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Revolution in Armenia? The Power and Prospects of the Protest Movement

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Revolution in Armenia? The Power and Prospects of the Protest Movement

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April 26, 2018

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Washington, DC

The briefing was held at 4:01 p.m. in Room SVC 200, Capitol Visitor Center, Washington, DC, Everett Price, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Panelists present: Everett Price, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Elen Aghekyan, Independent Research Analyst; and Stephen Nix, Eurasia Regional Director, International Republican Institute.

Mr. PRICE. Good afternoon. Thank you, everybody, for coming. On behalf of our chairman, Senator Roger Wicker, and our co-chairman, Congressman Chris Smith, I would like to welcome you to this U.S. Helsinki Commission briefing on the ongoing protest movement in Armenia. I'm really looking forward to the conversation today since we find ourselves in the midst of a fascinating and fluid moment of transition in Armenia that almost no one could have predicted just a couple weeks ago. We decided to pull together an expert panel on short notice in light of the dizzying pace of developments in Yerevan. Considering how much has transpired in recent days, allow me to say a few words to set the stage for our discussion before I turn the floor over to our briefers.

April was supposed to be a month of significant transition for the Republic of Armenia, but not like this. This month, the country's political system was slated to formally transition from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary one in accordance with profound constitutional changes approved by a popular referendum in December 2015. The 2015 referendum was initiated by Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, who served as president since 2008 and whose final 5-year term in office ended earlier this month. Opponents of the referendum at the time argued that the constitutional changes were employed by the president to extend his time in office by assuming the post of prime minister in 2018. To allay these concerns, Sargsyan vowed then to not seek the position of prime minister at the end of his term.

Yet, as parliament prepared to meet earlier this month to elect a new head of government, it became clear the ruling party would put forward Sargsyan for the newly empowered vote. The country's fractured opposition cried foul, and a protest movement emerged. On Monday, after more than week of surging nonviolent protest and acts of civil disobedience, and just 4 days after holding his first Cabinet meeting, Sargsyan stepped down as prime minister, ushering in an uncertain period of political transition.

This is a superficial gloss on the present political moment that our panelists will flesh out and help us to better understand. My summary focuses on the over fault lines in the political dispute, but we know from experience that the energy that fuels massive popular movements is most often drawn from undercurrents of discontent that are imperceptible at the surface until they burst into the open in unpredictable ways. It strikes me as well that the political drama in Yerevan, which is in many ways a powerful one, is a personal one, too. The current contest has been framed by some as a contest between a powerful establishment, Sargsyan, and the scrappy and disheveled protest leader, Nikol Pashinyan.

After the election of Sargsyan in 2008, Pashinyan was at the helm of a large-scale protest movement contesting the legitimacy of the election, an uprising that Sargsyan's government put down with force, and pushed Pashinyan into hiding. There is an interesting note of symmetry to the fact the beginning to Sargsyan's term in office is now bookended by Pashinyan leading a successful popular movement to unseat him.

We have intentionally put a question mark in the title of this briefing because this outcome, Sargsyan's resignation, raises more questions than it answers. Put simply: What happens next? What will be the outcome of early dialog between the government and protest leaders? Can the movement achieve more lasting reform of the entrenched power structures in Armenia's political system? Will this collective mobilization translate into sustained political engagement? What are the regional implications of this domestic upheaval?

We have an excellent duo of briefers to help us today formulate, understand, and hopefully answer these questions and others. I neglected to introduce myself. I'm Everett Price. I'm a policy advisor on the U.S. Helsinki Commission, where I cover Armenia and the rest of the Southern Caucasus.

Elen Aghekyan will speak first. She is an independent researcher and former research analyst at Freedom House, where she managed Europe and Eurasia content for the organization's Freedom in the World and Freedom of the Press surveys. She most recently authored the Armenia chapter of Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2018 Report, which is a comprehensive, comparative, and multidimensional study of reform in the former Communist States of Europe and Eurasia. I think we've very lucky to have her perspective as a result of her work on that report, because it casts this issue in the broader light of what's been going on politically and institutionally in Armenia over the years.

Next, we have Stephen Nix, who joined International Republican Institute [IRI] in October 2000 as a regional program director for Eurasia. In that position, he oversees programs in Belarus, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, perhaps elsewhere. You can correct me if I'm wrong. And Nix joined IRI after serving for 2 years as senior democracy specialist at the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID. Nix is a specialist in political party development and judicial and legal reform in the former Soviet Union.

