

NEW MASSES: IRELAND AND ARMENIA

In this number, NLR's 'New Masses, New Media' series examines the character of the recent protests in Armenia and Ireland, both sparked by price hikes for basic goods: electricity in one case, water in the other. Comparable in population—4.5m and 3m, respectively—Ireland as a whole is three times the size of Armenia. Historically, both have been shaped by their location between two imperial powers: Britain and America, Turkey and Russia. If there is an eerie parallel in the numbers estimated to have perished in the Irish Famine and the Armenian Genocide—between 800,000 and a million—the deliberately exterminationist policies of the Young Turks are of a different order of political and moral malignity to the laissez-faire arrogance of English colonialism. A mark of these dark pasts, in both cases the diaspora significantly outweighs the domestic population. In recent times, both countries have figured on the margin of larger economic unions, the EU and CIS; as a result, their trajectories in the 1990s were diametrically opposed. Armenia had been a high-end industrial hub within the Soviet Union, specializing in machine goods and electronic products. Already hit by the 1988 earthquake, its economy suffered one of the sharpest contractions of the former USSR as industrial disruption was exacerbated by war and blockade. From \$2.25bn in 1990, Armenian GDP dropped to \$1.2bn in 1993; it did not recover to its Soviet-era level until 2002. By that time, the population had fallen by 15 per cent, from 3.54m in 1990 to barely 3m; by 2013 it was down to 2.97m. The construction sector, chiefly driven by foreign investment and remittances from the diaspora—conservative estimates put this at 7m, the largest contingent in Russia, the wealthiest and best-organized in Los Angeles—has since become the main engine of growth, also nourishing a large shadow economy; privatizations have put key assets, including electricity generation and R&D, in Russian hands. Since 2014, Armenian exports to Russia have been hit by the tumbling rouble, which in turn has weakened the dram. Ireland, meanwhile, which had benefited from European Community structural and agricultural funds from 1973, saw its economy take off in the early 1990s as the Republic became the low-tax destination of choice in the EU for American multinationals. Irish GDP doubled from 1990–99, then tripled again from 2000–07, as the credit-fuelled construction boom took hold. Since the crash, its citizens have been forced to shoulder a bank bailout worth around 37 per cent of GDP through sharp public-spending cuts. Below, Zhanna Andreasyan, Georgi Derluguian and Daniel Finn discuss the nature of the protests and their potential outcomes.

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FUEL PROTESTS IN ARMENIA

THE THREE-WEEK-LONG occupation of Yerevan's main avenue ended on a bitterly comical note, worthy of a William Saroyan short story. As riot police moved in, on 6 July 2015, to dismantle the trash-can barricades and evict the last remaining protesters, the Chief of Police was heard urging his troops to be careful, in avuncular tones: 'Easy, easy, these are our brothers and sisters; they won their victory for all of us.' With TV cameras recording the scene for the national news, such pleas might sound patronizing, if not downright cynical; but perhaps in the Armenian context this is not the whole story. In the early days of the protests, sparked by the government's sudden hike in electricity prices, our colleague Petr Liakhov recorded a typical observation from an onlooker: 'These kids look so full of romantic energy, just like myself back in 1988! I used to sit-in at the very same spot. Well, you know how it all ended . . .'¹ It turned out he was a colonel in the Armenian Army. 'How did I become what I am?' A logical progression. First, in 1989, abandon graduate studies and join an "illegal armed formation"—Soviet-era policespeak for the nationalist guerrillas—'then, once your "illegal armed formation" wins the war, it becomes a legal national army in which, with a degree of diligence, you can rise through the ranks.'

The war was fought over the Armenian-populated enclave of Mountainous Karabagh, in Soviet times an autonomous province of Azerbaijan.² Armenian forces still hold nearly a fifth of Azerbaijan's territory, within a heavily fortified perimeter, including the unrecognized Karabagh Republic and the depopulated buffer zone around it; the whole area is now contiguous with Armenian territory. Meanwhile,

oil-rich Azerbaijan—with thrice the population of Armenia and an economy eight times bigger—has trumpeted its rearmament, with weapons expenditure over the past decade exceeding Armenia's entire national budget, while Baku reasserts its sovereign right to resume hostilities. During the *perestroika* period of the late 1980s, vast and impassioned mobilizations on the streets of Yerevan and Baku led to violent ethnic conflict between the two Soviet republics, both hitherto loyal to Moscow. The standard explanations of 'ancient hatreds', or a clash between Islam and Christianity, cannot explain the timing of the outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence in the Caucasus over the past century: 1905, 1917–20 and again between 1988 and 1994. Each time, contested political control and generalized uncertainty helped to bring to a tipping point existing structural and demographic tensions in agrarian markets, urban trades and professional strata; in a multi-ethnic setting, these tended to acquire sectarian dimensions. And in moments of historic transition, the impact of small peripheral events can be magnified in unpredictable ways: in the late 1980s, the gruesome pogroms in Azerbaijan and the emergence of Armenian *fidayin* guerrillas served to expose the impotence and disorientation of Gorbachev's government, thus helping to precipitate the dissolution of the superpower.

A not-so-coloured revolt?

