurezza nella regione del Caucaso meridionale (1991-2008)*, ISPI Working Paper n. 28

The EU's interest in the region can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, there is a strategic imperative to diversify energy supply channels, as outlined in official EU documents such as the Partnership Agreement⁹⁸. Secondly, there's a recognized need to foster cooperation to stabilize the region, particularly as the Eastern border of the EU following its enlargements in 2004 and 2007. This policy approach was further solidified with the inclusion of the Transcaucasian republics in the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, and subsequently in the Eastern Partnership in 2009. These steps underscored the EU's commitment to fostering closer ties and supporting reform efforts in the region.

The decision to include the South Caucasus in these policies was motivated not only by political and economic cooperation goals, but also by strategic reasons. Initially, the prospect of Turkey's potential EU accession played a significant role in the EU's strategic considerations regarding the Caucasus. However, recent years have seen a shift in this dynamic, as highlighted during the 2018 European Council meeting⁹⁹.

In 2009, the EU effectively included the three Transcaucasian republics in its Eastern Partnership policy, which was established to *"support reform efforts in these countries in the political, social and economic fields in order to strengthen democratization and*

⁹⁸ See European Parliament, *Three Eastern Partnership neighbours in the South Caucasus*, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>

⁹⁹ Council of the European Union (2018), *Enlargement and stabilisation and association process*, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

good governance, energy security, environmental protection, and economic and social development"¹⁰⁰

To manage relations with the South Caucasus region, the EU has established a permanent delegation called DSCA, the Delegation for the South Caucasus. The delegation *"will give a new impetus to our political dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation, in particular - but not exclusively - in areas such as energy and transport"*¹⁰¹.

Additionally, the EU has supported efforts to resolve conflicts in the region, notably between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU's stance emphasizes the importance of finding peaceful solutions to these conflicts, with the aim of promoting prosperity and contributing to conflict resolution, ultimately benefiting the ordinary people affected by these conflicts¹⁰².

3.1.4.2 Nato and United States

It is evident that much of the strategic maneuvering in the Caucasus region is primarily driven by the United States, whose focus on the area has intensified since the 1990s. Scholars have characterized this region as a stage for the *"unbloody but real political, strategic, and economic competition between the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet countries"*¹⁰³. So far, it seems that Russia and the US are once again engaged in a subtle confrontation, evoking what

¹⁰⁰ European Parliament, Three eastern partnership neighbours in the South Caucasus, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/erpl-app-public/factsheets/pdf/en/FTU_5.5.7.pdf

¹⁰¹Ibidem

¹⁰²Delegation for the South Caucasus available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/dsca/home>

¹⁰³ FERRARI A. (2008), *Il Caucaso: Una Frontiera Cruciale, Il Politico*, 73(2 (218)), p. 97

some scholars¹⁰⁴ described as a return to the 'Great Game'. This term, originally coined in the 19th century to describe the dynamics between Russia and the United Kingdom in the Middle East and Central Asia, is still used to describe the Caucasus region as a place where "great and middle powers, both regional and global, balance pressures and alliances, between armies and interest groups"¹⁰⁵.

The increasing attention from the United States stems from a variety of strategic, economic, and political objectives. Notably, the region's significance as a pivotal point within the 'Greater Middle East' due to its abundant energy resources stretching from the eastern Black Sea shores to China has captured US interest.

This interest has led to a departure from the earlier 'Russia-first' approach¹⁰⁶, particularly evident between 1993 and 1994, which opened up new spaces of interaction between the Caucasian republics and Euro-Atlantic institutions¹⁰⁷.

This change was particularly significant for Georgia, which wanted to distance itself from the Russian-centric arrangement of the post-Soviet space¹⁰⁸.

A significant turning point in US strategy in the Caucasus was the Russian military campaign in Chechnya in December 1994, which

¹⁰⁴ BANCHIERI B. (2006) La partita nel Caucaso, Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali, n.1, p.2

¹⁰⁵ NOCERINO D. (2022), Il Grande Gioco del Caucaso, *Opinio Juris*, p. 4

¹⁰⁶ TERZYAN A. (2017), *The EU vs. Russia in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia: the fragility of normative power or the power of Russian coercion?* *Eastern Journal Of European Studies* Vol. 8, Issue 2, notes that "in Armenia's foreign policy discourse, references to security are unequivocally linked to the 'Russia-first' approach. All other European and Euro-Atlantic security actors, be it the European Union or NATO, take a back seat to Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)".

¹⁰⁷ FRAPPI C. (2008), cit., p. 8

¹⁰⁸ See STEENLAND R. & GITASHVIL G. (2018), *Georgia's post-soviet transformation*, in Centre for International Relations and Warsaw East European Conference.

exposed Moscow's vulnerabilities and weakened its grip on neighboring countries. This perceived weakening prompted a reevaluation of regional dynamics in the immediate post-Soviet period, with the Caucasian republics increasingly distancing themselves from Russia-centric arrangements¹⁰⁹.

US engagement in the Caucasus has been multifaceted. The Partnership for Peace¹¹⁰ (PfP) initiative, launched in January 1994, facilitated bilateral cooperation between NATO and the Caucasian states, while subsequent admission to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) expanded political discussions¹¹¹. Additionally, economic cooperation was promoted through initiatives such as the Silk Road Strategy Act¹¹² of 1999, recognizing the interplay between economic development, democratization, and security.

Following the events of 9/11, the South Caucasus assumed even greater importance in US regional strategy, with Georgia and Azerbaijan offering support to US initiatives and serving as key partners in projecting US influence into Central Asia and beyond.

US involvement in the Caucasus region has remained consistent in recent years, particularly underscored by the 'Color Revolutions'¹¹³ between 2003 and 2005, which signaled a shift towards the US among former Soviet republics. This period saw Georgia, in

¹⁰⁹ See PACK J. (2011), *Russia at war: Chechnya, Georgia, and theories of foreign policy*, Utah State University

¹¹⁰ NATO, Partnership for Peace, available at <https://www.sto.nato.int/Pages/partnership-for-peace.aspx>

¹¹¹ See KOTANJIAN H. (2004), *Armenian Security and U.S. Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*, *Connections*, 3(2), 15–32

¹¹² Congress Government USA about Silk Road Strategy Act available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/senate-bill/579>

¹¹³ See STEENLAND R. & GIGITASHVILI G. (2018), cit., p. 4

particular, aligning closer with the West, deepening its ties while distancing itself from Russia.

Recent events, including the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian-led war in Ukraine, have renewed international attention on the South Caucasus region. The United States has closely monitored these developments, seeking to manage crises and promote peaceful resolutions, all while navigating complex geopolitical dynamics and maintaining a constructive presence in the region¹¹⁴.

In parallel, the Russian-led war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on regional security, creating new dynamics and challenges. The US, concerned about the expansion of Russian influence in several areas, including the Caucasus, has had to reassess and strengthen its presence and strategy in the region. The situation has raised security issues and prompted the US to carefully examine its role in defusing tensions and supporting stability in the region.

In this context, US diplomacy in the Caucasus has faced complex challenges in balancing relations with the Caucasian republics, Russia, and other regional actors. The need to carefully manage engagement in the region has become even more critical given the geopolitical sensitivities and unstable dynamics caused by wartime events and regional rivalries¹¹⁵.

As the Caucasus remains a focal point for global powers, the United States continues to play an active role in shaping regional

¹¹⁴TASHJIAN Y & POGHOSYAN M.A. B (2024), *US strategic interests in the South Caucasus and its post-2020 war policy towards Armenia*, in the armenian weekly, available at <https://armenianweekly.com/2024/01/31/us-strategic-interests-in-the-south-caucasus-and-its-post-2020-war-policy-towards-armenia/>

¹¹⁵KOTANJIAN, H. (2004), cit.

dynamics and promoting stability. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape necessitates ongoing adaptation of US strategies to effectively address emerging challenges and contribute to sustainable peace in the region.

3.1.4.3 Iran and Turkey

Turkey and Iran are both significant regional players, seeking to increase their influence in the area and promoting their interests. Both powers, rather than directly challenging each other, cooperated with Moscow to counter Euro-Atlantic influence in the region¹¹⁶.

Specifically, Turkey has been proactive in seeking cooperation with Russia to penetrate the area, demonstrating interest since the immediate post-Soviet period. Ankara maintains strong relations with the countries of South Caucasus, especially with Azerbaijan, due to its economic position. Azerbaijan represents the Turkish ally and economic partner in the region¹¹⁷.

Turkey also enjoys good relations with Georgia, which considers Ankara as a strategical link to markets in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and the Gulf region¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶FRAPPI C. (2021), *La Russia nel Caucaso meridionale. Vettori e strategie d'influenza in un mutevole contesto regionale*, in *L'influenza della Russia nel vicinato: tra minacce di erosione e adattamento alle nuove sfide*, Osservatorio di politica internazionale, n. 171, p. 9

¹¹⁷Osservatorio sul Mediterraneo (2023) available at <https://www.osmed.it/2023/02/09/turkey-in-the-south-caucasus-a-trans-eurasian-connector/>

¹¹⁸BALLA E. (2023), *Turkish and Iranian interests and policies in the South Caucasus*, in Norwegian peacebuilding resource center, available at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163461/gf_nahost_1211.pdf

Nonetheless, Turkey represents a gateway to energy resources in its neighbourhood¹¹⁹. Analysts closely monitor Turkey's policies in the South Caucasus, as it seems that the Turkish government is planning to transform the country into a "regional center of the energy" and into "an energy transit hub"¹²⁰

However, Turkey's relationship with Armenia are limited: with closed borders, lacking diplomatic ties, and Turkey's support for or Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including arms sales¹²¹.

Iran, on the other hand, declares neutrality in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, despite supplying natural gas and improving transportation links to Armenia¹²². Iran and Armenia have maintained diplomatic relations since 1992, based on the same geopolitical objectives¹²³.

Iran also seeks to exert strong influence over the South Caucasus, positioning itself as a guarantor of stability in the Karabakh region¹²⁴. However, Iran's relations with Azerbaijan are strained, with both countries viewing each other as threats to their respective territorial sovereignty and regional security¹²⁵.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem

¹²⁰ GADZHIEV A. (2015), *Geopolitical, Trade, And Economic Interests Of Turkey And Iran In The Southern Caucasus*, in Review of Armenian studies n. 32, available at <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/777525>

¹²¹ Osservatorio sul Mediterraneo (2023), cit.

¹²² ARJMAND M. J. J. (2018), *Iran and Turkey in the South Caucasus: Competition and Cooperation*, in Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies 1, 1 (Spring 2018): 15-31 available at https://journals.ut.ac.ir/article_69187_ccbe2557e8c82955c3d6418abe9a8863.pdf

¹²³ BALLA E. (2023), cit.

¹²⁴ ARJMAND M. J. J. (2018), cit.

¹²⁵ SCOTTI S. (2023), *Rapporti sempre più tesi tra iran e Azerbaijan. Cosa aspettarsi?*, Geopolitica.info, available at <https://www.geopolitica.info/tensioni-iran-azerbaigian/>

Furthermore, within the Caucasus, Iran aims to limit Western influence by cooperating with Russia, as both share the objective of curbing Azerbaijan's power and safeguarding their mutual interests in the oil sector.

3.2 Post-Soviet Armenia

Researching the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in Armenia, and practically up to the present day, is a complex challenge considering the multiplicity of events and developments that have characterized Armenian politics over the past 30 years. However, attempting to provide an overview and information base, that reflects the situation in Armenia in recent years, may prove crucial in answering the central question of this research: how has Armenia positioned itself within the project of recomposing the post-Soviet space? How has that position changed?

When the Armenian people went to the polls in September 1991, 99% of voters expressed their desire for independence¹²⁶. The newly formed Republic of Armenia, initially led by President Levon Ter-Petrosyan¹²⁷, faced significant challenges and extremely difficult conditions, both economically and geopolitically. The declaration of independence underlined the will of the Armenian people to embark on an autonomous path, but this historic moment

¹²⁶ PANOSSIAN R. (2006), *Post-Soviet Armenia*, in *After Independence. Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and PostCommunist States*, the University of Michigan Press, p. 232

¹²⁷ Levon Ter-Petrosyan was the first non-communist president elected in October 1991. He drove the country until 1998. See ASTOURIAN S.H., (2001) *From Ter-Petrosyan to Kocharian: Leadership change in Armenia*, University of California, Berkeley, winter 2000-2001

coincided with a series of complexities and difficulties that would influence the country's future.

The first years after the fall of the Soviet Union were very hard for the Armenian people: the economy was in a devastating situation, not only due to the breakdown of Soviet-era economic relations, but also due to a rather extreme geopolitical situation¹²⁸.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia found itself increasingly isolated from the rest of the Caucasus, both because of its unfortunate geographical position, which prevented it from having an outlet to the sea or from establishing major trading centres¹²⁹, and because of the escalation of the military conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh¹³⁰. In the course of its independence, Yerevan has thus maintained rather hostile relations with some of its neighbours: first and foremost, for obvious reasons, Azerbaijan, but also Turkey, heir to the Ottoman Empire, which committed the genocide of 1915 and is still reluctant to admit its guilt¹³¹. Both countries closed their borders in the 1990s and imposed an economic blockade on Armenia, which had no energy resources of its own and was dependent on Russian gas, often interrupted because of the difficult situation in Georgia¹³².

¹²⁸See SHAFFER B. (2009), *The Geopolitics of the Caucasus*. The Brown Journal of World Affairs, 15(2), 131–142.

¹²⁹YILMAZ R. (2009), *Armenian Foreign Policy During Levon Ter-Petrossian And Robert Kocharian Period*, in Journal of Qafqaz University, Baku

¹³⁰ Between 1992 and 1994 the clash reached the dimensions of a real open war between Armenians and Azeris. See C. Zurcher (2007), *The post-soviet wars: rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York University Press.

¹³¹ For the controversial issue of the Armenian genocide and Turkey's recognition, see FERRARA A. (2016), *Lo sterminio degli armeni ottomani, cento anni dopo*, in Contemporanea, Vol. 19 N. 1, Il Mulino

¹³² From its independence Georgia faced a new nationalist period against Russia See STEENLAND R. & GIGITASHVIL G. (2018), cit.

The situation in Armenia was catastrophic, not least because of the 1988 earthquake that struck the city of Spitak with a magnitude of 6.8, killing 25,000 people and leaving 51,500 homeless¹³³, and destroying the country's largest non-nuclear thermal power plant¹³⁴. Schools, colleges and universities also remained closed due to the terrible conditions of the low-energy, cold winters of 1991-1992 and 1992-1993¹³⁵.

According to the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development¹³⁶ (OECD) Armenia faced an economic decline between 1991-1992, with the worst recession period ever, and the production output volumes decreased more than 60 per cent.

Against this backdrop of economic crisis, emigration developed strongly in the early 1990s: data¹³⁷ show that by 1995, 500,000 Armenians had emigrated to other countries, mainly to Russia, which remains the preferred destination of Armenian migration, with 67% of migrants moving to the Federation. Consequently, in addition to the economic factors, which have certainly improved over the years but have still not been enough to stop the flow of Armenian migration, it must be added that migration has also been

¹³³ United States Government, History of Armenia, available at <https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/history>

¹³⁴ BALASSANIAN S.Y., ARAKELIAN A.R., S. NAZARETIAN N., AVANESSIAN A. S., MARTIROSIAN A.H., IGOUNOV V.A., MELKOUMIAN M.G., MANOUKIAN A.V. & TOVMASSIAN A. K. (1995), *Retrospective analysis of the Spitak earthquake*, in *Analisi di geofisica v. XXXVIII n. 3-4*

¹³⁵ DE WAAL T. (2013), *Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*, New York University Press, p. 619

¹³⁶ Organization Of Economic Co-operation and Development, The Republic of Armenia- Macroeconomic Review, available at <https://www.oecd.org/env/outreach/34484607.pdf>

¹³⁷ HONORATI M., BARTH E.(2020), International migration from Armenia and Georgia, World Bank Group, available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/604591625240160008/pdf/International-Migration-from-Armenia-and-Georgia.pdf>

driven by years of political instability and rampant corruption. It is worth noting that in 1991 the unemployment rate was 1.6%, while in 2019 it was as high as 17%¹³⁸.