So the way we'll proceed is I'll turn it over to Elen, who will give us our rundown of her experience following these events over the past several days, several weeks, and then casting it in light of the broader issues at stake. And then Stephen will give his remarks about the broader legal framework, the constitutional issues at stake, the U.S. implications. And then I'll ask some questions and also turn it over to the audience for your questions as well. So, without further ado, thank you, Elen, so much for coming here.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Thank you, Everett, for inviting me. And thank you, everyone, for being here.

So the events of the past week have certainly been unexpected to many, including myself. And though they are changing rapidly every day, there are already some early lessons learned. One is that civil society in Armenia, though routinely sidelined in policy-making over the past two decades, is much more powerful than many of us had previously thought. Another, as Tom de Waal has aptly put it, is that post-Soviet rulers are not as secure as they look from a distance. And a third, if I may add, as we're going to talk about the regional context later, is that not every overthrow of a Eurasian leader has to always be about Russia.

We're a few days now from Prime Minister Sargsyan's resignation. And attempts at negotiations are underway. We know now that on May 1st the Parliament is going to vote for an interim prime minister. And all of the agreements and decisions that the protestors and the government are going to make together up to that point will be critical as to how the process goes from there. Major changes may be happening on the ground as we speak here today. So I'm going to refrain for giving a chronological analysis of the many things that have happened, which would keep us in this room for many hours. Instead, I'm going to focus on the key on-the-ground tensions and questions at play based on what we know today, as well as on what we've known for a very long time about deeply rooted problems in Armenian democracy.

So, first, the factors leading up to Sargsyan's resignation from the office of prime minister, which he held for less than a week after being president for 10 years. Beginning on April 13th, thousands of people demonstrated in the streets of Yerevan, led by Nikol Pashinyan, who is one of the leaders of the Yelk Alliance, which holds a few seats in the National Assembly. At their height, the demonstrators drew more than 100,000 individuals to the streets of Yerevan alone, which is a staggering number if you think that the country only has 3 million people. And they were joined by groups in towns and villages across the country as well.

It's important to remember that mass demonstrations have been a staple for Yerevan, at the very least, for the past several years. And we've watched as many of them—often arising over socioeconomic issues, but almost always taking on an anti-government undertone—have been met often with police violence and few, if any, concessions from the government. I, myself, to the moment before Sargsyan's resignation, expected a similar outcome in this case as well. But, remarkably, the protests in this case have proved to be very, very different.

There were some tense moments, that is true. The protest leaders, including Pashinyan, were temporarily detained overnight, which was a very tense moment. And there are also reports of police violence against participants and journalists, which has been a huge human rights issue in Armenia since independence. However, it's important to note a few key distinctions that set these protests apart from others. And the first is that not a single shot was fired during these protests. And in general, they featured a

lower level of violence than protests in recent years. The protests didn't even erupt into violence or chaos when the protest leaders were detained overnight, which was perhaps sort of the lowest moment in the whole movement.

At the height of the demonstrations, right before Sargsyan's resignation, unarmed soldiers even joined the demonstrators, which was absolutely unprecedented. Strikes were a part of the equation. Major corporations joined in support. And the protest also had a remarkably young demographic, with high school students and university students joining despite severe limitations, including in one case at Yerevan State University administrators literally locking the lecture halls to keep students from going outside. More importantly, unlike demonstrations in the past few years which took on sort of broad and not very well-focused anti-government tones, these demonstrations focused on a singular, very clear domestic political goal initially, and that was the resignation of Sargsyan from the office of the prime minister. And of course, most importantly, they succeeded in this initial goal.

So the direct roots of the protester's calls, which Everett mentioned, lie in a government transformation that began in 2015 when the ruling party pushed through a constitutional change. And I want to emphasize that this change, which shifted the country from semi-presidentialism to a parliamentary system, was heavily flawed by the worst problems that have plagued Armenian elections in recent years. And that is fraudulent voting, abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party, alteration of votes, voter intimidation, vote buying—basically staples of the electoral process. Opposition members, civil society activists, and many watchdogs in Armenia and around the world suspected some questionable motives behind these changes, noting, for example, that they make it easier for one party—and in this case the ruling party—to grab power and retain a parliamentary majority.