Today, popular protests that reach state level in the former Soviet republics, as in Georgia or Ukraine, are inevitably cast in the context of renewed rivalry between Russia and the West. After becoming Boris Yeltsin's surprise successor in 1999, Vladimir Putin sought to re-establish Russia's position on the world stage. He never questioned the neoliberal economics underpinning the wealth of his crony-capitalist ruling caste; nor did he consider reviving the trappings of Leninist ideology. Putin's neo-Sovietism was strictly geopolitical, and driven by unvarnished great-power nationalism. In the 'near abroad' of former

¹ Our warm thanks to Petr Liakhov, a graduate researcher from the University of Toronto, for help in interviewing activists in Yerevan during the June–July 2015 fuel-price protests.

² Mountainous Karabagh: generally referred to in the Anglophone media by its Russian name, Nagorno Karabagh, presumably because the Western journalists covering the conflict in 1988 were more familiar with Russian than Armenian. Nagorno (or nagorny) simply means mountainous in Russian. In Armenian the name is Lernayin Garabagh. We use the English word here for the sake of clarity.

Soviet republics, Moscow favoured kindred regimes of (*de jure* or *de facto*) presidents-for-life, mostly consisting of native ex-communist apparatchiks and their offspring. These ruling clans responded to the historical juncture of 1991 by opportunistically hijacking the key demands of the liberal intelligentsia. As in Yeltsin's Russia itself, national sovereignty and competitive elections helped to reinstall the erstwhile provincial prefects at the head of diminished peripheral states. Their new official parties functioned much like Tammany Hall 'political machines', blending populism, corrupt patronage and sometimes outright gangsterism. Privatizations then transformed the relatives and clients of these presidents into supportive oligarchs. However, such chaotic transitions could also give rise to ferociously competitive oligarchic 'clans' whose feuds tended to escalate during elections, sometimes with explosive results. The Russian social theorist Dmitri Furman branded these regimes 'imitation democracies', with a democratic façade that allowed the West to largely ignore, with muted regrets, the imitational downside of its post-communist 'partners', as long as they compliantly accepted their place in the new world order.³

Over time, the benign neglect accorded to the post-Soviet periphery ran into mounting problems. Instead of gradually evolving into something more authentically Western, the state institutions of the imitation democracies tended to erode while their base narrowed inexorably with each round of 'musical chairs' among the insecure denizens of the inner circle. The trend pointed towards the emergence of sultanesque dictatorships, liable to future collapse amid the inevitable succession squabbles, and potentially opening the door to more effective outbursts of popular anger. Faced with such instability across the vast region between China, Russia, the Middle East and the EU, and mainly preoccupied elsewhere, Western policymakers chose to intervene selectively—that is, on the cheap, relatively speaking—by cultivating winning factions in the wave of 'colour revolutions' that marked the opening decade of the century. These factions were usually composed of aggrieved junior oligarchs, a smattering of ideologues from the 1989 intelligentsia, exiles and diaspora nationalists, all of whom had their hopes vested in Western aid, for both political and (pressing) economic reasons. The winners of 'colour revolutions' in countries like Ukraine (orange) and Georgia (rose) sought to bolster their case for admission to the NATO or EU club, playing up the

³ See Dmitri Furman, 'Imitation Democracies', *NLR* 54, Nov–Dec 2008.

threat from imperial Russia. Moscow, in truth, would be quite happy to foster an informal empire in its underbelly on behalf of the ‘international community’. Long before Putin’s accession to power, leading lights of Russian neoliberalism had declared that a regional empire of this kind was inevitable, and would be a real service to the new world order. But the US hegemon and its EU partners had no place for the ambitions of post-communist Russia in their plans; hence the renewed Cold War flaring up on the battlefields of Georgia in 2008 and, on a much greater scale, in eastern Ukraine today.

This June, as news spread of the barricades going up in central Yerevan, just a few paces from the Armenian parliament and presidential palace, political vigilantes among Moscow’s journalists and security experts immediately discerned the spectre of another Ukrainian-style Euromaidan, and called for a forceful response. The Russian blogosphere was saturated with lurid tales of mysterious boxes being unloaded at the US embassy in Yerevan, and *lavash*—the local flatbread—wraps laced with narcotics being fed to the naive protesters. But this chorus ended almost as soon as it had begun, indicating that this time the Kremlin had chosen not to aggravate the situation.

From a more sober perspective, important parallels between Ukraine and Armenia do exist. Both are impoverished post-Soviet republics with patently corrupt officials; both have large, well-organized diasporas and recent experience of major political mobilizations; and both are imitation democracies, vulnerable to pressure from disaffected oligarchs and nationalist intellectuals. This kind of opposition need only wait for the chance to exploit a sizeable outburst of popular anger. In Kiev, the latest revolution was triggered in November 2013 by the sudden reluctance of Yanukovich to sign a treaty with the EU, widely interpreted as a refusal to impose more civilized norms on police and state officials—all apparently at the insistence of Moscow. In Yerevan, the spark was struck in June 2015 by a fairly small rise in the price of electricity, which was nevertheless perceived by many as an intolerable attempt to cover up for waste and corruption, while also slavishly serving Russian economic interests which had come to control important sectors of Armenia’s economy through the privatization of public assets to pay off government debts—not unlike the plight of Greece. But in Yerevan, unlike Kiev, the authorities, police and protesters all showed considerable self-restraint, mercifully sparing Armenia an appearance in the world headlines. The—assiduously

maintained—peaceful character of the protests warrants an explanation. More importantly, it indicates that new social forces seem to be emerging across the post-Soviet zone, bringing youthful energy and innovative tactics to bear as they face daunting choices, both political and organizational.