Emigration was a very important factor in boosting Armenia's economy at the beginning of its independence and still is today; remittances from emigrants have been, and continue to be, a very important support to the domestic economy and household welfare. According to World Bank estimates¹³⁹, remittances amounted to USD 1.87 billion in 2018, equivalent to 15.5% of Armenia's GDP. It appears that remittances "support current household consumption, especially of basic necessities, and financing¹⁴⁰". The diaspora's substantial support has thus helped to revitalize the Armenian economy, which for many years was seen as a mere financial tool and was sometimes viewed with suspicion by the Armenian government itself.¹⁴¹

The role of diaspora communities is very important because since the early 1990s they have become very influential in the country, particularly diaspora communities in the West, mainly in the US¹⁴², have had a huge influence on Armenia's political and economic life. It should be remembered that in the early 1990s, significant funding came from diaspora communities to revive the Armenian economy, and they lobbied hard for Western aid.

¹³⁸ Ibidem

¹³⁹ Ibidem

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem

¹⁴¹ See MINOIAN V. & LEV F. (2005), *Armenia: what drives first movers and how can their efforts be scaled up?*, in MPRA Paper n. 10010

¹⁴² according to the official US census in 2010 there were one million Armenians in the US, KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016). Armenia's Foreign and Security Policy. In *Armenia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests* (pp. 4–21), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

For example, they were very influential in concluding of the agreement signed in 1992 with the United States, which provided for humanitarian aid and technical-economic assistance; until 1998, the program stipulated by the bilateral agreement provided for humanitarian aid, with a focus on food, fuel, medicine and clothing to help Armenia cope with the post-earthquake, post-war and post-Soviet economic collapse¹⁴³. The agreement, put in place in 1991, is part of the larger USAID program, through which the US has a strong presence in Armenia. In fact, with planned expenditures of \$23.1 million in 2016¹⁴⁴, the largest share of which goes to economic development projects, it also supports social projects such as the pension reform implementation project and works with the Armenian government on projects such as Support the Armenian National Assembly to improve Armenia's legislative procedures.

The Armenian diaspora community has been very influential in politics both in the 1990s and more recently, even influencing public opinion, as happened in 1998 when Levon Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign after attempting dialogue with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Realizing that he could not isolate Armenia any further, he tried to calm the nationalist spirits of the population and engaged in dialogue with Turkey and Azerbaijan. In fact, Ter-Petrosyan through the Minsk Group¹⁴⁵, led by Russia, the USA, and France,

¹⁴³ United States Government for USAID, available at <https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/history>

¹⁴⁴ KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016), cit., p. 18

¹⁴⁵ For more about Minsk Group and its involvement in Caucasus see ABILOV, S. (2018). OSCE Minsk Group: Proposals and Failure, the View from Azerbaijan. *Insight Turkey*, 20(1), 143–164.

tried to find a solution, with the Azerbaijani President, that we could call 'consecutive steps'¹⁴⁶.

This caused him a huge drop in popularity and loss of foreign support: 'according to a former US official, these diaspora figures consistently advocated a harder line in relations with Turkey, hindering the efforts of then-President Levon Ter-Petrosyan to normalize ties with Ankara despite the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict'¹⁴⁷.

However, the cessation of conflict in 1994 led to an improvement in life in Armenia and in the economy. After a period of economic collapse and hyperinflation in the early 1990s, the economy stabilized in 1995 and grew at an average rate of 6 per cent between 1996 and 2000¹⁴⁸.

Although the Armenian economy is no longer in a disastrous situation as it was in the early 1990s and it has reached a real GDP similar to the pre-1991 one since 2001¹⁴⁹, several studies highlight the complexity of the Armenian population's feelings over the years. In both 2001 and 2010, surveys revealed high levels of dissatisfaction, fueling nostalgia for the Soviet period and a sometimes less than positive perception of the future¹⁵⁰.

In 2010, although nostalgia for the Soviet period diminished, a growing approval of the current government emerged. However,

¹⁴⁶ ZOURABIAN L. (2017), *The Nagorno-Karabakh Settlement Revisited: is Peace Achievable?* In *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, p.255

¹⁴⁷ KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016). cit., p. 31

¹⁴⁸ GARDIS, I. (2003), *Armenia: the road to sustain rapid growth, cross-country evidence*, International Monetary Fund

¹⁴⁹ ibidem

¹⁵⁰ MCKEE R., RICHARDSON E., ROBERTS B., HAERPFER C., MCKEE M., *Things Can Only Get Better? Changing Views of Past, Present and Future in the Former Soviet Union*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 65, N. 7, Sept. 2013

these positive sentiments were not without reservations, as the government was often considered 'criminal and corrupt'¹⁵¹. Corruption has been a pervasive feature in Armenia in recent years, with numerous OSCE and EU reports highlighting the presence of electoral fraud or corrupt elections, especially during most electoral processes¹⁵².

In the chaotic context of post-Soviet Armenia, successive governments from 1991 to 2018¹⁵³ attempted to establish diplomatic relations with the various regional actors that appeared in the region, trying to balance ties with Russia and other emerging actors in the post-Soviet USSR dissolution space, including the European Union.

In fact, the economic, political and conflictual challenges of the Nagorno-Karabakh discourse led Armenia to maintain ties with Russia, a historical partner with which it shared a Soviet past. These ties were often a response to security, economic and political needs, as will be discussed later.

At the same time, Armenia has sought to develop relations with other regional actors, including the European Union. This openness to different partnerships reflects a desire to diversify sources of political and economic support, as well as to seek opportunities to improve governance and the democratization process.

Demonstrative in this regard is the link between Armenia and the European Union, which has been trying to shape Armenia's fate

¹⁵¹ Ivi p. 1475

¹⁵² see European Union External Action, Statement by the Spokesperson on the Parliamentary elections in Armenia, 2017, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/24071_en

¹⁵³ In this analysis 2018 and the Velvet Revolution is analyzed as a turning point to explain the dynamics between Russia and Armenia

since 1999¹⁵⁴. However, the link between the two remains to this day partial and with deep doubts.

¹⁵⁴ See KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016) cit.

CHAPTER 4: The Reconstruction of the Post-Soviet Space

When the “*greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century*”¹⁵⁵ happened, a drastic change in the political and geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia occurred.

This transformation was starkly evident with the newfound independence of the three South Caucasus republics, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. Their independence brought to a fragmentation of the region, restoring it to a condition reminiscent of the pre-Soviet era.

In this context, the new post-soviet states had to deal with the evolution from a bipolar to a “*multi-hub system*”¹⁵⁶.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked the end of the ‘multinational communist empire’ and the conclusion of the ‘multi-ethnic Russian empire’, spanning over four centuries¹⁵⁷.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia found itself in an ambiguous position. While it had not suffered a direct military defeat, it appeared as a defeated territory due to the loss of global hegemony and isolation from Europe¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁵HELMUT S. (2022), *The greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century*, Policy center for the new south, available at <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/greatest-geopolitical-catastrophe-20th-century>

¹⁵⁶BURKE-WHITE in MKHOYAN A. (2017) *Soft power, Russia and the former Soviet states: a case study of Russian language and education in Armenia*, International Journal of Cultural Policy, p. 690

¹⁵⁷CIGLIANO G. (2003) *L’Impero russo tra dissoluzione politica e rinascita storiografica (1989-2002)*, Studi Storici, 44(2), p. 423

¹⁵⁸TESTONI M. (2002), *La Russia e l’Occidente dieci anni dopo l’URSS: l’eterna ambiguità*, Il Politico, 67(3(201)), p. 443

However, its vast territory, military power¹⁵⁹, and natural resources still positioned it as a major global power.

For Moscow, the main challenge was to restore geopolitical balance and revitalize the economy to regain its status as a global power¹⁶⁰.

In this context, Russia focused on two main objectives. First, maintaining a leading role in the post-Soviet space and preventing NATO from entering this region. Second, Russia sought to promote a multipolar balance in the international scenario, in contrast to US unipolarism and Western hegemony¹⁶¹. The latter seems to be more easily achievable thanks to the emergence of China in the multipolar international scenario.¹⁶²

To achieve these two objectives, Russia employed military, diplomatic, and economic tools.

4.1 The Russian project

In 1991, Russia emerged as the legal successor to the Soviet Union¹⁶³, both as a power in the region and in international institutions, albeit with altered territorial boundaries and a transformed geopolitical context. Before 1991, the South Caucasus was administrated under the Federal structure of the URSS, subject

¹⁵⁹ Russia's nuclear arsenal was the only one comparable to that of the USA, see. ZONOVA T & REINHARDT R. (2014), *Main vectors of Russia's foreign policy (1991-2014)*, Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, 81(4(324)), p. 501

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem

¹⁶¹ See GERMAN T. in ELIAS GÖTZ (2022), *Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Europe- Asia Studies, 74:9, FERRARI A.(2021), *La politica estera russa in crisi? Mosca e le crisi di Biellorussia, Kirghizistan e Armenia*, in L'influenza della Russia nel vicinato: tra minacce di erosione e adattamento alle nuove sfide, Osservatorio di Politica internazionale n. 171

¹⁶² GÖTZ E. (2022), cit., p. 1543

¹⁶³ BALDOVIN M. (2021) *Ereditare l'URSS: i problemi di memoria nella Russia di oggi*, East Journal, available at <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/122412>

to Soviet oversight and rules. Post 1999, the South Caucasus evolved into a space no longer under Russian control.

The emergence of this new geopolitically reality compelled Russia to reassess and to adapt its foreign policy, towards a region that required commitments and new efforts to maintain and affirm Russian influence. In this context, since 2000, Russia has undertaken a path to reorganize the post-Soviet space¹⁶⁴.

Several reasons drive Russia's desire to assert its influence in the new Caucasus region. Primarily, the region is perceived as 'an inalienable part of Russia's history and fate'¹⁶⁵; Russia shares a common history and asserts with the Caucasus, and its 'Eurasian inclination' is rooted in historical ties¹⁶⁶. The concept of 'Eurasia' and 'Russia's Eurasian inclination' are not new themes¹⁶⁷, however, it is with the end of the Soviet Union that this ideology gained greater relevance. Consequently, Russia views the countries of Eurasia as "*its rightful zone of privileged interests*"¹⁶⁸, meaning that it aims to reunite the territories that were part of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, with the goal of consolidating its influence and presence in this vast region¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁴ IANNINI, G., & GALBANI, A. (2014). *La Russia E Lo Spazio Eurasiatico. Un'Integrazione Compiuta?* Il Politico, 79(3 (237)), p. 124

¹⁶⁵ NATION R. C. (2015). *Russia and the Caucasus*, Connections, 14(2), 1–12. p.2

¹⁶⁶ IANNINI, G., & VALIGI, M. (2014), *Geopolitica Di Un Impero: La Russia E I Suoi Confini. Un'Introduzione*, Il Politico, 79(3 (237)), p. 6

¹⁶⁷ The ideology of eurasianism is dated back to the 1920s, when ideas began to emerge suggesting that Russia should expand its ties with Asia for reviving after the collapse of the Empire. Russia should look toward Eurasia instead of turning to the West. Cf PALAT, M. K. (1993), *Eurasianism as an Ideology for Russia's Future*, Economic and Political Weekly, 28(51), 2799–2809.

¹⁶⁸ Director of National Intelligence (2021), *Russia and Eurasia*, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/GT2040-5-YR-Regional-2021317-Russia_Eurasia.pdf

¹⁶⁹ FERRARI A. (2020), *Grande Eurasia e ideologia russa*, La Russia e l'Occidente. Visioni, riflessioni e codici ispirati a Vittorio Strada, p. 309, available at

The centrality of Eurasian countries has been clearly highlighted since the early years of Evgenij Primakov as the Russian Foreign Minister. His policy was openly oriented towards the recovery of Russian space, power, and interests, especially in the so-called 'near abroad'¹⁷⁰.

From the 1990s onwards, the idea of the 'Near Abroad' was developed; the concept became the mainstay of both Yeltsin's and Putin's Russian foreign policy, and it was interpreted as Moscow's desire to delimit a post-Soviet Russian sphere of influence¹⁷¹. It would seem that, at least initially, this term indicated the difficulty for Russian politicians to consider the former Soviet countries as truly independent nations. According to this view, the former Soviet republics, that had become independent, still remained the object of Russian pretension.

In this conception, the Caucasus, and Armenia in particular, occupy a particularly significant role. The conception of considering the former Soviet republics as an integral part of the Russian sphere of influence reflects Moscow's desire to maintain a certain degree of control and influence over these countries, despite their acquired independence.

Armenia, in the context of the Caucasus, emerges as a 'mirror'¹⁷² of post-Soviet Russia, representing a kind of territorial extension of the former Russian empire. Moreover, the view that the Caucasus

<https://iris.unive.it/retrieve/e4239dde-0b71-7180-e053-3705fe0a3322/Grande%20Eurasia%20e%20ideologia%20russe.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ VITALE A. (2014), *Il nuovo "baricentro orientale" nella politica estera della Russia post-sovietica*, *Il Politico*, 79(3/237), p.60

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*

¹⁷² VITALE, A. (2008), *Il Sistema Politico Della Russia E Lo "Specchio" Del Caucaso*, *Il Politico*, 73(2 (218)), p. 86

is an ‘appendage’ of the former imperial body, provisionally ‘amputated’ but to be reunited, suggests that Russia would see the Caucasus, as an “*essential part of its geopolitical space*”¹⁷³.

In addition, there would be the view that “*at the end of imperial rule, colonizers and colonized are obliged by the old mutual relations to interact for a long time to come*”¹⁷⁴; this, in the former Soviet space happened a lot with very strong links between the former imperial centre and the independent republics. In particular, it would appear that post-Soviet Russia exploits interdependent relations with its neighbors to promote its own influence and interests.

Finally, Russia has demonstrated its ability to influence and exert pressure on the dispersed Russian communities across the former Soviet republics.¹⁷⁵ The Russian focus on ‘*Russian compatriots*’¹⁷⁶ is a significant foreign policy tool as it leverages common sentiments with the ‘*Russkij Mir*’¹⁷⁷.

Secondly, there are the geostrategic interests that view the region as a land bridge connecting the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and the Caspian Sea and, more generally, the wider European world with

¹⁷³ Ibidem

¹⁷⁴ VITALE A.(2006), *La politica estera e il Caucaso*, Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali ISPI n.1, p. 43

¹⁷⁵ DE QUIRICO R. (2022), *La politica estera russa nello spazio post-sovietico e le origini del conflitto russo-ucraino*, in *Ucraina, 2022 un’analisi storica giuridica e politica*, Jovene, p. 51, available at <https://iris.unica.it/bitstream/11584/352459/1/Estratto%204%20-%20Di%20Quirico.pdf>

¹⁷⁶ SCOCOZZA C. (2020), *Prove di soft-power russo nello spazio post-sovietico*, ICSR Mediterranean Knowledge, WPS n. 3, p. 61

¹⁷⁷ See CODEVILLA G (2023), *Alle origini dell’idea del Russkij mir*, Stato Chiese e pluralismo confessionale n. 17, pp. 39-54, and NATALIZIA G. (2022), *Russki Mir: genesi, evoluzioni e utilizzo della formula politica della Russia putiniana*, Geopolitica.info available at <https://www.geopolitica.info/russkij-mir-genesi-evoluzioni-utilizzo-formula-politica/>

Central Asia, the Silk Road and South and East Asia¹⁷⁸. The geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus is based on its strategic location for energy resources, especially in Azerbaijan. The presence of valuable energy resources has led many scholars to call the South Caucasus as a “*playground for global geopolitical competitions*”¹⁷⁹.