Some analysts also noted that the changes could be a way for a single individual, like Sargsyan, to hold on to power for a much longer time, simply by going from the president's office—in which his second term has already expired—to the prime minister's office, which technically does not have any term limits. So Sargsyan initially said that he wouldn't do this. Then for the past year, he actually spent some time sort of dodging the question or saying that he would like to be involved in security or something different. But then his motives and the party's motives became very clear this April, when he was nominated and voted in without any other candidates even being considered. And then a day later, as we know, he submitted his resignation.

So this was the first victory in the protest leaders and in Pashinyan's four demands, which were announced about a week into the protest. And these were: Sargsyan's resignation, the election by parliament of a people's candidate as an interim prime minister—which this day seems to mean, at least on what the protesters said, Pashinyan himself—and then establishment of a transitional government, and then the fourth step is that if in 40 days the National Assembly does not accept the plan put forth by the government, snap elections. So as the protesters are moving on from this first step, which was an unexpected success, they're already coming face-to-face with some of the deeply rooted problems facing democracy in Armenia.

Those are problems not of an individual but of institutions. Armenia has a ruling party and oligarchic networks that have co-opted the political system and changed many institutions to basically become shells to prop up their power. And this, along with a very weak and corrupt judiciary, along with corruption just pervasively overall, from systemic

corruption to petty bribes, as well as with very weak independence of the media, is what is going to make any meaningful change a very uphill battle. This is already problematic now as the protest leaders are just trying to see eye-to-eye with the government and to sit down with talks, as they can't seem to agree on the correct format or the correct people's involvement and how much the public should be involved in. And they're going to be more problematic, in my opinion, once the process actually moves toward a new parliamentary election, which is much more difficult to do in a free and fair manner than simple negotiations.

So it's true that from April 13th to April 23d the protests really focused on one man, Sargsyan, who tried to use constitutional engineering to stay past his democratic expiration date. But they've become about much more than just one man since. I want to emphasize that while Sargsyan stepped down, the regime has not. And the ruling party, the HHK or the RPA, is quite a force. Some believe that without Sargsyan, their leader, the party, which has a very weak ideological draw, will crumble. But I don't think it's that simple. And I don't think the road forward is going to be that straightforward, because what is ideology if you have a grip on administrative resources, a clientelist network that reaches across the country, and a majority in the parliament?

So, admittedly, there are cracks currently in the party's parliamentary strength. Its coalition partner has left. Some of the systemic opposition groups have aligned themselves with the protesters. And the acting Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan—well, Karen Karapetyan seems to be losing favor within his own party by the hour. But the RPA is also made up of and connected to some very problematic characters. Some of them are oligarchs who control entire sectors of Armenia's economy. So dismantling such a system, beyond the corruption and beyond just the elections, it's going to mean giving people a fair and free chance to vote such individuals out of office if they want to, or to keep them in office if they want to.

And getting to that step means a whole host of issues. It means open dialog among all of the parties right now, which is proving to be very difficult. It means new election commissions. It means a better electoral law, a stronger judiciary, more independent media, and stronger checks on power—which are all very hard to achieve. And because I don't want to leave us on a very negative note before we move forward, I wanted to say that this is a very, very difficult roadmap ahead, or perhaps, you know, a road that does not have a map at all.

But I want to go back to my beginning point of just how unprecedented and unexpected this whole development has been. And as we move on to talk about the regional aspect of all of this, I'd like to say that perhaps, you know, from afar, to me personally at least and professionally, it gives a kind of hope for democracy in Eurasia that I had almost given up on.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you very much, Elen. I appreciate the hopeful remarks. That's not something we get to do terribly often at the Helsinki Commission. So I'm happy for you to end on that note.

Thank you, Stephen. You can go.

Mr. NIX. First of all, thank you, Everett, for inviting me to speak today at a very critical time in a very critical part of the world. I appreciate the opportunity.

And my testimony today is divided into three distinct sections. The first, I wanted to give some political context to describe why we are where we are today. Second, I

wanted to go through some of the constitutional and statutory framework that could help guide us through the next several weeks which will be very crucial procedurally to see how things play out. And then third, I wanted to outline some recommendations for the United States Government as to what it might do to assist the government and the people of Armenia during this critical time.

Now, Elen just gave you an excellent previous of the context that got us where we are today, so I'm going to skip that part of my testimony and go straight to yesterday, as a matter of fact, when the Republican Party had a parliamentary majority of 65 out of 105 seats. That's all changed now. Yesterday the party's coalition partner, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Dashnaks, left the coalition. This leaves the ruling party with only 58 seats. They require 53 to elect a new prime minister. So it's definitely within the realm of possibility for change there.