The modern making of an old country

The Armenians pride themselves on the antiquity and resilience of their nation, which has borne its name since the fifth century BC. The multi-spoke swastika, the ancient Sun-chariot symbol, has been common here since the Bronze Age and still survives in folk ornaments and carpet designs. The language forms a separate branch in the Indo-European family tree, alongside Greek, Celtic, Albanian or Persian. In AD 301 Armenia became the first officially Christian kingdom, some eighty years before the Roman Empire; its church still stands distinct from both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The thirty-eight-letter Armenian alphabet has changed little since its invention in AD 405 by the monk Mesrop Mashtots. Recently, when a local stone mason came to do some repairs for us, he noticed a collection of ancient coins on a writing desk: Roman *sestertii* from AD 164, triumphantly proclaiming Marcus Aurelius as ‘Augustus Armeniacus’ for his victory in the latest border war with the Parthians. To this Khachik, the dwarf-like master carver, spat out grimly: ‘He tried to dominate us too, did he? Tell me, where’s your Marcus Aurelius now? And we’re still here, cutting stone.’

Different nations entered the Soviet Union in the 1920s from vastly divergent levels of prior development, capitalist, feudal or nomadic; the Armenians came in from beyond the grave. At the onset of World War One the flailing dictatorship of the Young Turks decided, in secret, to solve their Armenian problem by the wholesale deportation and annihilation of the remaining Christian populations in Anatolia. From 1915 onwards, more than a million Ottoman Armenians were slaughtered in what became the first genocide of the twentieth century. After the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was imposed on the Bolsheviks in 1918, a small residual area around the Russian-held city of Yerevan, full of traumatized survivors and orphans, was proclaimed the Armenian Republic. In 1921 the Bolshevik Army won the Civil War and integrated what remained of Armenia into the Soviet Union. Compared to the horrors of recent (and ancient) history, this conquest was hailed as national salvation even among Armenian diaspora communities in the Middle East, France

and America. Integration into Soviet developmentalism allowed many Armenians to reach positions of prominence—above all, the longest-serving Politburo member, Anastas Mikoyan, whose enviable political longevity was captured in the quip: from *Ilich* (Vladimir Ilich Lenin) to *Ilich* (Leonid Ilich Brezhnev), without *paralich* (a paralyzing stroke).

As cuneiform inscriptions attest, Yerevan itself, or Erebuni, was founded in 782 BC, in the fertile valley of Mount Ararat, whose huge, snow-capped peaks dominate the cityscape. This was earlier than Rome, as any good Armenian would point out; but it was repeatedly burned, sacked and abandoned over the centuries, the last time being in the early 1600s on the orders of the Persian ruler Shah Abbas, who implemented a scorched-earth strategy with mass deportations to prevent his Ottoman Turkish rivals from advancing through the valley. By 1918, when Yerevan was proclaimed the capital of modern Armenia, it was a dusty backwater with few landmarks above the ground. With the Treaty of Kars, Mount Ararat was placed on the far side of the Turkish border; like the moon, the Armenian poem goes, Ararat shines beyond our reach. The leading Caucasian metropolises at that time were Tiflis, now Tbilisi, the charmingly picturesque seat of Russian vice-royalty, and Baku, the gaudily eclectic and wonderfully cosmopolitan centre of the belle époque oil boom, when it supplied more than half the world's petroleum. But Soviet Yerevan had the advantage of backwardness: it could be built from scratch and according to plan.

Its chief architect, Alexander Tamanyan (or Tamanoff, in Russified form) had made his name under the Tsarist regime building splendid mansions and churches for the aristocrats of Moscow and St Petersburg, characterized by an ornate and distinctly conservative blend of Anglo-German neo-gothic with Russian faux-medieval Slavophilism. Tamanyan arrived in Yerevan as a refugee from the October Revolution. In the 1920s and 30s, he inventively domesticated the gigantic scale and centrally-mandated designs of Soviet construction by cladding the brick and concrete carcasses with soft, pink-brown *tufa* stone from the local quarries—the same stone from which Armenia's austere medieval churches had been constructed. The *tufa* façades made the Stalin-era monuments look ancient, like the churches; they were further nationalized by Tamanyan's ornate carved bas-reliefs of rosettes, grapevines and fairytale birds, copied from medieval manuscripts and magnified to fit the vast Soviet squares. The modernist vectors of the main avenues were mitigated by a ring of leafy

boulevards, where Tamanyan sited the House of Chess, the House of Cinema, the House of Chamber Music and so on. A statue of Stalin used to tower over it all, but after 1961 he was replaced by the equally monumental figure of Mother Armenia. Yerevan ended up looking by far the most 'national' of the capitals of the Soviet republics, and somehow cosy, too, in the smoky-volcanic warmth of its carved stone.