In this context the geostrategic importance of the region has aroused considerable interests, not only from regional powers, such as Turkey and Iran, but also from supranational actors as NATO and European Union.

The significance of the region has also increased due to energy policies pursued by Western consumer states seeking to reduce their reliance on resources sourced from Russia and the Middle East¹⁸⁰.

Russia had to reintegrate itself into a regional context characterized by greater autonomy and independence, as well as a plurality of local (including Turkey and Iran), superstate (NATO, EU, OSCE, GUAM), and sub-state (multinational corporations, NGOs, lobbies of various kinds, diasporas, criminal organizations, terrorist groups, etc.) actors.

¹⁷⁸ PAGE S. (1994), *The Creation of a Sphere of Influence: Russia and Central Asia*, International Journal, 49(4) p. 802

¹⁷⁹ FREEDMAN R. O. (2001), *Russian Policy toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge*, Middle East Journal, 55(1), p. 66-97

¹⁸⁰TIBOLD A. & CILLESSEN V. (2006), *Geopolitics, Energy Security and the South Caucasus*, in *Geo-Strategy in the South Caucasus: Power Play and Energy Security of States and Organisations*. Clingendael Institute, p. 11

The United States and the European Union were not slow to express their interest, forcing Russia, threatened by the loss of its "*great power*"¹⁸¹ status, to substantially redefine its foreign policy. In this scenario, Russia is driven to maintain a robust presence in the region to ensure that it does not fall too much under Western influence¹⁸². Since 2000, Russia has expressed concern over NATO's expansion and what it perceives as U.S.-led unipolarity¹⁸³. This concern has been recently reiterated with greater emphasis during the promulgation of the new foreign policy doctrine "*Koncepcija vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii*"¹⁸⁴, a document outlining Moscow's objectives and strategies in the international scenario. The new doctrine, published in 2023, blames the United States and its "satellites" for using measures taken by the Russian Federation in Ukraine to weaken Russia and unleash a new type of hybrid warfare¹⁸⁵. Furthermore, Russia sees the presence of the West in the region as an existential threat and a source of anti-Russian sentiments ¹⁸⁶. Indeed, many politicians and intellectuals

¹⁸¹ PAGE S. (1994), cit., p. 790

¹⁸² GÖTZ E. (2022), *Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Europe- Asia Studies, 74:9, p. 1540

¹⁸³ MORINI M. (2020), *La Russia di Putin*, Il Mulino, p. 163

¹⁸⁴ *Koncepcija vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii* (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation) (2023), available at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

¹⁸⁵ TAVIANI A. (2023), *L'evoluzione della strategia russa analizzata tramite le "Dottrine di politica estera del Cremlino*, Geopolitica.info, available at <https://www.geopolitica.info/strategia-russia-politica-estera/>

¹⁸⁶ MORSA M. (2023), *Il Cremlino inaugura una nuova dottrina in politica estera: gli Usa la minaccia più grande*, Euronews, available at <https://it.euronews.com/2023/03/31/il-cremlino-inaugura-una-nuova-dottrina-il-politica-estera-gli-usa-la-minaccia-piu-grande>

see NATO'S expansion as a dangerous and threatening development¹⁸⁷.

Starting from 2008, Russia has implemented a shift in its foreign policy. Russia interpreted the protests developing in Georgia, influenced and supported by the West and the United States, as a concrete example of the perceived threat against its interests in the region¹⁸⁸. Russia realizes that the Color Revolutions had shown how the West had managed to penetrate society in a non-violent but steady manner by leveraging the media and non-governmental organizations.

According to Tsygankov¹⁸⁹, despite the war episode with Georgia - which led to the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - both Medvedev and Putin understood the importance of dominating the region without resorting to the use of force and direct control, but by privileging 'soft power'.

This concept has been expressed through the promotion of Russian culture and the Russian language, the creation of economic and military alliances, and by assuming the role of peace enforcer and peacekeeper in the conflicts of the area.

According to Nye 'soft power' is the capacity of the States "*to get what they want through attraction rather than coercion or payments*"¹⁹⁰.

The use of *soft power* has become a key element of Russia's strategy to penetrate and consolidate its influence in the region.

¹⁸⁷ TSYGANKOV A. (2013), *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 96

¹⁸⁸ MORINI M. (2020), cit. p. 164

¹⁸⁹ TSYGANKOV A. (2013), cit. p. 221

¹⁹⁰ NYE J. (2021), *Soft power: the evolution of a concept*, Journal of Political power, p. 5

According to Scocozza¹⁹¹, Moscow has sought to promote a more modern image of Russia, with a historical and cultural legacy, different from that of the West, but historically an indispensable reference point for the entire region.

This implies that soft power has become an important tool, part of a broader strategy aimed at revitalizing the country's image, as well as being an "*indispensable component of current international politics*"¹⁹².

According to Mkhoyan, Russia's influence over the South Caucasus is implemented by using culture as a soft power¹⁹³. Culture helps to 'achieve foreign policy goals'¹⁹⁴ and it can be an international political tool¹⁹⁵. Russian language and Russian culture are promoted in the 'near abroad' through Foundations and Intergovernmental Foundation for cooperation and education, science and culture¹⁹⁶. Although Moscow has made various attempts to consolidate the use of soft power, it has become clear that Russia sometimes continues to resort to the use of *hard power* to enforce its interests and its worldview, as seen in the recent war against Ukraine.¹⁹⁷

The creation of economic and military alliances has allowed Russia to consolidate its influence in the region. Since the 1990s, Russia has implemented its foreign policy agenda through the use of soft

¹⁹¹ SCOCOZZA C. (2020), *Prove di soft-power russo nello spazio post-sovietico*, ICSR Mediterranean Knowledge, WPS n. 3, p. 55

¹⁹² Ivi p. 58

¹⁹³ MKHOYAN A. (2016), *Soft power, Russia and the former Soviet states: a case study of Russian language and education in Armenia*, International Journal of cultural policy, vol.23 n. 6, pp. 690-704

¹⁹⁴ Ivi p. 690

¹⁹⁵ MORINI M. (2020), cit. p. 164

¹⁹⁶ MKHOYAN A. (2016), cit., p. 693

¹⁹⁷ SCOCOZZA C. (2020), cit. p. 66

power, such as the promotion of Russian culture and language, alongside economic and military alliances, and by assuming the role of a peace enforcer and peacekeeper in regional conflicts.

The first step taken in 1991 was the creation of the CIS to address the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At the behest of the Presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, an association comprising 12 republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Georgia—was formed.¹⁹⁸

The association aimed at coordinating and facilitating the free movement of goods, services, labor force, and capital among member states, while also promoting cooperation on security matters¹⁹⁹. Nevertheless, the CIS was formed to create a society to address common issues among the new state entities²⁰⁰. However, after a few years, the CIS proved incapable of addressing divergent interests and external pressures, thus diminishing the original purposes of the CIS²⁰¹ and turning it into a “*political circus of ambiguity and backstabbing*”²⁰².

¹⁹⁸ Centre Virtuel de la connaissance sur l'Europe (2016), *The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)*, available at https://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_creation_of_the_commonwealth_of_independent_states%20_cis-en-7f16a3ab-ad03-4f04-b24f-99dff97a1d8d.html

¹⁹⁹ Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), available at <https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/commonwealth-independent-states-cis/>

²⁰⁰ IANNINI, G., & GALBANI, A. (2014), cit., p. 125

²⁰¹ Ivi, p. 129

²⁰² VAN DER TOGT T., MONTESANO F.S. & KOZAK I. (2015), *Integration in post-Soviet space: from the CIS to the Eurasian Union*, Clingendael Institute, p. 13

According to the Ukrainian President Kravchuk CIS was created only to facilitate a ‘civilized divorce’ between Soviet Union and new former States²⁰³.

From 2000 onwards, Russia has initiated various cooperative plans among post-Soviet states, aiming to strengthen their economic integration and cooperation in the region. One of the results of these efforts is the establishment within the CIS of the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec). The creation of Eurasec was driven by Vladimir Putin's desire to promote “the integration of Post-Soviet space as a means to restore Russia’s lost glory”²⁰⁴

The new organization was formed to provide economic benefits and simplify the mobility of people and capital. Eurasec established a structural framework modeled after the EU's principles and initiated a range of economic integration projects in the post-Soviet region that mirrored those of the EU.²⁰⁵

By the end of 2006 the Eurasec consisted of five full members Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and three observe members: Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The highest form of economic integration and economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space is the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2010 Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus decided to set up their integration by creating the Eurasian Custom Union which in 2012 evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

²⁰³ TRENIN D.& DI PLACIDO L.,(2006), *La Russia e la fine dell'Eurasia, Ventunesimo Secolo*, 5(10), p.73

²⁰⁴ T. Van Der Togt, F.S. Montesano & I. Kozak (2015), cit., p. 13

²⁰⁵ M. Sisu Vicari (2016), *The Eurasian Economic Union Approaching The Economic Integration In The Post-Soviet Space By Eu-Emulated Elements*, Papers in Political Economy n.55, p. 5

The EEU represents the first real attempt to create “*an economic pole of a new polycentric world*”²⁰⁶. As part of Putin's post-Soviet space project, the EEU aims to become “*not only an economic pole but also, in the future, a politically autonomous entity with the role of a central axis of the new international architecture*”²⁰⁷.

Vicari²⁰⁸ believes that the establishment of the EEU is motivated by the competition between Russia and the European Union due to the latter's influence in the post-Soviet region.

The institution of the EEU aims to further economic integration among its members and to stimulate economic development and improve the standard of living of their citizens. It created a common market with the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor, promoting modernization, cooperation, and competitiveness of the economies of its member states in the global economy.²⁰⁹

As stated by the Russian Foreign Minister Lavov, the EEU can be seen as a serious element of a bridge between Europe and the Asia-Pacific Region²¹⁰

The integration of the post-soviet space has long been a core ambition of Russian president Vladimir Putin and the foundation of the EEU was supposed to represent the culmination of his efforts to

²⁰⁶ SALVINI, G. (2014), *Putin E Il Pensiero Eurasiatico*, Il Politico, 79(3 (237)), p.78

²⁰⁷ Ibidem

²⁰⁸ SISU VICARI M. (2016), cit., p. 8

²⁰⁹ BARBIROTTO P.I., *L'Unione Economica Euroasiatica: che cos'è, come funziona e le opportunità per le imprese*, dossier in Conoscere Eurasia, p. 5, available at https://conoscereeurasia.it/wpcontent/uploads/2019/03/Unione_Economica_Euroasiatica_1.pdf

²¹⁰ DOBBS J. (2015), *The Eurasian Economic Union: a bridge to Nowhere?*, European Leadership Network, p. 1

bring Russia's neighbourhood together under Moscow's leadership²¹¹.

Indeed, according to Leonard and Krastev the EEU could be "*the best chance to shift the competition between Russia and the West back onto an economic field rather than a military one*"²¹².

Russia has implemented various strategies on the military and security fronts. It's worth noting that security serves as the primary conduit for Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus²¹³. Established in 2003, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) comprises Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Its mandate extends to serving as a security provider and ensuring regional stability and the territorial integrity of its member states. According to Article 2, in the event of any threat to a member's security, stability, territorial integrity, or sovereignty, other members are obligated to provide assistance. Furthermore, Article 4 stipulates that aggression against any member state is considered an attack on the entire organization²¹⁴. Nevertheless, Russia is involved in international mediation mechanisms for conflict resolution in the area through participation in security cooperation it can exert its influence in the area.

²¹¹Ibidem

²¹² KRASTEVA I. & LEONARD M. (2014), *The new European disorder*, European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR 117, p. 8

²¹³ FRAPPI C. (2021), *La Russia nel Caucaso meridionale. Vettori e strategie d'influenza in un mutevole contesto regionale*, L'influenza della Russia nel vicinato: tra minacce di erosione e adattamento alle nuove sfide, Osservatorio di Politica internazionale n.171, p. 9

²¹⁴ WAHLANG J. (2024), *Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Caucasus Conflict*, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, available at <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Collective-Security-Treaty-Organization-and-the-Caucasus-Conflict-jwahlang-110324>

According to Frappi²¹⁵, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow has "*set up Russo-centric security cooperation mechanisms and inaugurated its role as a peacekeeper and mediator in Caucasian conflicts*".

Russia's peacekeeping activities in the South Caucasus and throughout the post-Soviet space have been a key instrument of Moscow's regional policy. Through peacekeeping, Moscow has been able to legitimize its military intervention in neighbouring countries in order to protect national interests²¹⁶.

In particular, throughout the 1990s, Russia played an active role in negotiating ceasefire agreements, demonstrating significant diplomatic capacity in addressing the complex ethnic and political dynamics of the post-Soviet region. According to Cuppuleri, Russia's involvement in negotiations often fueled fears that it was attempting to create another protracted frozen conflict scenario²¹⁷.

4.2 Armenia in the Russian project and its foreign policy

According to classical political geography, a country's relative and absolute location significantly influence its development. The economic, social, and political development of a state is particularly affected by the geographical environment in which it is situated, encompassing not only natural conditions, due to its

²¹⁵ FRAPPI C. (2008), *La cooperazione alla sicurezza nella regione del Caucaso meridionale (1991-2008)*, ISPI Working Papers n. 28, p. 6

²¹⁶ Ibidem

²¹⁷ CUPPULERI A. (2021) *The Rationale Behind Russia'S Military Interventions*, Peacekeeping: the Russian way, ISPI Dossier, p. 9

geographical position, but also relations and the geopolitical situation of neighboring states²¹⁸.

Based on this theory, Armenia does not appear to be a “lucky” country.

In terms of absolute location, Armenia is situated on mountainous terrain and lacks direct access to the sea²¹⁹. Its geography poses several challenges to the country’s economic and commercial development. The absence of a maritime outlets limits opportunities for the development of significant commercial centers and makes connecting to international trade routes more challenging. Moreover, dependence on overland transport routes through neighboring countries, like Azerbaijan, could increase Armenia's economic and political vulnerability²²⁰.

Nonetheless, despite Armenia boasting several mineral resources such as iron, copper, zinc, gold, and silver²²¹, and a significant water resource²²², it lacks reserves of natural gas or oil²²³.

On the other hand, in terms of relative position, Armenia does not enjoy positive relations with its neighbors, particularly with Azerbaijan. The conflict that erupted in 1988 over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory continues to persist to this day, raising concerns

²¹⁸ MARCONI M., SELLARI P., CERRETTI C. (2019), *Spazi e poteri;geografia Politica, Geografia Economica, Geopolitica*, Editori Laterza, p.16

²¹⁹ See Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008), *Country profile- Armenia*, available at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/74a8fcc6-7ef5-456a-bb13-723b635c5e8f/content>

²²⁰ YILMAZ R. (2009), *Armenian Foreign Policy During Levon Ter-Petrosian And Robert Kocharian Period*, in *Journal of Qafqaz University*, Baku, p. 11

²²¹ *Invest in Armenia*, available at <https://investinarmenia.am/en/regional-position-climate-and-natural-resources>

²²² See Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2008), cit.

²²³ International Energy Agency, *Armenia energy profile*, available at <https://www.iea.org/reports/armenia-energy-profile/energy-security-2>

for Armenia regarding security and defense. Furthermore, Azerbaijan holds a much more favorable position in terms of energy resources, being one of the world's significant producers of crude oil and natural gas²²⁴.