Before April 25th, two opposition parties were in parliament—the Tsarukyan Alliance Prosperous Armenia, which has 31 seats, and the Way Out Alliance, which as you know is Mr. Pashinyan's party. So a significant number of votes that could be assembled. Both of these parties are pro-European. Both are generally centrist in orientation. And despite the sizable opposition presence in the National Assembly, all the leadership—including the acting prime minister and the president—are key allies of Sargsyan. And Sargsyan maintains his position as party leader.

The obvious concern now is that any new government that might emerge from these events would still be under Sargsyan's control. And this has meant that the resignation of Sargsyan has not placated the protesters. Importantly, Pashinyan's Way Out Alliance has been joined on the streets by their fellow parliamentary opposition party, the Tsarukyan Alliance, and by the non-parliamentary Heritage Party and the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party. The Republican Party appears intent to rely on a 58-seat majority to retain control of parliament, but only if they can find a politically and socially viable way to do so. And this may prove very difficult given the atmosphere that exists in the streets of Yerevan.

Some of the constitutional requirements that we see—and actually are fairly well written, I have to say—but the constitution of Armenia, as amended, rather specifically outlines the processes that must be followed in this current crisis. Parliament has 7 days to appoint a new prime minister. Any party with representation can name a candidate. And any candidate with the support of more than one-third of parliament will be put before the full body for a vote. Fairly straightforward. A simple majority will elect the new prime minister. If the National Assembly is unable to elect a prime minister on the first vote, they have seven more days to hold an additional vote. If no candidate receives a majority on the second ballot, the National Assembly must dissolve and call new elections.

So, with only two parties that represent more than one-third of parliament, the Republicans and Sargsyan, it's likely that there will only be two candidates for prime minister, making it more than likely that one of the two candidates will receive an outright majority. The newly elected prime minister will have 15 days to form a government. Failure to do so will not necessarily trigger new elections, as there are constitutional provisions that allow the prime minister to appoint a government, quote, "by virtue of law." The new government then has 20 days to propose a new governmental program or agenda. And if that agenda is not accepted by a majority of the National Assembly, the body must be dissolved, and new elections held.

In the event that special elections are called, voting must be conducted within 30 to 45 days of dissolution. On April 26th, Karapetyan announced that the National Assembly would vote on a new prime minister on May 1. Based upon this, it would appear that the National Assembly's hoping that a consensus candidate can be found that might placate the opposition and potentially avoid the need to dissolve parliament. With this in mind, there are probably three possible scenarios.

No. 1 would be that the National Assembly goes through the constitutional process to appoint a new prime minister, who successfully adopts a program and those special elections are called. Second scenario is the National Assembly goes through the constitutional process to appoint a new prime minister but is unable to adopt a program within 20 days, and special elections are called 30 to 45 days later. Third and last, the National Assembly is unable to appoint a new prime minister and emergency elections are called, again, between 30 and 45 days later. So these scenarios pose several possible timelines that need to be mindful of.

For the first outcome, a new government would be fully formed and operational no later than June 11. For the second outcome, emergency or special elections would take place between July 11th and 26th. And then in the third scenario, special elections would need to be called no later than June 6th to June 21st. So those are the timelines. That's what we're looking at. That's the possible procedural outcomes.

But given the Republicans' majority in the National Assembly it's doubtful that a deal could be made with the opposition without endangering that majority. It's even more doubtful that the street protesters, having achieved initial success, would be willing to wait beyond the initial week required for the appointment of a new prime minister. Opposition leaders have demanded that Pashinyan be named the new prime minister. And it remains to be seen if the president will accede to this demand. So it's all about wait and see. So over the next several days, we'll all be watching very closely.

Third and last, let me just go through a couple of recommendations that I think would be beneficial in terms of the U.S. Government involvement. Despite Armenia's membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union and its relatively warm relationship with the Russian Federation, Armenia also has strong ties to the West. This is true thanks to the large diaspora populations in the United States and France. The United States has a history of democracy work in Armenia, including providing assistance to political parties and NGOS from 1992 until the mid–2000s. During that period, the International Republic Institute formally conducted national public opinion polls which were shared with politicians from both sides of the aisle. We did this to help them with their messaging, their targeting, and their party building.