By the 1960s Soviet Armenia had become a manufacturing hub, transforming the lives of former peasants and artisans through industrial modernity, and Yerevan was a city of a million people. It boasted an improbable constellation of world-class talent: Aram Khachaturyan composed symphonies, Tigran Petrossian was a world-champion chess player, Martiros Saryan extended the post-Impressionist experimentation with colour. The astronomer Victor Ambartsumian organized conferences on extraterrestrial civilizations, Robert Sahakyants drew zany cartoons and Sergei Paradjanov filmed *The Colour of Pomegranates*. By any measure this was a lot for the still relatively compact city of Yerevan—and for the nation of survivors, who proudly revered their intellectuals. Perhaps it was this array of talent that deterred the local communist *nomenklatura* from emulating the levels of despotism and pomposity familiar in the other Soviet republics. Remarkably, party officials even tolerated the spontaneous, massively attended marches in remembrance of the genocide that became an annual tradition from the mid-1960s—perhaps because they represented a local peculiarity and were not anti-Soviet in character. By the time of Gorbachev's reform programme, the citizens of Yerevan had long experience of unofficial discussions and public gatherings.

The anvil

Glasnost-era democratization began cautiously at first, with nuclei of young protesters from the intelligentsia launching campaigns around the environment, cultural heritage and schools.⁴ But once the Armenians

⁴ After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, Armenia's 'informal' environmental activists successfully demanded the shutdown of a nuclear power plant outside Yerevan and reproached Moscow for siting too many chemical factories in the small and beautiful republic. Yet these factories had provided many jobs, and the electricity generated by the nuclear plant was badly missed during the 'dark years' of war and Turkish–Azerbaijani blockade. Negative attitudes towards environmentalism are only now beginning to shift, as more Armenians begin to suffer the effects of unregulated copper mining, commercial construction and deforestation.

of Karabagh raised the territorial issue in early 1988—and were met by pogroms across Azerbaijan, reawakening memories of the genocide—at a stroke, nationalism unified the population and pushed all other issues aside. Armenia became the first Soviet republic in which the local *nomenklatura* effectively surrendered to popular mobilizations, led by the intelligentsia. Victory in the 1991–94 war against Azerbaijan offered an overcoming of the trauma of genocide and generated intense patriotic commitment. Wartime political unity helped to keep the *perestroika* intelligentsia in power for much of the 1990s. Once again breaking with the usual post-Soviet pattern, the country did not witness a comeback by ex-communist politicians claiming to represent traditional competence. Nevertheless, Armenia was not so different from the rest; the range of post-Soviet possibilities was after all restricted.

As Furman once observed, the leaders of the 1989 protests were insurgents, nationalists and liberals, but they were hardly democrats; many came to see their own survival in power as a precondition for leading the nation on the right path. The founding president of post-Soviet Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, had been an expert in Syriac manuscripts. In August 1993 he forced the resignation of his Defence Minister and now potential rival, Vazgen Manukyan, a former mathematician and erstwhile fellow-inmate with Ter-Petrosyan in KGB prisons. In 1996, amid protests, he rewrote the constitution to ensure that he remained in the presidential palace. Meanwhile the widely feared Interior Minister, Vano Siradeghyan, had been a children's short-story writer before 1988; since 2000 he has been on the run, accused of masterminding political as well as pecuniary assassinations.

In the early 90s, war losses were compounded by economic collapse. Across the former USSR, industries lost their all-Union coherence and failed to function; post-Soviet governments found themselves starved of tax revenues and unable to meet basic obligations. The situation in Armenia was especially dire, because Azerbaijan had cut off its rail and pipeline connections. The populace was left to improvise survival strategies amid severe economic depression. Workers abandoned their now defunct factories for the informal economy of services, petty trade or bare subsistence. The once proud intelligentsia faced a choice between emigration, scurrying around in search of foreign grant money, and outright starvation. State personnel like teachers, doctors and, most venally,

police and licensing officials began demanding personal payments from their clients, while scandalous private fortunes were made in banking and the import–export trade. The tiny Armenian economy offered fewer opportunities for corrupt privatization windfalls than Russia or Azerbaijan, however. As a local saying goes, God must love the Armenians after all: he gave them no oil. By the late 90s, more than a third of Armenia’s population had left to seek employment elsewhere, their remittances a major factor in keeping the domestic economy afloat. Those who remained appeared immobilized by the realization of their collective impotence to change the post-Soviet order of things. From the epic heights of patriotic mobilization just a few years before, Armenia appeared to be curdling into apathy and cynicism.

In 1998, in what amounted to a bloodless military coup, Ter-Petrosyan was ousted by former guerrilla leaders from the Karabagh war, who installed Robert Kocharyan, leader of the newly proclaimed Republic of Mountainous Karabagh, in his place. (The current President, Serzh Sargsyan, also a native of Karabagh and former war commander, would serve as Kocharyan’s Chief of Staff and Defence Minister.) Compared to the cultured liberal nationalists, these veterans were cruder and more provincial, but also earthier and more muscular. They managed to stabilize the country after political infighting culminated in 1999 with the bizarre shooting of eight leading legislators, including the Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan, by a small group of apparently deranged gunmen, who walked into the National Assembly with machine guns concealed under their trenchcoats, offering no explanation beyond the wish to end ‘the rule of bloodsuckers’. One can easily imagine the sort of conspiracy theories that could be generated by such a traumatic episode.

Yet the Karabagh veterans eventually managed—just—to steer Armenia away from the precipice. Ten years later the same Ter-Petrosyan attempted a political comeback, claiming that he had won the 2008 presidential elections, despite the official result. Opposition protests alleging electoral fraud had become almost traditional—and traditionally futile. In 2008, however, Ter-Petrosyan’s supporters appeared unusually numerous, angry and evidently emboldened by the example of the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine—while the incumbent Karabagh veterans were resolved to prove that they were no Yanukoviches, either. In the resulting bloodshed eight protestors and two policemen died.