This circumstance has led Azerbaijan to develop “*pipeline projects that tilt the geopolitical balance in its favor*”²²⁵. Moreover, the ‘pipeline politics’ for energy transit in the South Caucasus excludes Armenia²²⁶. Nevertheless, Armenia does not enjoy good neighborly relations even with Turkey, which has consistently supported Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite some initiatives for rapprochement between the two countries, between 2008 and 2009²²⁷, the borders between them remain closed, seemingly due to “*Turkey's inability to set aside its sense of kinship with Azerbaijan*”²²⁸. As a result, Armenia has only two neighbors with which to foster good relations: Georgia and Iran. Iran, in the immediate post-Soviet period, expressed its interest in establishing friendly relations with Armenia, which were reassessed as early as 1991, harking back to their shared history²²⁹.

²²⁴ See International Energy Agency, Report on Azerbaijan 2023 available at <https://www.iea.org/reports/azerbaijan-energy-profile/overview>

²²⁵ BRANCH A. R. (2018), *Armenia and the South Caucasus: A New Security Environment*, Connections, 17(2),p. 53

²²⁶ SHIRINYAN A. (2019), *Armenia's foreign policy balancing in an age of uncertainty*, Research paper, Russia and Eurasia programme, p. 4

²²⁷ RICHTER P. (2009), *Turkey, Armenia Are Likely To Ease Conflict*, Los Angeles Times, available at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-apr-04-fg-turkey-armenia4-story.html>

²²⁸ SHIRINYAN A. (2019), cit., p.4

²²⁹ See ZARIFIAN J. (2009), *Iran and Its Two Neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan: Resuming Relationships under America's Suspicious Eyes*. Iran & the Caucasus, 13(2), 383–399.

In particular, analysts observe that Iran not only was eager to have “*its slice of the pie*”²³⁰, but its presence in Armenia might also be attributed to its desire to expand its religious influence²³¹, coupled with both countries’ fear of isolation²³².

Although Iran declared itself neutral in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, relations between Yerevan and Teheran remain fruitful and blossomed following the construction of a gas pipeline in 2007 connecting Armenia and Iran²³³.

Regarding relations with Georgia, despite the two countries took significantly different paths after the dissolution of the USSR²³⁴, Armenia considers it crucial to maintain ties with its Georgian neighbor, due to the vital importance of transit for its exports through Georgian territory. Armenia has consistently sought to collaborate with Georgia, primarily for economic reasons and because a sizable Armenian community resides in Georgia's Javakhk region²³⁵. However, Georgia maintains relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, which raises concerns in Armenia, especially considering the context of historical and territorial tensions with these two countries.

Armenia's foreign policy since the 1990s has primarily focused on several key points: maintaining national security, particularly due

²³⁰ Ivi, p. 386

²³¹ Ibidem

²³² Ivi p. 387

²³³ Monitor Global Energy, *Iran-Armenia gas pipeline*, available at https://www.gem.wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Armenia_gas_pipeline

²³⁴ Georgia is commonly considered a pro-West States, see GERMAN T. (2015), *Heading west? Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic path*, International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 91(3), 601-614.

²³⁵ TER-MATEVOSYAN V. & CURRIE B. (2018), *A conflict that did not happen: revisiting the Javakhk affair in Georgia*, Nations and nationalism, journal of the associations for the study of ethnicity and nationalism, 1-21

to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, fostering economic growth, presenting Armenia's position on the international stage, ensuring the protection of Armenia's interests and its citizens abroad, increasing engagement with international organizations, cooperating with friendly states and partners, and resolving regional issues in an atmosphere of cooperation²³⁶.

In order to ensure the achievement of these objectives, Armenian foreign policy since the 1990s has been based on a ‘multi-vector’ or ‘complementary approach’²³⁷, seeking to maintain a balance between the interests of regional and international powers. This concept was first expressed by President Kocharian during the Parliamentary Assembly on June 23, 2004²³⁸: *“That policy is based on the concept of seeking advantages in smoothing conflicts between the global and regional powers, and not in widening the gaps. We are responsible for regional stability and our actions shall help to solve problems, instead of creating new ones. That approach allowed us to develop trustworthy relations with the United States, the European Union and Iran, and to strengthen the traditional kinship with Russia.”*

The underlying idea of Armenia's foreign policy is to avoid a pro-Russian or pro-Western orientation²³⁹ but to guarantee its own economic and security interests by cooperating with regional and

²³⁶ Embassy of Armenia to the United States of America, available at <https://usa.mfa.am/en/foreignpolicy/>

²³⁷ S. Minasyan (2017), *Multivectorism in the foreign policy of the post-Soviet Eurasian States*, the Journal of post-Soviet democratization, 268-273

²³⁸ Parliamentary Assembly, *speech of Robert Kocharian on 23rd June 2004*, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/Speeches/Speech-XML2HTML-EN.asp?SpeechID=118&a1=0&p2=0>

²³⁹ MINASYAN S. (2017), cit.

international powers. As stated by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan,²⁴⁰ "*Armenia's foreign policy is neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian; we are pro-Armenian*"²⁴¹.

In this context, Armenia has developed relations with NATO since joining the Partnership for Peace Program in 1994, supported the United States after 9/11, contributed to operations in Kosovo in 2004 as part of the Kosovo Force²⁴², and agreed on an Individual Partnership Action Plan²⁴³ in 2005. This plan specifies cooperation not only in defense but also in economic, security, democratic standards, and corruption-related issues. Armenia also supported the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2009. However, Armenia does not aspire to join NATO, considering that it would not favor its national security due to Turkey's presence within the Alliance²⁴⁴.

Furthermore, Armenia's experience during the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia led to the realization that NATO does not provide complete security in the region. This perspective is underscored by Washington's influence, which compelled NATO to

²⁴⁰ Armenpress (2018), "*Armenia's Foreign Policy Is Neither Pro-Western Nor Pro-Russian, We Are Pro-Armenian*" available at <https://armenpress.am/eng/amp/942283>

²⁴¹ It is notable that Pashinyan's foreign policy differs greatly from that of his predecessor Kocharian, as will be seen in Chapter 5.

²⁴² NATO, Relation with Armenia (2023), available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm

²⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (2016), *Armenia-NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) Assessment report. The working visit of the delegation of the Republic of Armenia to the NATO Headquarters*, available at <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2016/11/11/nato-10/6650>

²⁴⁴ See AL MAYADEEN (2024), *Armenian FM affirms Yerevan's non-interest in joining NATO*, available at <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/armenian-fm-affirms-yerevan-s-non-interest-in-joining-nato>

retract its stance towards Georgia, indicating NATO's reluctance to engage in the affairs of the South Caucasus.²⁴⁵

Security stands as a pivotal point in Armenian foreign policy. The ‘frozen conflict’ over Nagorno-Karabakh and the security problems arising from the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade have contributed to perceiving the security factor as the main element of Armenian policy. According to the ex-President and ex-PM of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan: “*We are living in a region entangled in a web of consistent hatred and warmongering rhetoric, a region full of threats and hazards. [...]Some countries even question the right of the Armenian people to live on their historical land. The probabilities of military conflicts in our region are rampant.*”²⁴⁶. This factor has contributed to Armenia perceiving Russia ‘friend-in-need’²⁴⁷ for ensuring its security. Russia's importance in security matters should not be overlooked: Moscow plays a crucial role in the implementation of security guarantees based on perceived threat²⁴⁸ represented mainly by Azerbaijan and Turkey. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Armenian leaders maintained friendly relations with Russia as part of a broader multi-vector policy, and in memory of the historical ties. But it was in 1993,

²⁴⁵ See LOBJAKAS A. (2009), *NATO Lacks the stomach for South Caucasus fight*, in *Caucasus analytical digest* n. 5

²⁴⁶ The President of the Republic of Armenia (2012), *Statement by the President of Armenia, Chairman of the Republican Party of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the 14th RPA Convention*, available at <https://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2012/12/15/Address-by-Serzh-Sargsyan-at-the-14th-Republican-Convention-speech/>

²⁴⁷ TERZYAN A. (2018), *Material forces vs the force of ideas: what makes Russia Armenia's best friend?*, *Armenian Journal of Political Science* 1(8), p. 11

²⁴⁸ SMITH M.A. (2000), *Russian Foreign Policy 2000: The Near abroad*, Conflict studies research centre, p. 11

with the closure of the Armenian-Turkish border, that Armenia sought greater national security, primarily ensured by Russia ²⁴⁹.

Since 1991 Armenia emerged as a solid and reliable partner for Russia. Cooperation between the two countries, based on historical ties, has developed significantly, feeding on common interests, mainly related to regional security, political stability and common economic interests. For Armenia, Russia is the country with which it has the largest and most important bilateral relations. Russia has provided security to Armenia since the early days, initially by offering military support during the conflict with Azerbaijan within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and later transforming this cooperation into a strategic alliance with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) ²⁵⁰.

Since then, Russia and Armenia have deepened their ties not only in the military sector but also politically and economically.

The first step taken by Yerevan was to join the CIS, the Commonwealth of Independent States, an organisation born out of the ashes of the Soviet Union. Joining the CIS is the first strong signal of Armenia's commitment to maintaining a historical and strategic link with Moscow.

While, on one hand, since 2000, Russia has viewed Armenia as a "*Russia's outpost in the region*" ²⁵¹ to counter Western influence in the South Caucasus, on the other hand, Armenia has responded

²⁴⁹ See SHIRINYAN A. (2019), *Armenia's foreign policy balancing in an age of uncertainty*, Research paper in Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham house The royal Institute of International Affairs, 1-28

²⁵⁰ MINASSIAN G. (2008), *Armenia, a Russian outpost in the Caucasus?*, *Russie. Nei. Visions* n.27, p. 6

²⁵¹ MINASSIAN G. (2008), *cit.*, p. 7

positively towards Russia due to its need of military assistance and security.

In this context, an agreement was signed on 16 March 1995 between Moscow and Yerevan allowing Russia to keep its troops in the Gyumri military base; this agreement, which would have allowed the troops to remain there for 25 years, was renewed in 2010 by extending the term to 49 years, i.e. until 2044²⁵². In addition, Russian monitoring forces are deployed along the borders with Turkey and Iran, reaching a contingent of around 10,000 soldiers²⁵³. Moreover, the presence of some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region²⁵⁴ played a crucial role in Moscow's regional policy, especially after the resumption of the 2020 conflict. According to Moscow²⁵⁵ Russian peacekeepers played a key role in ensuring a degree of stability in the region and in helping to manage tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, it should be noted that in the light of the events of 2020, Russian peacekeepers have been severely criticised for operating

²⁵² For other military bases located in Armenia SEE ROGOZIŃSKA A. & KSAWERY OLECH A. (2020), *The Russian Federation's Military Bases Abroad*, Institute of New Europe Report, Warsaw, available at <https://ine.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/THE-RUSSIAN-FEDERATIONS-MILITARY-BASES-ABROAD-1.pdf>

²⁵³ AVETISYAN A. (2023), *Armenian PM sees "no advantage" in Russian troop presence as ties with Moscow deteriorate further*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-pm-sees-no-advantage-in-russian-troop-presence-as-ties-with-moscow-deteriorate-further>

²⁵⁴ Moscow recently affirmed the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers stationed on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. See *Russian peacekeepers start withdrawal from Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh (2024)*, AlJazeera, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/17/russian-peacekeepers-start-withdrawal-from-azerbajjans-nagorno-karabakh>

²⁵⁵ SHAHVERDYAN L. (2024), *Russia rejects criticism of peacekeepers in Karabakh*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/russia-rejects-criticism-of-peacekeepers-in-karabakh>

ambiguously, failing to prevent the Azerbaijani attack and proving ineffective²⁵⁶.

In addition, Russia is deeply involved in the negotiation process for the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and has been actively participating in the OSCE Minsk Group for Mediation since March 1992. Armenia regards cooperation in the military-political sphere as essential for the security and defence of its country; cooperation goes beyond the presence of troops and extends to the purchase of arms directly from Moscow. Russia sells weapons to Yerevan and, according to some studies²⁵⁷, in 2016 Yerevan purchased Russian Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems (SS-26 Stone). In addition, Armenia and Russia cooperate in the Caucasus Unified Air Defense System as well as in a 'Joint' Armenian-Russian Group of Forces.²⁵⁸

The Moscow-Yerevan axis has also developed significantly in economic terms. Russia, from the very beginning, emerged as the main trading partner of Armenia. In 2013, Russia was Armenia's largest trading partner, with a turnover of USD 1.4 billion²⁵⁹. Currently, according to the report on socioeconomic conditions

²⁵⁶ SHAHVERDYAN L. (2022), *Karabakh residents increasingly questioning Russian peacekeepers' effectiveness*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/karabakh-residents-increasingly-questioning-russian-peacekeepers-effectiveness>

²⁵⁷ ALYEV N. (2018) *Russia's Arms Sales: A Foreign Policy Tool in Relations With Azerbaijan and Armenia*, in Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 15 Issue: 47, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-arms-sales-foreign-policy-tool-relations-azerbaijan-armenia/>

²⁵⁸ See 'Joint' Armenian-Russian Force: what it is & what it isn't (2016), USC Dornsife Institute of Armenian Studies, available at <https://armenian.usc.edu/joint-armenian-russian-force-what-it-is-what-it-isnt/>

²⁵⁹ WORLD BANK GROUP (2015), *Republic of Armenia: Export-Led Industrial Development Strategy: Implementation Review and Recommendations on New Toolset*, report n. ACS14153 available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/es/606191468002671320/Armenia-Export-led-Industrial-Dvt-Strategy-Review-June-18.docx>

published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia²⁶⁰, foreign investments from Russia have reached almost \$2.5 billion in 2019. These data highlight how, even thirty years after the establishment of the independent Republic of Armenia, Russia retains a leading position as the country's main economic partner. The strong economic interconnection reflects not only a bilateral relationship based on trade interests, but also Armenia's economic dependence on Russia, which is defined as an 'asymmetric relationship'²⁶¹.

Starting from 2002, the Russian State gradually acquired strategically critical assets in Armenia, including telecommunications, railways, electricity, and gas distribution networks²⁶².

This maneuver was part of a pact known as 'equity for debts'²⁶³ or 'assets-for-debts'²⁶⁴, through which Armenia transferred its state-owned strategic assets in exchange for the cancellation of its debt of around 100 million²⁶⁵. Through this political decision, Armenia ceded control of six hydroelectric power plants, acquired by United Energy Systems (UES), and numerous other enterprises. Furthermore, since 2003, Armenia and Russia have transitioned

²⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2019), *Report on Investments in the Republic of Armenia*, available at https://mid.ru/en/maps/am/1475237/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab20005d28881533fd273cd2bc205a15c5ceebcfb71c30f2f8d7f5d92fb4b85c8341d108cd01f12514300055bbbe359a91fce87f2662eccf90965304c1716bb051e69657ac786bdf02aa0d057d43142821f180cc32c1dfc231de04

²⁶¹ See SHIRINYAN A. (2019), cit.

²⁶² Ivi, p. 8

²⁶³ DANIELYAN E. (2003), *Russia Tightens Grip On Armenia With Debt Agreements*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/russia-tightens-grip-on-armenia-with-debt-agreements>

²⁶⁴ GIRAGOSIAN R. (2019), *Paradox of power: Russia, Armenia, and Europe after the Velvet Revolution*, European Council of Foreign Relations, 1-17

²⁶⁵ DANIELYAN E. (2003), cit.

from what Socor²⁶⁶ defined as "*property-for-debt to property-for-gas*", meaning that Moscow has purchased much of Armenia's energy infrastructure for electricity and gas. A significant example is the management of the electricity grid by RAO Unified Energy Systems (UES), which gained financial control of the Medzar nuclear power plant²⁶⁷.