It would be in the best interests of the U.S. and Europe to help Armenia resolve the crisis in a constructive and democratic manner by reviving this kind of assistance to shore up the country's democratic institutions. Notwithstanding early elections, there is much that the U.S. can do to help Armenia resolve this crisis. There's been very little democracy promotion and governance work in the country in the last decade, but the last 2 weeks have proven—as Elen said—that there is an appetite for both among the opposition and civil society. While the scope of such work must depend on the priorities of the USAID and Yerevan, at the very least nonpartisan work with youth, with women, and other groups could provide an opportunity to share lessons in democratic values and good governance.

Such efforts would be focused on building skills such as debate and policy formation, and not necessarily on partisan activities. Such efforts would also seek to involve the full spectrum of political parties, including the governing party. In the increasingly likely event that special elections are called and lead to significant gains by the opposition, opportunities will open up to work with the new government on a number of things—policy development, administrative skills, and internal party democracy. This will also increase opportunities to work with local officials on increasing efficiency and improving service delivery. The opportunities for political party strengthening are manifold. Like other countries in the region, Armenia has several long-established political parties. However, the current opposition parties have been in opposition since the late 2000s, as the Republican Party has dominated political space.

Although these parties have parliamentary representation and strong popular support, their transition from political opposition to governing can be very difficult. IRI stands ready to provide the necessary party-building and policy development assistance should it be requested. Given the required timeframe between the dissolution of government and new elections, should they happen, which could be any time between May 30th and July 14th, it's unlikely that an international election observation could be assembled in a timely manner. But IRI and others are confident that an assessment could be made, could be put together, and could assess these elections.

It's crucial that Armenians have access to high-quality polling so that decisionmakers and the general public can receive unbiased information on political questions and concerns. Periods of intense change, like we're seeing now, also lead to divergent public narratives. And accurate and unbiased polling is vital to distinguishing citizen needs from the misleading information propagated by dishonest and outside actors. IRI has conducted high-quality public opinion surveys in Armenia and in the region over the last 20 years. This included regular polling in Armenia up to 2008. And IRI hopes to once again resume this effort.

In closing, I'd like to say that Armenia faces the prospect of transformative change in its government and its policies. The United States must do more than observe and analyze. It must be part of helping Armenia to move from crisis to progress. The crisis represents a unique opportunity to help Armenia as it continues on its democratic path, and to demonstrate to the Armenian people that the West, and the United States in particular, is a reliable partner in the country's growth and development. Democracy assistance organizations like IRI will be vital partners to this effort in Armenia, as they have been throughout the region.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you very much, Stephen. And thank you, Elen. Thank you both for your excellent presentations. I think with your opening remarks we've gotten an excellent picture of the political and tactical updates from the past few weeks, and then also the broader legal and international context in which these events are taking place.

I'd like to open with just a few questions before turning it over to the audience. And I wanted to start with the youth, who've been out in front of this, and really the protagonists of the protests. I was wondering, from both of your perspectives, what is the driving force behind the large youth participation that we've seen in these weeks? What are the key grievances? Is there any precedent for this kind of youth mobilization in Armenia? And do you think that there are chances for this to translate into electoral participation?

I'll just say very briefly that I had the opportunity to participate in the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly observation of the last parliamentary elections in April of last year that led to the election of this parliament that now is in the midst of this transition. And one thing that was striking was the youth that were out—a lot of them, I think, affiliated with the Yelk Alliance that Nikol Pashinyan represents. And that was striking. And yet, as you've noted, there is so much influence from oligarchs, from established parties. So is this really an inflection point, do you think, for the youth of Armenia? What's the way forward?

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Okay, I'll have a try. So absolutely, there are huge numbers of youth. And whether that's high school students who can't vote yet or university students and the youth who are of voting age. And I think there are several factors driving their participation. One is undeniably Pashinyan's and the protest leader's charisma and pull. Their character has really seemed to be exactly what's needed for a popular movement like this. And the other I would say is the young nature of the Yelk Alliance itself. There are young journalists, civil society activists who are part of the alliance, who now hold seats in the parliament—which I think is a big change for Armenia. And they are also at the forefront, helping Pashinyan lead this movement. And I think—you know, as you said, there is a huge appetite for change and a huge appetite for democracy. And I think the general and overwhelming sense among young Armenians is that they wanted to have a say in what tomorrow looks like for them.