Armenians were stunned by this fratricide. Ter-Petrosyan returned to the seclusion of his ex-presidential villa.

Break with the old guard

A new wave of social activism began after 2008, though it remained largely under the radar of political commentators until this summer. The young activists insisted on keeping their distance from electoral politics, with its corruption, hypocrisy and manipulation. This would become their great moral advantage. Armenia's parliamentary opposition includes the usual panoply of post-Soviet parties: residues of the *perestroika*-era national-liberal intelligentsia; oligarchic vehicles with brand names like 'National Prosperity'; politicians sponsored by the American-Armenian diaspora under the telltale 'heritage' rubric, whose style, unsurprisingly, seems utterly foreign. These parties only come to life during well-funded election campaigns, and make grandiloquent statements at press conferences, but otherwise carry little real weight in Armenian society. Tellingly, none proved willing or able to take up in a consistent fashion the issues raised by the new social movements.

Then, of course, there is the ruling 'party of power' known by the bland title of 'Republicans', mostly comprising officials of varying rank, all the way down to village headmen. This party has more substance, insofar as its key members are locally embedded, eminently practical and self-assured men who own, directly or through close relatives, all the prime assets—real estate and agricultural land, wineries and distilleries, gas stations, shops, pharmacies and beauty parlours—in their respective towns and villages. Before each election, they unfailingly repair local roads and schools, pay modest bonuses to teachers, and distribute sacks of sugar and potatoes to the elderly. In short, as the Yerevan-based political commentator Alex Iskandaryan wryly observed, the ruling party honestly buys its popular vote. If its core membership still looks distinctively Soviet, and often stolidly provincial, that is because the majority of them got a head start to their careers as sons of Soviet-era collective-farm chairmen and junior apparatchiks from the Komsomol. In the early 90s, many of these practical political entrepreneurs fought in the Karabagh war, where they forged the camaraderie of nationalist veterans.

In its ideological pantheon, the ruling party has elevated Garegin Nzhdeh—a nationalist revolutionary who, between 1906 and 1921, took

up arms against first the Turks and then the Bolsheviks—as a straightforward replacement for Lenin and Stalin. Nzhdeh was exiled in Europe during the 1930s and, following a popular trend of the time, became a fascist. Berlin, however, was counting on an alliance with Kemalist Turkey and showed little interest in his projects. In 1944 SMERSH, the wartime Soviet counter-intelligence agency, captured Nzhdeh in Bulgaria and sent him for trial in Yerevan. From prison, he wrote letters to Stalin, an old acquaintance from the revolutionary years, arguing that it was in Moscow's interest to dispatch him as an envoy to the Armenian communities abroad so that he could lessen Cold War tensions. The ageing nationalist now claimed to have become a supporter of the USSR, seemingly impressed by the Stalinist architectural splendours of Yerevan. His pleas went unanswered, and he died in 1955, still behind bars. Ironically, the latter-day cult of Nzhdeh is based in part on the reverent memoir of an Armenian KGB veteran, who had the honour in his youth of interrogating the indomitable nationalist.

These permutations of the official ideology after communism matter for our analysis in one crucial respect. There is a striking parallel between Nzhdeh and Stepan Bandera, icon of the right-wing Ukrainian nationalism which ended up prevailing in the 2013–14 Euromaidan rebellion. But in Armenia, the ruling party itself has claimed the heritage of interwar nationalism and unwittingly defused its charge by instituting a tedious official cult, while the entire parliamentary opposition has equally sought to disguise its politicking with nationalist rhetoric. As a result, the new generation that has come of age in the past decade, while duly patriotic, appears largely uninterested in such ideologies. The extra-parliamentary movements that emerged after 2008 were free to concentrate on more pressing social questions.

First, though, the new activists had to gain the recognition of their fellow citizens. The search for issues that would have a wide social resonance—but would also avoid pushing the rulers to the brink—seems to have proceeded by trial and error. The first success came over a fight to preserve historic buildings and boulevards coveted by property developers. The tent camps erected by urban protesters drew the sympathy of Yerevan residents, who cherish their culture of evening strolls. A few years earlier, the city authorities had bulldozed an old, overpopulated quarter to clear the way for newly fashionable promenades lined with fancy boutiques, provoking violent scuffles as desperate old women

threw themselves in front of the demolition crews. The residents did not object to renovation: many still lived in old houses lacking the most basic amenities. They protested rather against the pitiful compensation offered and the threat of forced relocation to the city's periphery. That battle was lost, but it left passionate memories of struggle which underlay the tent camp, however festive it might have appeared on the surface. This is probably why President Sarkisyan, who likes to see himself as a consensus-builder, paid a visit to the contested site and said to the accompanying officials—loudly enough to be 'overheard' by the official media—'But it would look ugly, wouldn't it?'

The tent camp set a number of important precedents. It was agreed from the outset that alcohol would be banned, cigarette butts collected, and cleanliness maintained. To combat tedium, the protesters fell back on popular folk games, chess and backgammon, or improvised concerts, art exhibitions and street theatre. Passers-by were free to join as long as they followed the norms of civility. The police could also be jokingly invited to take part, or at least calmly instructed that no violations of public order were taking place. Ethnic feeling, so potent in the past, was now invoked solely to lower tensions and elicit solidarity: 'We are all Armenians, clinging to the same patch of mountain: can't we resolve this matter peacefully?' Together, these innovations constituted what students of social movements call 'the repertoire of contention'.