Indeed, in 2013, Armenia allowed the Russian company Gazprom to control its natural gas facilities in exchange for the payment of a 300 million debt, that, according to Terzyan²⁶⁸, was caused by a secret price hike between 2011 and 2013.

In this sense, the cost of gas and the use of energy as weapons have become crucial tools for Russia to exert influence and achieve its goals in Armenia²⁶⁹.

On this point, Armenia's choice to join the Customs Union (CU) and taking part in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) represents an important point of discussion on the asymmetry between Moscow and Yerevan.

In September 2013 Armenia made what many describe as a change of course, a 'U-turn'²⁷⁰ or a '180 degree turn'²⁷¹.

²⁶⁶ TADEVOSIAN A. (2003), Armenia cedes power to Russia, available at <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenia-cedes-power-russia>

²⁶⁷ BORDONARO F. (2008), *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: elezioni, politiche e scenari del contesto caucasico*, ISPI Working Paper n. 29

²⁶⁸ TERZYAN A. (2019), *Russian policy, Russian Armenians and Armenia: ethnic minority or political leverage?*, CES Working Papers, vol. XI(2), p. 127

²⁶⁹ See TER-MATEVOSYAN V., DRNOIAN A., MKRTCHYAN N & YEPREMYAN T. (2017), *Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: reasons for joining and its consequences*, Eurasian Geography and Economics, 58:3, 340-360

²⁷⁰ GIRAGOSIAN R. (2014), *Armenia's strategic U-turn*, European Council on foreign relations Policy Memo n. 99

²⁷¹ KHACHATURIAN V. (2020), *Armenia and the EAUE*, Center for International private enterprise, p. 3

Until that point, Armenia had maintained good relations with the European Union through a balanced foreign policy. In May 2009 Armenia joined the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with the main goal of creating “*the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested partner countries*”²⁷². In line with the objectives set by the Eastern Partnership declaration, the Armenian government implemented a range of political and socioeconomic reforms aimed at fostering integration with the European Union²⁷³. Negotiations to join the Association Agreement and the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) proceeded for years, driven enthusiastically by the Armenian leadership. President Sargsyan in 2011 during the Assembly of the Council of Europe Parliamentary affirmed: “*The people of Armenia have made their historic and irreversible choice. Our road to becoming closer to Europe has been unique in a natural way. [...] our society knows precisely where it is going, and why it has chosen this particular route of development. For us, it is a homecoming to the European civilization and cultural realm, to which we belong, and where we have been ever-present.*”²⁷⁴.

The Armenian change was completely unexpected. Both Sargsyan and other officials had stated that joining the Customs Union was

²⁷² Council of the European Union (2009), *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_09_78

²⁷³ See DELCOUR L. & WOLCZUK K. (2015), *The EU'S unexpected 'ideal neighbour'?* *The perplexing case of Armenia's europeanisation*, *Journal of European integration* v. 37 n. 4, 491-507

²⁷⁴ The President of Republic of Armenia (2011), *Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*, available at <https://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2011/06/22/news-91/>

impossible. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shavarash Kocharyan declared that “*joining the Customs Union would mean losing sovereignty*”²⁷⁵. On the contrary, on September 3rd 2013, Armenia joined the CU and, on December 4th 2014, the Armenian Parliament ratified the document of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, which became operative on January 1st, 2015. The main goals of the EAEU are creating the conditions for sustainable economic development of the member countries, improving the living standards of population, forming a common market of goods, services, capital and labor and promoting the comprehensive modernization, cooperation and increase the competitiveness of the states²⁷⁶.

Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union has conferred certain economic benefits, such as exemptions from customs duties on specific goods and facilitation for migrant workers from Armenia. However, these economic benefits are short-term; Armenia has not experienced stable growth because the Union has developed under the ‘center of gravity’²⁷⁷ of the Russian market, serving as a dominant and influential force. This implies that any developments affecting Russia and its economy also impact Armenia, such as in cases of sanctions or conflict. According to Karapetyan²⁷⁸, countries that benefit from Russian inflows and

²⁷⁵ GRIGORYAN A. (2013), *Armenia: Joining under the Gun*, in Putin’s Grand strategy: the Eurasian Union and its discontents, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, ch. 8, p.103

²⁷⁶ <https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/6>

²⁷⁷ TER-MATEVOSYAN V., DRNOIAN A., MKRTCHYAN N. & YEPREMYAN T. (2017), *Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: reasons for joining and its consequences*, Eurasian Geography and Economics, V. 58, NO. 3, 340–360.

²⁷⁸ KARAPETYAN N. (2023), *Beyond Russia - the impacts of sanctions on the region*, IPS Journal, available at <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/beyond-russia-the-impacts-of-sanctions-on-the-region-6959/>

trade with Russia are highly vulnerable, exposing their economies to significant challenges. Furthermore, economist Armen Ktoyan²⁷⁹, highlights that there is a potential for the Armenian economy to be adversely affected by the devaluation of the ruble, which could lead to a reduction or cessation of investments.

Armenia's decision to join the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union is indicative of its profound dependence on Moscow across various sectors. Indeed, it appears that Russia employed considerable measures to influence Armenia's decision.

According to a publication by the Warsaw-based Center for Eastern Studies²⁸⁰, *“Moscow has demonstrated its ability to influence Yerevan by announcing an extreme, almost 70 percent, gas price rise [...] It cannot be ruled out that the intention behind Russia’s pressure on Armenia is aimed at impeding its dialogue with the EU [...] Initialing the Association Agreement contradicts the plans of Armenia’s accession to the Customs Union and Moscow has been seeking this for a long time now “.*

The thesis that Russia utilized energy leverage to compel Armenia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is also supported by Terzyan²⁸¹, who states that *“the threat of a 50 percent increase in gas prices forced Armenia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (UEE)”*.

Furthermore, although the government's decision to join the Customs Union and then the EAEU has been widely justified as a

²⁷⁹ Jam News (2022), *How can anti-russian sanctions affect Armenia?*, available at <https://jam-news.net/how-can-anti-russian-sanctions-affect-armenia/>

²⁸⁰ GRIGORYAN A. (2013), cit., p. 105

²⁸¹ TERZYAN A. (2019), cit.,

matter of military and economic security, Minasyan²⁸² asserts that, from Yerevan's perspective, the decision to join the Union was driven principally by political considerations. Similarly, according to Giragosian²⁸³, the Armenian government's choice, besides indicating Yerevan's clear dependence on Moscow, was also a political decision. It served the President in neutralizing opposition attacks, which portrayed the pro-Western choice as a threat to Russian friendship.

The asymmetry in the relationship between Yerevan and Moscow is further accentuated by the fact that Russia is the largest seller of weapons to Azerbaijan. Russia sells arms to Azerbaijan, which, being much richer than its rival, is able to purchase much more advanced Russian weapons²⁸⁴. This choice raises questions about Moscow's real intentions in resolving the conflict. The question arises whether Russia genuinely seeks to stabilize the region, or whether it stands to gain strategically and economically by maintaining a position of strength in a tense environment. Additionally, according to Shirinyan²⁸⁵, Russia's sale of arms to Azerbaijan not only bolsters the country militarily but also reinforces it politically, "*blurring the lines between Baku and Yerevan*", and increasing the possibility of escalation.

Indeed, Russian control over Armenia's critical infrastructure has triggered negative local reactions, highlighting the complexity of bilateral relations. Between 2005 and 2015, the company RUO-

²⁸² MINASYAN S. (2015), *Armenia Keeps on balancing, between the European Union and the Eurasian Econoc Union*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo n. 377.

²⁸³ GIRAGOSIAN R. (2014)

²⁸⁴ ALYEV N. (2018), cit.

²⁸⁵ SHIRINYAN A. (2019), cit.

UES increased electricity tariffs by 40 per cent, causing discontent and protests among Armenian citizens²⁸⁶. The protests triggered by rising electricity prices are part of the broader context of discontent with the country's political and economic system. In this context, economic and political dependence on Russia emerges as one of the main factors of tension. For some analysts, it appears that Armenia has sacrificed its sovereignty in exchange for security and economic support.

The 2015 protests are set against the backdrop of generational change and an emerging civil society. Young protesters do not fully trust existing institutions, which they perceive as corrupt, and seek to shape a future based on Western values of transparency, democracy and active participation²⁸⁷.

The protests developing in Armenia since 2015 and leading up to the Velvet Revolution of 2018 represent a moment of transition and highlight the complexity of geopolitical, economic and social relations in the post-Soviet context. While dependence on Russia has provided security, it has also generated growing internal dissatisfaction, highlighting the need for a re-examination of regional dynamics and the aspirations of the Armenian population.

The Russian project of re-integrating the post-Soviet space in Armenia also manifests through the discourse on the Russian language and culture. According to Russian President Vladimir

²⁸⁶ KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016). Armenia's Foreign and Security Policy. In *Armenia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests* (pp. 4–21). Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

²⁸⁷ MIKHELIDZE, N. (2015), *#ElectricYerevan: Why Armenia's Future is in Europe*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), available at <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1522.pdf>

Putin²⁸⁸, the promotion of the Russian language is a crucial tool for increasing Russian influence and consolidating ties in the post-Soviet world. Although Russian is widely spoken as a second language in Armenia, after the country gained independence, many Russian schools were closed or converted into institutions with only Armenian-language instruction. Despite Russian being known by a large part of the population and being the second most spoken language with an 89%²⁸⁹ proficiency rate, the Russian government has exerted pressure on Armenia to increase the teaching and use of the Russian language. For instance, Eleonora Mitrofonova²⁹⁰ has argued that the Russian language should receive legal status in the constitutions of the former Soviet Union countries. Additionally, there have been proposals to recognize Russian as an official language in Armenia. In 2017, Volodin²⁹¹ proposed consolidating the status of the Russian language as an official language in Armenia due to the law prohibiting foreign drivers from operating and working in Russia. However, given that 98%²⁹² of the population in Armenia is Armenian, teaching Russian does not seem as important. Russia has often been accused of imperialism by international media, as it appears unwilling to respect Armenia's sovereignty. Yet, the number of Russian-speaking people in

²⁸⁸ President of Russia (2019), *Meeting of Council on Russian Language*, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61986>

²⁸⁹ Translator without border, *Language data for Armenia*, available at <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-armenia>

²⁹⁰ *Russia MFA: Russian language should be given legal status in ex-USSR countries*, (2016), News.am, available at <https://news.am/eng/news/357735.html>

²⁹¹ The State Duma (2020), *Viacheslav Volodin: status of Russian language as language of interethnic communication is in the interests of the citizens of Moldova*, Available at <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/50427/>

²⁹² *Armenia Language Map*, available at <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Armenia-language-map.pdf>

Armenia is much more modest compared to other CIS countries. According to Mhkoyan²⁹³ the presence of various institutions in Armenia suggests that Russian 'soft power' has been active in the country since the 2000s. Many centers such as the Russkiy Mir Russian Center (2008) and the Russian Center for Science and Culture (Rossijskij centr nauki i kul'tury) of Rossotrudnichestvo (2009) have been established in Armenia to promote the Russian language. In addition to these centers, the distribution of school textbooks and the opening of libraries aim to support the learning of the Russian language. Lastly, the role of the Armenian diaspora in Russia is crucial in the context of Armenian-Russian relations. Russia is home to the largest Armenian community, which makes a significant financial contribution to the motherland²⁹⁴ and the role of the Armenian diaspora helps to maintain strong ties between the two countries.

²⁹³ MKHOYAN A.(2017), *Soft power, Russia and the former Soviet states: a case study of Russian language and education in Armenia*, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 23:6, 690-704,

²⁹⁴ See KUCHINS, A. C., MANKOFF, J., & BACKES, O. (2016), cit.

CHAPTER 5: The Velvet Revolution: a turning point?

In 2018 a revolution occurred in Armenia. The Velvet Revolution, recognized as a ‘non-violent process’ by analysts, culminated with the election of Nikol Pashinyan as new Prime Minister. Protests, which put an end to Serzh Sargsyan’s term, sought to combat rampant corruption and to establish a democratic Armenia. The Velvet Revolution raises the issue regarding the relationship between Yerevan and Moscow: can it be considered a ‘turning-point’?.

5.1 Background

In 2018 a transfer of power took place in Armenia. After several weeks of peaceful protests on April 23rd, Serzh Sargsyan, the Prime Minister who ruled the country for a decade, resigned. The following month, on May 8th, Nikol Pashinyan came to power.

What happened in Yerevan during the first months of 2018 is known as the “Velvet Revolution”, a wave of demonstration, protests, and march against the government actions and the re-election of Serzh Sargsyan as Prime Minister. Sargsyan has been at the head of Armenia for ten years: from 2008 to 2018 he has ruled the country as President. In April 2018, according to the constitutional change of 2015 that transformed the government from a presidential to a parliamentary system²⁹⁵, he transitioned to

²⁹⁵See FALKOWSKI M. (2009), *The constitutional referendum in Armenia: the institutionalisation of the oligarchy*, Centre for Eastern Studies, available at

the role of Prime Minister. Many Armenians were against Sargsyan leading the country for another term, accusing him and his party of corruption and favoring oligarchs²⁹⁶. In addition, Sargsyan was seen as contradictory, since he stated repeatedly that he would not run for Prime Minister²⁹⁷.

When Sargsyan became Prime Minister, a wave of protest broke out across the country. Armenian people protested against Sargsyan and the oligarch class, blaming them for corruption and for leading the country to collapse, both socially and economically²⁹⁸.

According to Freedom House's report²⁹⁹ of 2018, corruption in Armenia was flagrant. Armenia was classified as a 'partly-free' state, with high levels of corruption at various levels, particularly in the electoral system. According to the report, OSCE reported Sargsyan's second presidential term in 2013 as "*marred by credible allegations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party*"³⁰⁰.

Moreover, the Armenian economy was experiencing a severe downturn. In 2015, the country's GDP was 5.032 trillion AMD, and the economic growth rate was only 3%, significantly lower than the

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-12-09/constitutional-referendum-armenia-institutionalisation-oligarchy>

²⁹⁶BOHDAN K. (2018), *Why are Armenians protesting against the new prime minister?*, Aljazeera, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/features/2018/4/19/why-are-armenians-protesting-against-the-new-prime-minister>

²⁹⁷LOMSADZE G. (2014), *Armenia: two terms is enough, President Sargsyan says*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-two-terms-is-enough-president-sargsyan-says>

²⁹⁸STORTO A. M. (2018), *Armenia, l'opinione di Simone Zoppellaro sulla "rivoluzione di velluto"*, Euronews, available at <https://it.euronews.com/2018/05/01/armenia-l-opinione-di-simone-zoppellaro-sulla-rivoluzione-di-velluto->

²⁹⁹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2018 - Armenia* -, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2018>

³⁰⁰ Ibidem

7.2% growth rate in 2013³⁰¹. This economic decline directly impacted poverty and inequality: in 2015 the poverty rate was 29.8% and the unemployment rate was 18.4% in June 2016³⁰². As consequences of the socio-economic situation, emigration developed significantly; in 2015 the 25% of Armenian people lived abroad³⁰³.

These conditions sparked a wave of protests starting in April 2018, initiated by the political group 'My Step Initiative', which organized the first demonstration in Yerevan. From April, the opposition launched continuous demonstrations to prevent Sargsyan from being elected as Prime Minister on April, 17th. The protests rapidly spread across all provinces in Armenia, drawing participation from over 200,000 people³⁰⁴.

The Velvet Revolution culminated in December with an extraordinary parliamentary election. The 'My Step Alliance' received 70.42%³⁰⁵ of the votes, securing an overwhelming majority. This marked a significant shift in Armenian politics and highlighted the public's demand for substantial change.