The Internet, of course, provided new tools of communication and coordination. From our observations, a strikingly high proportion of those taking part in protest events were IT professionals. This sector has been growing rapidly in Yerevan as it becomes an outsourcing hub for Western multinationals: the wages of Armenian computer programmers are highly 'competitive', even compared to India. Out of seventeen recent civic initiatives in Armenia, at least ten used social media, principally Facebook. Campaign websites, however, proved less popular, perhaps because they appeared too formal. The number of those following the campaigns on Facebook rose steadily from 174 during the earliest battle to save trees on a boulevard from developers, to 53,000 at the time of the energy protests in June–July 2015.

Yerevan is home to around a third of Armenia's three-million-strong population, yet the city is remarkably free of street crime, drug addiction and other common social afflictions, apparently because it is so

densely bound together with family ties and support networks, both local and professional. As a result, socially important news spreading through the Internet is enormously amplified by word of mouth among families, neighbours and friends. Moreover, class boundaries remain quite permeable: in a recent survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resources Centre (CRRC), an overwhelming majority of participants reported having close friends and relatives who were either much richer or much poorer than they were. Ethnographically, these attitudes could be observed in the cordial or even jovial street interactions between strangers—an illustration of the classical Durkheimian theory that a society engaged in sharp external conflict will attain a high level of internal solidarity.⁵ And perhaps Armenians have simply got tired, after decades of nationalist fervour, war, blockade and economic ruin: they had made their sacrifices, and now just wanted a more normal and dignified life. That, at any rate, appeared to be the sentiment animating the new protest movements.

Bus-fare boycott

The breakthrough came in August 2013, when protesters proved capable of overturning a 50 per cent hike in minibus fares. The extensive Soviet-era public transport network has all but disappeared, to be replaced by private minivans—most of them decrepit bangers held together by wire and the odd scrap of oriental rug. The standard fare was 100 drams, perhaps 25 cents; but in a country where the average monthly salary is barely \$200, and many earn no salaries at all, raising the tariff to 150 drams spelled near disaster. To add insult to injury, the price increase was simply imposed without notice one summer morning, with a vague promise about updating the crumbling fleet. Groups of boisterous youngsters began appearing at bus stops to clamp stickers with the message ‘100 drams!’ on the vans and urge passengers to pay no more than the old fare. The activists were mostly students, among those worst hit by the fare hike: they had hatched the protest scheme through social networks and in their classrooms. The action quickly snowballed. The city buzzed with rumours of celebrity singers and athletes stopping to offer free rides in their cars. This created a new urban fashion: private motorists would

⁵ As Eric Hobsbawm once observed of his personal experience in Northern Ireland during the ‘troubles’: an elderly man felt surprisingly safe and comfortable there, as long as he stayed away from the front lines.

pull up beside bus stops and announce their destination and the number of available seats. Bus drivers formed an independent union, which sided with the protesting passengers. Grandmothers brought food to the demonstrations, while older men led celebratory dances and the singing of—what else?—patriotic resistance songs. In the end, Sarkisyan said something cutting to the Mayor of Yerevan which was, of course, widely overheard. The next day, Yerevan's residents were startled to discover that they had won.

Success breeds emulation. A spate of movements now emerged, highlighting other urban issues. Taxi drivers and private motorists began cruising around the city, honking their horns loudly and waving flags to challenge the draconian new fines imposed after the privatization of speed cameras and parking spaces. An important threshold was crossed in the rebellion against the pension 'reform' of early 2014: for the first time government employees, who had previously distanced themselves from the protests, fearing for their jobs, were a visible presence. The mood was angrier, too, as demonstrated by the new tactic of showering top officials, including the Prime Minister, with small change. The result was a partial success, the authorities delaying implementation until some future date. Importantly, none of these mobilizations had any connection to the parliamentary opposition nor to the Western-funded NGOs, which had been set up to promote market reform and democratic consolidation (individual NGO activists did take part). Our research indicates that the new protest movements emerged mainly from personal discussions among like-minded people; although high-school students were also involved, most were in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties—in other words, too young to have fought in the Karabagh war—and had university diplomas, though by no means all had jobs to match their qualifications. The organizational nuclei only partially overlapped: we often saw that the main organizers of new protests had been at most peripheral to earlier events. The milieu of local militants and neighbourhood activists that coalesced after 2008 was matched by growing networks of mutual obligation—'I'm going to the protest because the decent people I value will be there too'—and by the emergence of an almost carnivalesque repertoire of non-violent collective action.

The outlook of the security forces is harder to evaluate, but indirect observation suggests that they were also learning not to overreact when

facing the new protesters. Nor should we forget the tacit importance of the ‘third side’: onlookers, passers-by, minibus passengers—those who constitute mass opinion in an urban community. We offer one ethnographic vignette from March 2008, preceding the rise of the new movements, in the wake of a rare violent confrontation over the disputed presidential election. The Interior Ministry’s conscript troops, ordered to hold their guard on the perimeter of Yerevan’s main square, had been garlanded with flowers by the protesters. Not daring to leave their posts, they pleaded awkwardly with passing women to take the flowers away. ‘All right, I’ll take them’, said one woman, ‘but only if you promise not to shoot at the people.’ ‘But of course, dear lady’, exclaimed the soldier, in a thick village accent. ‘Do you think we are Turks?’

Barricades on Baghramyan

By now the basis for this summer’s explosion should be clear. On 17 June 2015, government regulators approved a 17 per cent increase in the price of domestic electricity (the Russian-owned utility company had insisted on 40 per cent, allegedly to cover its costs). Several hundred protesters, unified by the truly Laconic slogan, ‘*Dev em!*’—‘I’m against!’—gathered in the evening near the Opera House, Yerevan’s traditional site of unsanctioned gatherings since the days of *perestroika*. But following the 1988 heyday of the Karabagh movement, the previously austere expanse of open space around the neo-classical Stalin-era Opera House had been densely—some would suggest, maliciously—filled with glitzy amusement machines, vending stalls, cafés and car parks. The protesters appeared lost amidst this commercial hubbub. Still quite few in number, the activists then moved their base a few hundred yards up Marshal Baghramyan Avenue, the city’s main artery, closer to the Parliament and Presidential Palace. Residents of Yerevan learned about the protest immediately, thanks to the monumental traffic jam it precipitated during rush hour. Curiously, few seemed to mind the inconvenience. In a typical comment, two female commuters said, ‘The authorities need to be served continuous reminders, lest they sit on our heads.’

Four days later, in the early hours of 23 June, riot police dispersed the small camp of protesters with water cannon, making 237 arrests. As news spread through social media, alternative radio stations and word of mouth, Yerevan seemed to erupt in outrage. A barricade of trash

containers was lashed together across the Baghramyan—on the initiative of anarcho-feminists, we were told. Solidarity rallies were held in smaller towns and, for the first time in the recent protest wave, supporters from the villages flocked to the capital in sizeable numbers. The detainees were promptly released in face of this pressure. Many thousands now stood guard at the downtown barricade, celebrities prominent among them. Two young women at the protest, who worked as interior designers for the political elite, confided: ‘We have to decorate their homes and offices. You cannot imagine what arrogant wealth and gaudy ugliness we have to put up with, but our employer tells us that we cannot refuse such people because they are too dangerous.’ The owner of their little firm, also a woman, actually gave her workers permission to join the occupation full-time.

Successful social movements open the way to other forms of rebellion. This summer’s turbulence in Armenia—closer in this respect to Western Europe’s 1968 than to the anti-Soviet rallies of 1989—defied traditional stereotypes about the role of women in society. In the early 90s, during the Karabagh war, rapturous actresses and stolid schoolmistresses called on Armenian women to fulfil their sacred duty by bearing more brave sons for the nation. Now, many young women were sporting cropped hair and T-shirts with progressive slogans (mostly in English), mingling freely with men and directly confronting the police, who stood in phalanx formation a short distance from the protest. This defiance of gender roles greatly troubled some working-class protesters, who objected to the women smoking cigarettes and dressing ‘like whores’, on the grounds that this could disgrace the whole movement. Government officials unwittingly helped overcome such divisions by reprimanding ‘girls forgetting their modesty and family obligations’. Such moralizing strictures were met with loud ridicule, and cries that the best brides in town were those manning [*sic*] the barricade overnight.

Meanwhile, intruders who tried to unfurl the flags of the European Union or banners of the opposition parties were heckled and ejected from the crowd, on the universal insistence that the protest was strictly single-issue. The demonstrators seemed well aware of the troubling signals from Moscow, and carefully avoided provocations in the style of Kiev’s Euromaidan. Russian journalists were cordially invited to share Armenian food and to verify the peaceful nature of the protest. Perhaps

by extension, the participants also vehemently denied any leftist orientation, insisting that it was an all-Armenian mobilization with no political agenda. In fact, they seemed only vaguely aware of contemporary political history. This is, after all, a post-Soviet generation who grew up in a time of declining educational standards and corrupt official politics, and so are sceptical of any ideological projects. Even if these precariously employed young people could be regarded as a 'rising class', they are far from constituting a 'class for itself'. Symptomatically, the clearest economic demand put forward in the course of the protests was made from afar by Serj Tankian, lead singer of the legendary US-based rock group System of a Down, all of whose members are of Armenian descent. His call for Armenia's utilities to be nationalized under close public supervision garnered plenty of 'likes' on Facebook, but was never taken up as a concerted demand.

The Baghramyan protest site became a safe destination for evening strolls and improvised concerts where parents could bring small children. Once in a while someone would grab the microphone, climb on a trash-can and engage in what was usually rambling speechifying, to which few seemed to pay much attention. Instead, many in the crowd preferred to scrutinize their smartphones, trying to learn from Facebook and from friends staying by the TV set at home what might be happening next. Loudly affirming the horizontal character of their movement, the protesters did not raise any demands beyond the original '*Dev em!*' and the generic slogan, 'No to robbery!'. Invitations from Sarkisyan to send negotiators to his official residence, just a hundred paces up the Baghramyan, were twice declined, on the grounds that the movement had no leaders and nothing to talk about anyway: all that was required was for the price hike to be cancelled. Indicatively enough, only a handful of the protesters could say how much their utility bills actually cost, many confessing with disarming frankness that the chore of paying household bills fell to their parents. But they insisted nonetheless that their protest was a matter of principle, and the sympathetic majority of Yerevan residents seemed to agree with them.