³⁰¹ *The economic situation in Armenia: opportunities and challenges in 2017*, Compass Center, analysis available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/13248.pdf>

³⁰² Ibidem

³⁰³ Ibidem

³⁰⁴ SHIKARYAN B. (2018), *Velvet Revolution in Armenia: April-May 2018*, Human rights online, available at <https://humanrights-online.org/velvet-revolution-in-armenia-april-may-2018/>

³⁰⁵ BATASHVILI D. (2019), *Security Review: Nikol Pashinyan's Russian Problem*, Georgian Foundation for strategic and international studies, available at <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/English-2684.pdf>

5.2 Yerevan- Moscow after the Velvet Revolution

Following the Velvet Revolution, many analysts³⁰⁶ assumed a deterioration in relations between Russia and Armenia.

However, the Armenian Revolution did not directly affect its geopolitical status and its foreign policy. Firstly, the Revolution occurred owing to its domestic policies³⁰⁷, without any relevance on foreign policy. The change of power was a domestic political process, devoid of foreign policy matter.

In this sense, it differs significantly from the ‘Color Revolutions’ that have affected other countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine, whose goals was to break with the Soviet past and to move closer to the West. In other word, Armenia was definitely not a ‘colour’ revolution³⁰⁸.

What happened in Armenia was a change of power: the corrupt authoritarian model was swept away to create a democratic model based on free elections³⁰⁹.

Nevertheless, over the years many analysts have tried to examine how the Armenia’s change of power has affected relations with Russia. Therefore, it is natural to wonder whether and how the Armenian position in the project of recomposing the post-Soviet space has changed.

³⁰⁶ISKANDARYAN A. (2019), *Armenia–Russia Relations: the Revolution and the Map*, Caucasus Analytical Digest, 109, 2-4.

³⁰⁷ Ibidem

³⁰⁸ SWITALSKI A. (2020), *The Armenian Revolution: an unfinished cable*, The Polish Institute of international affairs, Warsaw.

³⁰⁹ LANSKOY M. & SUTHERS E. (2019), *Armenia’s Velvet Revolution*, Journal of democracy, v. 30, n.2.

Immediately after the end of the Velvet Revolution, there was a widespread belief that Russia was alarmed³¹⁰. This concern was influenced by the recent regime changes in neighboring countries, Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), which led to a significant deterioration in relations and a cut of Russian influence in those regions. However, the Velvet Revolution had nothing in common with the Color Revolutions of the post-Soviet period³¹¹. The Color Revolutions were able to change communist or socialist regimes during elections. According to Nikmoeen³¹², Colour Revolutions have common elements: non-violent protests, the role of media, students, NGO, and especially the role of the West. Indeed, Nikmoeen highlights that the main goal of Color Revolution was to cut out dependency on Russia. According to Iskandaryan³¹³, these revolutions were pursued “*as efforts to break with the Soviet or post-Soviet past, moving from what is Soviet and archaic to something that is Western and modern*”.

For example, both the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine were characterized by a common element, which drew Russia's attention: Western support.

In particular, the United States spearheaded Georgia's and Ukraine's process to democracy through a mechanism that can be

³¹⁰ ABRAHAMYAN E. & MELIKYAN G.(2018), *Moscow Worries Armenian 'Velvet Revolution' Could Lessen Its Leverage Over Yerevan*, The Jamestown Foundation, available at

<https://jamestown.org/program/armenias-velvet-revolution-threatens-moscows-continued-leverage-over-country/>

³¹¹ OHANYAN A. (2021), *Velvet is not a colour, Armenia's democratic transition in a global context*, in *Armenia's Velvet Revolution: authoritarian decline and civil resistance in a multipolar world*, I.B. Tauris, p. 25.

³¹² NKMOEEN J.(2017), *Review Of Color Revolution*, International Journal Of New Technology And Research, V. 3 Issue 8.

³¹³ IISKANDARYAN, A. (2019), *Armenia-Russia Relations: the Revolution and the Map*, Caucasus Analytical Digest, 109, 2-4.

defined as “*dollars for democracy*”³¹⁴, which refers to the use of funding to promote democratic movements and institutions in other countries. In the case of the post-Soviet revolutions, the United States often provided support through NGOs, opposition groups, support in the election of specific candidates, and civil society organizations³¹⁵. For example, The New York Times³¹⁶ reported that the U.S. government spent 14 million dollars on the Orange Revolution, and NGOs supported Yushchenko's government with an additional 60 million dollars in funding.

The role of the United States was also crucial in the case of Georgia, particularly through the use of the media. Over 10 years, the U.S. government spent 154 million dollars on Georgia's democracy assistance projects³¹⁷.

On the contrary, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia did not follow the dynamics of its post-Soviet neighbors. The first factor highlighting this difference is that the Armenian Revolution was driven by non-elites, starting from the grassroots level, and spread through the country's institutions, rather than against them³¹⁸.

Indeed, The April Revolution was not led by reformist elites supported by external players, such as United States and the

³¹⁴ BRINKLEY J. (2004), *Dollars for democracy? U.S. aid to Ukraine challenged*, The New York Times, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/21/politics/dollars-for-democracy-us-aid-to-ukraine-challenged.html>

³¹⁵ CHAULIA S. (2006), *Democratization, NGOs and “colour revolutions”*, Open Democracy free thinking for the world, available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/colour_revolutions_3196jsp/

³¹⁶ BRINKLEY J. (2004), cit.

³¹⁷ ANABLE D. (2005), *The role of Georgia's media -and Western aid- in the Rose Revolution*, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Working Papers Series, available at https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/2006_03_anable.pdf

³¹⁸ OHANYAN A. (2021), cit., p. 25

European Union³¹⁹. Moreover, a significant factor is that Pashinyan did not fuel the protests with anti-Russia or pro-Western slogans³²⁰. According to some analysts³²¹, Pashinyan realized that adopting an anti-Russian rhetoric could be detrimental to the goals of the revolution and hinder the country's most important objectives.

Nonetheless, the Armenian protest that led to the regime change were driven by domestic factors: they had no relevance in foreign policy and occurred due to the need for domestic reforms, to put an end to the rampant corruption, and to establish a good governance³²².

Pashinyan has consistently expressed his intention to maintain friendly relations with Russia and emphasized that the Revolution had nothing to do with foreign relations. During the meeting between Putin and Pashinyan in Moscow, in September 2018, Pashinyan stated: *"I want to stress that despite certain pessimism evident in both the Armenian and Russian media and in social networks, it is my belief that our relations are developing dynamically. I think that our priority is to try to tap the full potential of our bilateral relations"*³²³. Pashinyan did not seem intent on changing Armenia's foreign policy or questioning its

³¹⁹ OHANYAN A. (2018), *Armenia'S Democratic Dreams In Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/07/armenias-democratic-dreams/>

³²⁰ BAEV P. (2018), *What made Russia indifferent to the Revolution in Armenia*, Caucasus analytical digest, 104, 20-24.

³²¹ SHAKARIAN PIETRO (2018), *Russia-Armenia relations and the april revolution*, Eastern Europe Modern Diplomacy, available at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/05/23/russia-armenia-relations-and-the-april-revolution/>

³²² IISKANDARYAN, A. (2019), cit., p. 2

³²³ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia (2018), *Nikol Pashinyan meets with Vladimir Putin in Moscow*, available at <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2018/09/08/Nikol-Pashinyan-met-with-Vladimir-Putin/>

friendship with Moscow. For these reasons, despite Russia's traditional aversion to regimes that come to power through revolutions³²⁴, Moscow did not interfere with the Velvet Revolution. In fact, Shakarian³²⁵ notes that Russian spokesperson Maria Zakharova publicly supported the protests, stating, "*Armenia, we are always with you!*". Additionally, Putin was one of the first political leaders to congratulate Pashinyan as Prime Minister. Saradzhyan³²⁶ notes that Russia does not intervene in post-Soviet countries if they have had a revolution, if they have become more democratic or if their leaders have begun to have friendly relations with "*Russia's competitors*", but only if its vital interests are affected. In this sense, there is no apparent break between Moscow and Yerevan; however, as of 2018, a shift in foreign policy has marked a change in ties between the two countries.

From the moment he took office, Pashinyan had no doubts about the trajectory of his foreign policy: Armenia needed to continue the policy of complementary, balancing relations between Russia and other countries.

Since 2018 Yerevan has continued to strengthen its relationship with Tbilisi, its strategic partner. The high relationship has been further emphasized by the sign of a 'strategic partnership'

³²⁴ BATASHVILI D. (2019), cit.

³²⁵ SHAKARIANA P. (2018), *Russia–Armenia Relations and the April Revolution*, available at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/05/23/russia-armenia-relations-and-the-april-revolution/>

³²⁶ SARADZHYAN S. (2018), *Armenia: why has Vladimir Putin not intervened so far and will he?*, opinions in Russia in Global Affairs, available at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/armenia-why-has-vladimir-putin-not-intervened-so-far-and-will-he/>

memorandum in January of this year³²⁷. Georgia is a strategic partner for Armenia due to the closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, serving as a vital point for trading. However, some issues persist between the two countries, primarily concerning the Javakheti region, which is home to approximately 95,000 Armenians³²⁸. Moreover, the growing anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia, exacerbated by the events of 2008, indirectly influences the Armenian diaspora and relations with Armenia as a friend of Russia. Finally, it seems that Georgia, in order to maintain good relations with Azerbaijan and serving as a gas corridor, may partially sacrifice its friendship with Armenia³²⁹.

On the other hand, relations with Iran have also always been strong. Iran has always welcomed the friendship between Armenia and Russia, as any reduction in Russian influence could potentially be filled by the US, a historical adversary of Iran³³⁰. In addition, Tehran is concerned about the potential use of Armenian territory as a base for US anti-Iran activities. Teheran regarded the Velvet Revolution with apprehension, fearing that Armenia could follow

³²⁷ *Georgia, Armenia Sign 'Strategic Partnership' Agreement During Pashinian Visit*, Radio Free Europe, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-armenia-strategic-partnership-pashinian-garibashvili/32793475.html>

³²⁸ *Georgia: The Javakheti Region's Integration Challenges* (2011), International Crisis Group, policy briefing n. 63, available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/129960/B63%20Georgia%20The%20Javakheti%20Regions%20Integration%20Challenges.pdf>

³²⁹ *Far and Near South Caucasus: Present-Day Georgia-Armenia Relations* (2019), Eurasia Research Institute, available at <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/far-and-near-south-caucasus-present-day-georgia-armenia-relations/>

³³⁰ POGHOSYAN B. (2022), *Opinion: Armenia-Iran relations after 2018: Continuity or ambiguity?*, Commonsense. Eu, available at <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-armenia-iran-relations-after-2018-continuity-or-ambiguity>

the same pattern as the color revolutions. In 2018, Pashinyan formulated the ‘new Iran strategy’ reassuring Tehran that changes in Armenia did not have a geopolitical agenda and Yerevan would continue to avoid any “*international anti-Iranian initiatives*”³³¹. In recent years, the geopolitical shift in the Caucasus³³², including the souring of relations between Armenia and Russia, has led Iran to revise its foreign policy, throwing ambiguity into the relationship between Iran and Armenia. An example of this is the positive attitude Iran has always had towards the deployment of Russian troops along the Armenian borders³³³. Therefore, Tehran is likely to view with concern Russia's recent decision to remove border guards from Armenia's borders³³⁴.

On the other hand, as early as July 2018, the Prime Minister held a series of informal meetings with NATO leaders³³⁵, including attending the Brussels Summit³³⁶ to discuss the development of bilateral and multipolar relations. In September 2018, Pashinyan travelled to New York, where he met with NATO Secretary

³³¹ ABRAHAMYAN E. (2018), *Pashinyan Formulates Armenia's New Iran Strategy*, CivilNet, available at <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/385115/pashinyan-formulates-armenias-new-iran-strategy/>

³³² MAMEDOV E. (2024), *Perspectives: Iran adapting to altered geopolitical landscape in South Caucasus*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-iran-adapting-to-altered-geopolitical-landscape-in-south-caucasus>

³³³ POGHOSYAN B. (2022), cit.

³³⁴ PICCIOLI L. (2024), *Ecco come il ritiro delle forze russe impatta sulla geopolitica nel Caucaso*, Formiche, available at <https://formiche.net/2024/04/ritiro-forze-russe-geopolitica-nel-caucaso/>

³³⁵ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia (2018), *Nikol Pashinyan holds informal working meetings with leaders of several countries*, available at <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2018/07/12/Nikol-Pashinyan-meetings/>

³³⁶ KUCERA J. (2018), *Pashinyan in Brussels: “We expect more assistance”*, EurasiaNet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-in-brussels-we-expect-more-assistance>

General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. President Donald Trump³³⁷. According to many observers³³⁸, the Velvet Revolution would allowed Europe to take the opportunity to shape Armenia's future, and the way revolution took place, through non-violent protests and popular power rallies, demonstrated a claim to European values. Pashinyan continued to strengthen relations with the European Union, with which Armenia had already signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA)³³⁹ in 2017, adopting a road-map in 2019 and 2021³⁴⁰. In 2021, CEPA officially entered into force. Since the Velvet Revolution, the EU has actively participated in processes to support peace in the Caucasus and in particular in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The EU implemented border monitoring activities between Armenia and Azerbaijan with the aim of contributing to peace in the region³⁴¹.

Pashinyan's aforementioned foreign policy choices to further bind himself to the West have negatively influenced Russia's view of Armenia. This concept is clearly expressed by Markedonov³⁴², who states that: “*contradictions between Russia and the West over Caucasian geopolitics have not arisen today or yesterday*”.

³³⁷ PM Pashinyan participates in reception on behalf of U.S. President Donald Trump, ArmenPress, available at <https://armenpress.am/eng/amp/948708>

³³⁸ GIRAGOSIAN R. (2019), *Paradox of power: Russia, Armenia, and Europe after the Velvet Revolution*, European Council on Foreign Relations, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia_armenia_and_europe_after_the_velvet_revolution/?amp

³³⁹ European Commission (2021), *The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_782

³⁴⁰ European Council, *EU relations with Armenia*, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/armenia/>

³⁴¹ Ibidem

³⁴² MARKEDONOV S. (2024), *The Caucasus: between East and West*, Russia International Affairs Council (RIAC), available at https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-caucasus-between-east-and-west/?sphrase_id=144485504

Markedonov emphasises how the balance in the Caucasus has been altered by recent geopolitical dynamics, pointing out that: “*Moscow sees the EU mission in Armenia not only as proof of inconsistency in the Armenian leadership but also as an anti-Russian tool used by the West*”. Nevertheless, according to some observers³⁴³, the Velvet Revolution had a domestic agenda, however, the choice to fight corruption also affected Russia; the Russian oligarchs were directly influenced by the new Armenian leadership, which tried to do away with Russian-linked figures by accusing them of corruption or nepotism³⁴⁴.

On the other hand, Yerevan continued to cooperate with Moscow, despite the hope of many³⁴⁵ for a change in Armenian international policy and less dependence on Russia. Yet Pashinyan expressed the importance of using a foreign policy to favour domestic interests, stating “*Our goal is to protect the national interests, country’s sovereignty and independence. Our foreign policy is neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian. We are pro-Armenian*”³⁴⁶. Although Pashinyan before his election did not support Armenia's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the "Way Out" faction proposed leaving the union in 2017³⁴⁷, he affirmed Armenia's

³⁴³ The opinion of experts interviewed by the author, who did not consent to the publication of their names in this thesis, are reported.