In the end, the authorities managed to outwit the protesters without much difficulty. Taking advantage of the Kremlin's paranoia after what had happened in Ukraine, Sarkisyan's government managed to extract a large emergency loan from Moscow. The President then announced a

compromise: the question of electricity prices would be examined by an independent body, including unnamed representatives of the public; in the meantime, the state budget would absorb the price increase under the rubric of internal security, with the justification that the protests had grown into a major security problem. At first the young people on the barricades greeted the news as a victory, while the rest of Armenia breathed a sigh of relief. Chief of Police Vladimir Gasparyan took the opportunity to declare that he would be joining the public dance in celebration of the people's victory—but, importantly, not before normal traffic had resumed on Baghramyan Avenue.⁶

All of a sudden, the once proudly 'leaderless' protest seemed at a loss. Was this victory for real? Who could make the call, or suggest the movement's next steps? How would representatives be chosen to oversee the promised audit of the energy company—if indeed they could be chosen at all? The movement had far outgrown its original informal nuclei of web-linked activists. Predictably, it now split into the usual factions of 'realists' and 'die-hards'. The former beat an orderly retreat to the original site near the Opera House, where they once again looked rather out of place. The latter remained stubbornly in position near the barricade, despite warnings from the Chief of Police, but the energy was visibly draining from their camp. A week later, the police took down the Baghramyan barricade easily enough.

Prospects?

It is too soon to say what the legacy of the Yerevan protests will prove to be. In the short run, Sarkisyan has once again shown himself to be an astute compromiser. His ruling party, with renewed confidence in its ability to hold onto power, has set in motion constitutional reforms that will transform Armenia into a parliamentary republic. This is widely seen as a clever manoeuvre to undermine the already shrinking official opposition, discredited by their hollow bombast and irrelevance—glaringly evident during the summer protests. In parliamentary

⁶To the unconcealed jealousy of some politicians, Gasparyan became the most recognizable public figure during the weeks of protest. He is now paying the price of such popularity, as would-be suicides from Yerevan's many bridges over the mountain gorge insist that he come in person to talk them down.

elections Sarkisyan's party will presumably exploit its far-reaching patronage networks to the maximum, and stands a good chance of monopolizing a first-past-the-post vote. The pool of aspiring parliamentary candidates has been growing apace with the expansion of a new dominant class whose members must combine economic wealth and political stature. They covet MP status, not merely for its attendant prestige but also for the practical advantages of legal immunity and personal access to state resources.

Yet the success of this clever scheme is not necessarily assured in the longer run. On the spectrum of post-Soviet 'imitation democracies'—from, say, Niyazov's Turkmenistan to Lithuania—the Armenian version seems among the more restrained. In part, this is due to objective factors: rocky, landlocked Armenia has no oil or other source of easy rents; it is geopolitically isolated, sandwiched between hostile Azerbaijan and Turkey, with Iran and Georgia, its other neighbours, offering only tepid friendship, and no common border with Russia, still its major ally. This situation of geopolitical siege arguably serves to discipline the ruling elite. Yet the greatest constraint on its behaviour may be the Armenian citizens themselves, who have proved quite rebellious in recent decades, capable at times of an impressive degree of social solidarity. They may have resigned themselves to 'imitation democracy' simply for lack of a credible alternative; the existing opposition parties, with their unappetizing blend of patriotic clamour and free-market conservatism, patently cannot offer one.

Almost by default—because this generation of Armenians has seen too much of nationalism and heard too many promises of market miracles; and because memories of the genocide have inspired a strong aversion to violence—there may be the potential for a broadly progressive and democratic opposition party to emerge. Judging by our observations, social activists are slowly beginning to perceive the need for such a party in the light of their recent successes and failures. It will not be easy, however. Many still seem to be yearning for a political sledgehammer, when what they really need—and would have to build—is a reliable engine, staffed by efficient cadres in Yerevan and beyond, that can challenge the monopolistic hold of the official patronage networks. Before that can happen, many illusions will have to be overcome; there will have to be a great deal of learning and reflection. The principal dilemmas facing

Armenia in the region and the wider world—relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey; political and economic dependence on Russia, and on the West—do not allow for easy solutions. Grounds for optimism are chiefly internal to Armenia itself, in the coming of age of a new political generation, and its now proven ability to mobilize the energies of a larger citizenry.

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Previous texts in NLR's 'New Masses, New Media' series have included Göran Therborn, 'New Masses?' (NLR 85), André Singer, 'Rebellion in Brazil' (NLR 85), Erdem Yörük and Murat Yüksel, 'Class and Politics in Turkey's Gezi Protests' (NLR 89), Bhaskar Sunkara, 'Project Jacobin' (NLR 90), Evgeny Morozov, 'Socialize the Data Centres!' (NLR 91), Joshua Wong, 'Scholarism on the March' and Sebastian Veg, 'Legalistic and Utopian: Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement' (NLR 92), Pablo Iglesias, 'Understanding Podemos' and interview, 'Spain on the Edge' (NLR 93), Francis Mulhern, 'A Party of Latecomers' (NLR 93) and Daniel Finn, 'Water Wars in Ireland', in this number.