³⁴⁴ See ATENASIAN G. (2018), *Armenia’s revolutionary government steps up anti-corruption purge*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/armenias-revolutionary-government-steps-up-anti-corruption-purge>

³⁴⁵ FRAPPI C. (2021), *La Russia e il Caucaso meridionale. Vettori e strategie d’influenza in un mutevole contesto regionale*, in *L’influenza della Russia nel vicinato: tra minacce di erosione e adattamento alle nuove sfide*, ISPI Approfondimenti, p. 14

³⁴⁶ *PM’s interview to Armenia’s foreign policy is neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian, we are pro Armenian* RFI (2018), Armen Press, available at <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/942283.html>

³⁴⁷ MARKAROV, A., & DAVTYAN, V. (2018), *Post-Velvet Revolution Armenia’s Foreign Policy Challenges*, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet*

commitment to the Eurasian Economic Union, to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and to the military alliance Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Pashinyan's decision not to reverse Armenia's foreign policy is due to the fact that relations with Russia are vital for the country. In this regard, Russia's presence has always been crucial, to the extent that according to some analysts, "*Armenia's post-revolutionary political leadership has committed itself to further deepen ties with Russia, showing no indication or ability to revise relations with Russia*"³⁴⁸.

This statement can be taken into account for the first years of the Pashinyan government, in which the PM continued to believe in Russian support in various fields.

The first factor influencing Armenian choice to maintain relations with Russia, in the post-revolution period, is the country's energy and economic dependence on Moscow.

Russia, through government-owned companies controls most of the infrastructure in Armenia, operating a quasi-monopoly. Russia has acquired approximately 90%³⁴⁹ of Armenia's power generation capacity making it the largest source of economic investment in Armenia, totaling around 697 million USD.³⁵⁰ Moscow controls major infrastructures and is the primary supplier of gas in Armenia through the company Gazprom. Armenia's strong dependence on

Democratization 26(4), 531-546, available at <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2022/ph241/nodarse1/docs/markarov-2018.pdf>

³⁴⁸TERZYANM A. (2018), *Material Forces vs. the Force of Ideas: What makes Russia Armenia's 'best friend'?* Armenian Journal of Political Science 1(8) 2018, 5-22

³⁴⁹ Ibidem

³⁵⁰ Lloyds Bank, *Armenia: investing in Armenia*, available at <https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/armenia/investment#:~:text=Russia%20remained%20the%20most%20prominent,was%20about%20USD%20350%20million>

Russia is evident in its reliance on Russian hydrocarbons and the use of gas supply as a political tool to exert pressure, even on the Pashinyan government³⁵¹.

However, Russia remains the most popular destination for migration among Armenians, with approximately 73%³⁵² choosing Russia as their destination. Migration to Russia generates significant remittances, which constitute a fundamental economic pillar for Armenia. These remittances represent a source of strong economic dependency for many Armenian families, ensuring an essential financial flow for their sustenance. In this regard, some analysts³⁵³ note the possibility of using migrants living in Russia as a weapon for the Russian government to leverage Armenia. They observe that in the event of Armenia's disobedience, Russia could use repressive measures against them³⁵⁴. This point of view developed in conjunction with the Georgia-Russian war in 2008.

Secondly, Pashinyan knows that Armenia depends on Moscow for its security. Russia was³⁵⁵ a security guarantor for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and, according to the military alliance

³⁵¹ TERZYAN, A. (2019), *Russian policy, Russian Armenians and Armenia: Ethnic minority or political leverage?*, CES Working Papers, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 11, Iss. 2, pp. 124-142, available at <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/286605/1/167105024X.pdf>

³⁵² INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (2006), *Migrant remittances to Armenia: the potential for saving and economic investment and financial products to attract remittances*, available at https://webapps.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-moscow/documents/publication/wcms_308928.pdf

³⁵³ Crf. TERZYAN, A. (2019), cit.

³⁵⁴ TERZYAN A. (2019), *The Aftermath of the "Velvet Revolution": Armenia Between Domestic Change and Foreign Policy Continuity*, Eastern European Journal Of Regional Studies Volume 5/ Issue 2.

³⁵⁵ Today, Russia is no longer the guarantor of security for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, due to the changing dynamics that have emerged since 2020 with the escalation of the war.

between Moscow and Yerevan, Russia should provide assistance, including military, and support³⁵⁶.

In the first period of Pashinyan's government³⁵⁷, Nagorno-Karabakh remains the first priority in both foreign and domestic policy for Armenia: resolving the conflict and achieving a peaceful compromise remained the priorities of Pashinyan. The interest in a peaceful compromise has been pursued by the Pashinyan government from the very beginning, as witnessed by his visit to the President of the Karabakh Republic³⁵⁸.

Moreover, crucial for the Prime Minister was that Karabakh participates in the negotiation processes³⁵⁹. This hard-line stance marks a choice in domestic politics strongly based on the assertion of national security³⁶⁰.

According to *fonti azero-turche*, from 2019 Pashinyan abandoned the policy of finding a peaceful resolution and used a more aggressive policy, as indicated by his formula used at the Armenian Diaspora meeting in New York “*new war for new territories*” instead of the formula “*peace in exchange for territories*”³⁶¹. This

³⁵⁶Collective Security Treaty Organization available at <https://en.odkb-csto.org/structure/>

³⁵⁷ According to some of the interviewees, the earliest period of Pashinyan's policy towards Russia runs from 2018 to 2020/2022 with the outbreak of the Second Nagorno Karabakh War and the escalation of Azerbaijani violence.

³⁵⁸ The Prime Minister of Republic of Armenia, *Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's working visit to the Republic of Artsakh*, available <https://www.primeminister.am/en/Nagorno-Karabakh-visits/item/2018/06/16/Nikol-Pashinyan-visited-Artsakh/>

³⁵⁹*Pashinyan Stiffens Armenia's Posture Toward Karabakh* (2018), Jamestown Foundation, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b728d37e.html>

³⁶⁰ DE WALL T. (2018), *Armenia's Revolution and the Karabakh Conflict*, Carnegie Europe, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2018/05/armenias-revolution-and-the-karabakh-conflict?lang=en¢er=europe>

³⁶¹SHAFIYEV F.& HUSEYNOV V. (2020), *Peace Negotiations Cannot Be Held Forever: Breaking the Deadlock in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, Insight Turkey 2020 Vol.

aggressive policy reflects a domestic choice strongly based on asserting national security. This assertion would support the thesis that Armenia has lost interest in seeking a peaceful agreement because, on the one hand, Yerevan would not find it acceptable to sign a peaceful agreement too onerous and, on the other hand, the continuation of the war would allow Armenia to continue to turn to the West³⁶².

The outbreak of the second Karabakh war in 2020 exacerbates the situation. The reopened conflict in September 2020 represented the strongest military confrontation since 1994 and lasted 44 days.

With the outbreak of the Second War, relations between Armenia and Russia began to falter, marking a fractured moment in their relations. This moment highlights Armenia's over-dependence on Russia, an asymmetry that leans sharply in Moscow's favour. It also shows how Russia can decide Armenia's fate according to its own geopolitical moves. First of all, Russia maintained what defines a “*policy of parity*”³⁶³, the sale of weapons to both sides in the conflict, without favoring either one or the other. Actually, Russia is the largest exporter of arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with an estimated total of 5\$ billion of weapons³⁶⁴ in Azerbaijan.

22 / No. 4 / pp. 99-109, available at <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1300/peace-negotiations-cannot-be-held-forever-breaking-the-deadlock-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict>

³⁶² This opinion emerged during an interview between the author and an international relations analyst, here presented anonymously.

³⁶³ ANGGRAENI S. K. (2022), *Analyzing Russia's Interests in the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh Ceasefire Agreement*, Jurnal Hubungan Internasional Tahun XV, No. 2, Juli, available at <https://e-journal.unair.ac.id/JHI/article/download/35864/23332/18440>

³⁶⁴ WEZEMAN P. D., KUIMOVA A. & SMITH J. (2021), *Arms transfers to conflict zones: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, SIPRI, Available at <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>

This has fueled criticism from Armenian leaders, who argue that the Russian supply encourages Baku to attempt a military solution to the conflict and goes against the military alliance between Armenia and Russia³⁶⁵.

Secondly, Russia was neutral in the clashes, increasing the perception in Armenia that Russian support could be changed and it significantly damaged Russia's image in Armenia. For this reason, there has been a strong tendency³⁶⁶ to see Russia as capable of intervening and creating conditions to influence the dynamics in the region. Moscow contributed enormously to the development of the conflict and maintained it for its geostrategic goals. The ceasefire have allowed Russia to send peacekeepers to guard the remaining Armenian territory, but also have allowed Moscow to put troops in the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and the territory connecting Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan³⁶⁷. On the other hand, Russia is regarded as a “*behind-the-scenes actor*”³⁶⁸ in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, because, according to the interview to the analyst De Wall³⁶⁹, “*both Armenian and Azerbaijani*

³⁶⁵Armenian National Committee of America, *Russia supplies more weapons to Azerbaijan*, available at <https://anca.org/russia-supplies-more-weapons-to-azerbaijan/>

³⁶⁶NESET S., AYDIN M., ERGUN A., GIRAGOSIAN R., KAKACHIA K & STRAND A. (2023), *Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry*, CMI Report, n. 4, pp. 1-72, available at <https://www.cmi.no/publications/8911-changing-geopolitics-of-the-south-caucasus-after-the-second-karabakh-war>

³⁶⁷ DUMOULIN M. & GRESSEL G. (2023), *The war of opportunity: How Azerbaijan's offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh is shifting the geopolitics of the South Caucasus*, European Council on Foreign Relations, available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-war-of-opportunity-how-azerbajjans-offensive-against-nagorno-karabakh-is-shifting-the-geopolitics-of-the-south-caucasus/?amp>

³⁶⁸ GEYBULLA A. (2016), De Waal: Kremlin 'Not Primary Actor' Behind Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Radio Free Europe, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-de-waal-kremlin-not-primary-actor/27654309.html>

³⁶⁹ DE WALL

militaries are very strongly independent. They don't like to be pushed around by Moscow". According to the first view, the signing of the cease-fire created a favourable condition for Russia. Popescu³⁷⁰ suggests that Moscow wants to have "*its geopolitical cake and eat it too*"; this means that since the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia has shown that letting Azerbaijan regain some territories, without significantly damaging Armenia, could be the right strategy to maintain its influence over the region.

The analysis of the Russian change of support in the second Nagorno- Karabakh war can be deepened by examining the consequences of the change of government in Armenia in 2018. According to Anggraeni³⁷¹, Russia's first aim in the cease-fire of 2020 was to limit the power of Prime Minister Pashinyan and cause negative feelings towards him. This happened when thousands of people took to the streets to protest under the slogan 'traitor' against the Pashinyan government, after the Prime Minister signed the ceasefire agreement in which Azerbaijan regained part of its territory, leaving Armenia only a part of Karabakh³⁷².

Moreover, the view that Russia changed its security policy towards Armenia, because of the 2018 Revolution, was widely supported during the 2021 election campaign; many blamed Pashinyan for

³⁷⁰ Popescu N. (2020), *A captive ally: why Russia isn't rushing to Armenia's aid*, European Council on Foreign Relations, available at https://ecfr.eu/article/a_captive_ally_why_russia_isnt_rushing_to_armenias_aid/?amp

³⁷¹ ANGGRAENI S. K. (2022), cit.

³⁷² MELIMOPOULOS E., SAFDAR A., COOKMAN L. & PIETROMARCHI V. (2020), *Protesters in Armenia call for PM to step down*, AlJazeera, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2020/11/11/russian-peacekeepers-arrive-to-armenia-for-nagorno-karabakh-live>

having pro-European ambitions and soured relations with Moscow³⁷³.

Nevertheless, Pashinyan has been severely criticized for his relations with superpowers such as the European Union and the United States, as stated by Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the television network RT and the media group Rossiya Segodnya, who said that Pashinyan has turned Armenia into a “*bridgehead of anti-Russian forces in the Caucasus*”³⁷⁴, accusing that Pashinyan has “*inundated*”³⁷⁵ Armenia with non-governmental organisations. In fact, Pashinyan has surrounded himself over the years with NGO representatives to whom he has entrusted leadership roles, fueling Moscow's concerns³⁷⁶.

In other words, according to these views, Moscow's attitude of not supporting and offering assistance to Armenia would stem from the 2018 change of power. Russia knows that Armenia is an important ally. However, the Kremlin, despite Pashinyan's unchanged foreign policy rhetoric, has always been wary of the new government, since it came to power in the same way as the color revolutions, which are considered a “*deadly sin*”³⁷⁷. Russia would perceive Pashinyan's multi-vector policy as dangerous for its relationship

³⁷³ GUASTAMACCHIA P. (2021), *Successo parziale, perché la vittoria di Nikol Pashinyan rischia di bloccare l'Armenia*, Linkiesta, available at <https://www.linkiesta.it/2021/06/armenia-militari-elezioni-pashinyan/amp/>

³⁷⁴ BUNIATIAN H. (2020), *Pashinyan rejects harsh criticism from Kremlin media chief*, RadioFreeEurope, available at <https://www.azatutyun.am/amp/30753754.html>

³⁷⁵ Ibidem

³⁷⁶ *Kremlin propaganda turns up the heat on Armenia* (2023), OC Media, available at <https://oc-media.org/features/kremlin-propaganda-turns-up-the-heat-on-armenia/>

³⁷⁷ BAUNOV A. (2020), *Why Russia is biding its time on Nagorno-Karabakh*, Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/10/why-russia-is-biding-its-time-on-nagorno-karabakh?lang=en¢er=russia-eurasia>

with Yerevan and would like to “punish”³⁷⁸ it. On the other hand, Yerevan would perceive dependence on Moscow dangerous in some ways for the country's survival and can not rely on Russia for its security³⁷⁹.

This breakdown in relations has been evident in recent years, especially when the ceasefire brokered by Russia in 2020 was violated in 2022 by Azerbaijani forces attacking several towns on the border that were part of Armenian territory. The military escalation reached maximum levels as the military attack did not only affect the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh but also expanded into Armenia. A few hours after the outbreak of the conflict, the Armenian government had approached the CSTO and Russia to request assistance according to the obligations of the military alliance. However, assistance was not given and the Azerbaijani attack was not condemned. Again, the lack of assistance from Russia and the loss of its historical role as security-provider makes Armenia doubt the bond of friendship³⁸⁰. On the other hand, Russia justified itself by stating that it had a special relationship not only with Armenia but also with Azerbaijan³⁸¹, while the CSTO

³⁷⁸ VAISMAN A. K. (2024), The Challenging Task of Armenia’s Multi-vector Policy: How to Prevent the Transfer of Western Nuclear and Missile Technologies to Iran?, BESA Center, available at <https://besacenter.org/the-challenging-task-of-armenia/>

³⁷⁹ Ibidem

³⁸⁰ KUCERA J. & MEJLUMYAN A. (2022), *Azerbaijan launches wide-ranging attacks against Armenia*, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-launches-wide-ranging-attacks-against-armenia>

³⁸¹ CHAWRYLO K. (2020), Russia on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: calculated neutrality, Centre for Eastern Studies, available at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-10-26/russia-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-calculated-neutrality>

members said they wanted to maintain “ *neutrality*” and balance relations³⁸².

In this context, discussions regarding the CSTO and its limits have developed extensively, in particular Anfibio³⁸³ argues that the alliance operates merely as an instrument of the Russian government and as an ‘extension’ of it, and does not represent the foreign and security policy expression of all member. The limitations of the CSTO were also evident in 2023 when the organisation again failed to intervene in the final assault by Azerbaijan. These factors fueled fear in the population, as reflected in a sociological survey³⁸⁴, which showed that in 2021 only 25.4% of the respondents saw the CSTO as a security instrument, while in 2022 only 8.2% shared the same view as the previous year.

In addition, the war in Ukraine would have fuelled a misalignment between Moscow and Yerevan, which, according to Mammadova³⁸⁵, would have taken advantage of Moscow's distraction to continue a shift towards more pro-Western political positions. Moreover, Russia's brutality in Ukraine has increased anti-Russian sentiments and support for the Ukrainian people³⁸⁶.

³⁸² BAKYTOVA K. (2023), *Why did the CSTO not intervene in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, as Armenia wanted?*, Journal of Territorial and Maritime studies, available at <https://www.journalofterritorialandmaritimestudies.net/post/why-did-the-csto-not-intervene-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-as-armenia-wanted>

³⁸³ ANFIBIO A. (2023), *I limiti della CSTO e di Mosca: il caso armeno*, Geopolitica.info, available at <https://www.geopolitica.info/armenia-unione-europea-russia-csto/>

³⁸⁴ KOTCHIKIAN A. (2022), *Armenia's youth perceptions of Russia's war in Ukraine and its possible consequences*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, pp. 1-55.

³⁸⁵ MAMMADOVA G. (2024), *From Moscow to the West: Armenia in a security trap*, Geopolitica.info, available at <https://www.geopolitica.info/from-moscow-to-the-west-armenia-in-a-security-trap/>

³⁸⁶ FULTS A. & STRONSKI P. (2022), *The Ukraine war is reshaping the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, available at

Although at first Armenia refrained from condemning Russia, recently Pashinyan affirmed his support for the Ukrainian people, stating that “*Armenia is not Russia’s ally in the matter of Ukraine*”³⁸⁷ and sending his wife to Kiev to meet Armenian families living in Ukraine and the President Volodymyr Zelensky³⁸⁸. These events mark a clear signal of rupture between Moscow and Yerevan, clearly expressed by Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, who said in an interview with La Repubblica: “*depending on Russia was a strategic error*”³⁸⁹. According to Pashinyan, Russia did not guarantee the security of the Armenian people in the Nagorno-Karabakh war because it does not consider Armenia to be a sufficiently pro-Russian country³⁹⁰.

Nevertheless, the protracted confrontation between Russia and Ukraine is certainly not conducive to relations with the South Caucasus states, primarily because Russia has seemed short of weapons on several occasions³⁹¹, which would not allow it to sell them either to Azerbaijan or Armenia, and secondly because it fosters contrasting sentiments among the population. For example,

<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/04/the-ukraine-war-is-reshaping-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict?lang=en>

³⁸⁷ *Armenia is not Russia’s ally in matter of Ukraine, reiterates Pashinyan* (2024), Armenpress, available at <https://armenpress.am/eng/amp/1130634>

³⁸⁸ *Armenia PM’s wife in Kyiv, shakes Zelensky’s hand* (2023), News.am, available at <https://news.am/eng/news/779299.html>

³⁸⁹ STEINMAN L. (2023), *Il Premier armeno Pashinyan: “la nostra dipendenza dalla Russia per la sicurezza è stata un errore strategico. In Nagorno Karabakh è in corso una pulizia etnica”*, La Repubblica, available at https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2023/09/03/news/armenia_pashinyan_russia_sicurezza_a_nagorno_karabakh-413072928/

³⁹⁰ *Il premier armeno: “Dipendere dalla Russia per la nostra sicurezza è un errore strategico”* (2023), Euractiv, available at <https://euractiv.it/section/mondo/news/il-premier-armeno-dipendere-dalla-russia-per-la-nostra-sicurezza-e-un-errore-strategico/>

³⁹¹ LUZIN P. (2023), *Russia’s military industry forecast 2023-2025*, Eurasian Program, available at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/04/russias-military-industry-forecast-2023-2025/>

a survey³⁹² conducted on the young Armenian population to find out their geopolitical orientation regarding the war in Ukraine, revealed a common disappointment and general opinion that Armenia should remain neutral.

In this regard, many analyses can be made of how relations between Moscow and Yerevan might develop in the future. First of all, many analysts wonder to whom Armenia will turn to ensure its security. According to Pashinyan, Armenia will consider whether to continue to be a member of the CSTO in the future: *“If the CSTO answers the question of where the organization’s area of responsibility is in Armenia, and this question corresponds to our vision, then we will consider that the issue between us has been resolved. If not, then Armenia will leave the CSTO”*³⁹³.

Armenia's need to diversify its relations has never been more urgent. According to many analysts³⁹⁴, the European Union could act as a security support in the Nagorno Karabakh area and become a strategic partner for Armenia. Nevertheless, Panishyan recently declared Armenia's willingness to consider joining the European Union³⁹⁵. The European Union was soon responsive to Pashinyan,

³⁹² MKRTICHYAN A. & ATANESYAN A. (2022), *Armenia youth’s perceptions of Russia’s war in Ukraine and its possible consequences, a sociological study*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, available at <https://www.kas.de/documents/269781/0/Armenia%27s+youth+perceptions+of+Russia%27s+war+in+Ukraine+and+its+possible+consequences+ENG.pdf/97923f37-fca1-3472-ec77-ed4d542fd7d1?version=1.0&t=1679637035920>

³⁹³ ERUYGUR B. (2024), *Armenia threatens to leave Russian-led military alliance CSTO*, Anadolu Agency, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/armenia-threatens-to-leave-russian-led-military-alliance-csto/3162402#>

³⁹⁴ *Deepening EU-Armenia relations: More Europe in Armenia; More Armenia in Europe* (2024), Friends of Armenia network, available at <https://rasmussenglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FAN-Report-Deepening-EU-Armenia-relations.pdf>

³⁹⁵ *The Prime Minister expressed his wish for Armenia's EU Membership in 2024* (2024), Armenpress, available at <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1137035.html>

strengthening relations and passing a resolution declaring: “*The European Union should respond positively and take full advantage of this potential geopolitical shift and help Armenia anchor itself more strongly in the community of democracies*”³⁹⁶.

Sammut³⁹⁷ states that Armenia is a small country where EU assistance can make a tangible difference: at the security level, the European Union through the EU Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA)³⁹⁸ will be able to provide a deterrent to a future Azerbaijani attack on Armenian territory, providing concrete confidence-building support between Baku and Yerevan. In addition to providing surveillance and contributing to the ‘human-security’ of the inhabitants in the border towns with Azerbaijan, the EUMA offers Armenia a concrete possibility to turn towards the West. Pashinyan's approach to the West is attracting a hostile reaction from Russia and Azerbaijan³⁹⁹. The latter views the European Union's presence on its doorstep with apprehension, calling it a “*very unpleasant fact*”⁴⁰⁰. On the other hand, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Lavrov accused the EU

³⁹⁶ AVETISYAN A. (2024), Armenia scouts path towards EU accession, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-scouts-path-toward-eu-accession>

³⁹⁷ SAMMUT D. (2020), *Two years after the Velvet Revolution, Armenia needs the EU more than ever*, European Policy centre, available at <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Two-years-after-the-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-needs-the-EU-more-than-33e910>

³⁹⁸ EU Mission in Armenia (2024), *About European Union Mission in Armenia*, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283

³⁹⁹ AVETISYAN A. (2024), European Union, United States woo Armenia with economic assistance package, Eurasianet, available at <https://eurasianet.org/european-union-united-states-woo-armenia-with-economic-assistance-package>

⁴⁰⁰ TATIKYAN S. (2023), The EU's role in preventing a new conflict and ensuring sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, *European Policy Review*, v. 6, issue 1.

and the West of pressuring Armenia to end the Russian military presence and turn to the United States⁴⁰¹.

Nevertheless, in an interview Lukyanov⁴⁰² states that the current political situation, characterised by open conflict between Russia and the West, has contributed to a deep ethical and political rift, with mutual accusations of fascism. This situation, according to him, makes any cooperation between Russia and the West impossible and further undermines mutual trust. Moreover, he suggests that Armenia may have no realistic alternative to partnership with Russia and that attempts to get closer to the West may not be viewed positively by Russia.

In this context, relations between Armenia and Russia appear increasingly tense. According to a survey⁴⁰³ commissioned by the International Republican Institute, 49% Armenian people view Russia as a threat and only 31% of them think that relation between Armenia and Russia are very good.

As a result of the geopolitical situations that are shaping the dynamics of the Caucasus region, the historical relationship between Moscow and Yerevan is becoming increasingly vulnerable, creating many uncertainties for the future. It seems that the Velvet Revolution of 2018 may have affected relations between Armenia and Russia. Although the revolution did not have an immediate impact on the relations between the Kremlin and Yerevan, the

⁴⁰¹ AVETISYAN A. (2024), cit.

⁴⁰² *Karabakh Has Become a Symbol of the Beginning and the End of the Post-Soviet Period*, (2023), Interview to Fyodor Lukyanov, in *Russia in Global Affairs*, available at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/karabakh-and-the-end/>

⁴⁰³ BARSEGHYAN A. (2024), Survey suggests 40% of Armenians view Russia as a political threat, OC media, available at <https://oc-media.org/survey-suggests-40-of-armenians-view-russia-as-a-political-threat/>

change of power that ousted the pro-Russian oligarchy has worried Russia, mindful of the coloured revolutions⁴⁰⁴.

In the mid-to-long term, it is evident how the Velvet Revolution has affected relations between the two countries. The Armenian priority of a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been waning since 2020 when Russia proved unable to guarantee the security promised to Yerevan, not only because of Moscow's distraction from the escalating conflict with Ukraine⁴⁰⁵, but also to maintain its influence on the entire Caucasus area⁴⁰⁶. Pashinyan's turn towards the West in an attempt to find new allies has only destabilized the Kremlin. So recently, the Russian Foreign Minister stated: “*The Armenian leadership is making a serious mistake in its deliberate attempt to sever Armenia's many centuries-old ties with Russia, making it hostage to Western geopolitical games*”⁴⁰⁷.

In this perspective, Yerevan's request to Moscow to remove the soldiers from the airport, as well as Moscow's withdrawal of Russian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh, marks a clear break between the two countries. This shift, as indicated by De Wall⁴⁰⁸,

⁴⁰⁴ BATASHVILI D. (2019), cit.

⁴⁰⁵ See AMBROSETTI TAFURO E. (2022), *A new regional order in the making: the coming geopolitics of the South Caucasus*, ISPI dossier, available at https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/dossier_caucasus_november_2022.pdf

⁴⁰⁶ GIUSTINO M. (2023), *Armenia in disarmo. L'esodo biblico dal Nagorno-Karabakh, le spinte russo-turche per far cadere Pashinyan*, Huffpost, available at https://www.huffingtonpost.it/esteri/2023/09/27/news/armenia_in_disarmo_lesodo_da_l_nagorno_karabakh_le_spinte_russo-turche_per_far_cadere_pashinyan-13452492/

⁴⁰⁷ DE BARTOLO L. (2023), *Esodo di massa dal Nagorno Karabakh, esplose un deposito di carburante. Strage di fuggiaschi: almeno 125 morti*, La Repubblica, available at https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2023/09/26/news/fuga_da_nagorno_karabakh_esplose_un_deposito_di_carburante_strage_armeni-415850417/

⁴⁰⁸ DE WAAL T. (2024), *Putin's Hidden Game in the South Caucasus*, Foreign Affairs, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/azerbaijan/putins-hidden-game-south-caucasus>

began in late September 2023, opening up new trajectories and dynamics for the future of relations. The Kremlin recognised that, at a time of war with Ukraine and Western sanctions, economic security took priority over physical security. Therefore, Russia is looking for new trading partners, such as Azerbaijan, which has developed significantly in recent years. This scenario is pushing Armenia to increasingly turn its gaze to the West claim that it intends to leave the CSTO alliance.

Conclusion

This elaboration contributes to the analysis of relations between Armenia and Russia. Based on the previous discussion, there are some concluding remarks to be made regarding the relationship between the two countries and how it has evolved in light of the events of 2018 affecting Armenia. The Velvet Revolution of 2018, that brought the current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to power, raised many hopes about a possible democratic change and greater independence from Russia. The change of power did not immediately lead to a drastic reversal in Armenia's foreign policy, mainly due to Armenia's heavy economic, energy and security dependence on Russia; the revolution that takes place mainly concerns Armenia's domestic political agenda, it does not have the

same connotations as the coloured revolutions, and from the outset Pashinyan emphasises the friendship between Armenia and Russia. Despite the fact that Moscow does not intervene directly in the revolution, from the outset it looks with attention on the new Armenian leader, partly because it is historically averse to changes of power that take place through revolutions, and partly because the Armenian government makes choices that distance it from Moscow, such as the fight against corruption that directly affects the pro-Russian oligarchs, and mainly the turn towards democracy and rapprochement with the West.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh continues to play a crucial role in relations between Yerevan and Moscow. Historically, Russia has been the guarantor of Armenia's security, protecting it in the name of the common Christian religion and, more recently, against Azerbaijan. However, since 2020, Russia has shown increasing reluctance to defend Armenia, a decision influenced in part by the 2018 change of power that caused a weakening of pro-Russian oligarchs and promoted an emerging democracy. Moreover, the feeling of being abandoned intensifies in 2022, and Armenia begins to seek support from the West more forcefully, further straining relations between the two countries.

The complex geopolitical dynamics of the post-Soviet space, as the war in Ukraine, directly influence the foreign policy choices of the countries of the sub-Caucasus region. In this context, relations between Yerevan and Moscow are further complicated by the Western presence in the region, which seeks to influence the

geopolitical dynamics of Russia's 'backyard'. As a result, Armenia is looking elsewhere for the security guarantees that Russia does not currently seem willing to provide, turning its attention to the United States and, above all, the European Union.

This scenario raises doubts about future prospects. It raises questions as to whether Armenia will really succeed in leaving the Russian orbit and whether the European Union will be able to fully support it by providing the necessary security guarantees. Certainly, Armenia remains extremely dependent on Russia and would have to leave the Eurasian Union to access the European market, which would make the situation highly complex.

In addition, the question of the future of Armenian relations with Moscow remains open; there arises the question of whether the rapprochement with the West will provoke a break similar to that experienced by Georgia and Ukraine, or whether Russia will retain some degree of influence in the name of historical friendship.

Q&A with International Expert

Giovanni Scopa - Counsellor at the Embassy of Italy in Moscow

1. Given the latest events and statements by Prime Minister Pashinyan, do you think Armenia could join the European Union in the near future?

In theory, Armenia's entry into the European Union is possible, but it would require further detachment from Russia on the Armenian side, such as leaving the CSTO military bloc, and economic diversification, considering that Armenia is currently significantly dependent on Russia. In the short term, an increase in EU investment in Armenia is likely, especially in the area of human capital through technical assistance programmes and cultural

exchanges, in order to accustom new generations to look towards the West first.

2. Could the Russian-Ukrainian conflict have influenced relations between Russia and Armenia? Can the continuation of the war act as a ‘catalyst’ for detachment from Russia and rapprochement with the West?

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict led to a decrease in Russian interest in Armenia, which allowed Azerbaijan to retake Nagorno-Karabakh to the disinterest of Russian peacekeeping forces. Pashinyan's pro-Western policies have further attracted EU and US attention to Armenia. However, much will depend on the evolution of Armenia's domestic political framework and Pashinyan's ability to maintain a strong leadership, already challenged by the public square.

3. According to some observers, the treatment of the Georgian population and Russian-Georgian relations have caused apprehension in Armenia. Can the ‘Georgian lesson’ continue to influence relations between the two countries?

The ‘Georgian lesson’ has raised concerns in Armenia, but Armenians might not go too far. The lesson in question concerns the fact that Russia tends to exercise a kind of right of pre-emption over the territories of the former Soviet ‘new countries’. However, despite the recent conflicts, bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia have stabilised in some respects, such as the restoration of direct flights and the importance of the Russian market for Georgian products.

4. Do you think that the Armenian diaspora continues to play a key role in Yerevan's political choices?

The Armenian diaspora plays a significant role in the country's financing and could influence Armenian policies, especially when these positions are nationalist and divergent from Pashinyan's. However, the political dynamics in Armenia are unpredictable, and much will depend on Russia's attitude and Pashinyan's future decisions.

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