Mr. NIX. Let me do a little bit of comparative analysis, because IRI does polling throughout the former Soviet space. If you look at the polling in countries like Georgia, like Moldova, like Ukraine and others—when you look at the youth crosstabs, young people don't watch television in the same numbers that older people do. They're obviously attracted to social media. And that's where they get much of their political news. So one would think they might have different opinions and be more encouraged to be participatory. But the data also shows that youth are the least likely to vote, to join a political party, or be politically active. It's discouraging, because the hope for the future is really the youth. That's why it's both astonishing and really impressive to see this show in the streets of Yerevan, and young people taking into their own hands the situation and demonstrating that they want to have a say in their country's future.

We saw glimpses of this in the Maidan. And that's why it's so encouraging to see this in Yerevan, young people getting out, demonstrating. And the polling also shows that young people are mostly concerned, primarily, with jobs. It's no different in Armenia. The youth do not think they have a positive future under the current system, under current conditions. They want change. And they're advocating for change. And it's very—it's really heartwarming to see this.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Yep. And I'll also add that we saw some youth participation in protests that happened in the past 5 years, so, in Electric Yerevan, which happened a few years ago and was focused on electricity prices. Last year when the parliament was in the process of changing the rules regulating military—mandatory military service, we also saw youth participation. But I think the issue now is so just central to life and the future, whether it's political or for their jobs or just for life within the borders of Armenia, that this issue just had a much larger draw than the issues that were at the forefront of protests in the past years, and whether that's electricity prices, or pensions, or military service, which would have affected just half of youth.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you. And you mentioned the central role of Pashinyan several times, and then also in terms of how he has drawn youth to this movement. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about who he is, what draw people to him, maybe elements of his background that might be relevant. And also, for the Yelk Alliance, which is another thing we've talked about quite a bit—what's its program? What's its agenda or approach or ideology that is also drawing so much popular support?

Ms. AGHEKYAN. So Nikol Pashinyan is a very interesting character. He's been active in politics for quite some time, but his background is as a newspaper editor. So he was a journalist. And he was also—he has been activist for quite some time. He does have a—you know, some people have—in the media, have called him a newcomer, or someone who doesn't have a lot of political experience. And I think that's sort of a yes and no. He doesn't have a whole lot of high-level governance experience, but a few years ago he founded a party, Civil Contract, which he called a public political union. And this is one of the big bodies that's in the Yelk Alliance.

And the Yelk Alliance overall, I think its draw is how it's focused on progress, how it's focused on democracy and civil rights. And I think the fact that Pashinyan is very frank about these issues, and the fact that he has framed himself and acted as well as just, you know, the people's leader. He's in the streets always, in his camo shirt with his backpack. He has a very attractive image if you're thinking about sort of the logistics of how to get people to follow you. I think just the way that he's approached the people that he's asking to follow him, as well as the progressive, the human rights-minded, and sort of the positive reform-centered focus of his Yelk Alliance is what's drawn people so much.

I think he has a very good mix of activist, politician. And, you know, as a journalist, he devoted so much of his time to analyzing the issues and trying to tell truthful stories. That was also very important.

Mr. PRICE. And you mentioned his frankness. And I think that's one thing that's struck me from watching him lead the protests, and mostly in meetings, actually, with the government, when he met with the president at the Marriott in central Yerevan, and they had a 2-minute meeting or so, captured on camera, in which I believe the president walked out.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Yes. The president walked out. And I want to emphasize that that was a very sad moment for the president because—or, I mean, the prime minister—because I think that may have been a moment where he knew that he was already done. That was right before his resignation. But it was also a very chilling one, because the president—the Prime Minister Sargsyan, he claimed that he was being blackmailed, and that's why he couldn't be at the meeting anymore. And then in what I think has been one of the scariest moments of this whole movement, he turned to the cameras and said: You know, have you learned nothing from what happened in 2018—which is when we had deadly——

Mr. PRICE. 2008, right?

Ms. AGHEKYAN. 2008, I'm sorry, which is when we had deadly electoral violence. But, you know, during this whole time, Pashinyan was sitting there, backpack right next to him, just watching it all unfold as if he was—he seemed like a frank outsider.

Mr. PRICE. Well, I just was struck by how directly he engages and makes demands and makes very clear what he's out for. And recently it's only somewhat oblique, his positioning to present himself as the option for next prime minister. Is that something that

rubs people the wrong way at all? Is it just attractive? Kind of what are the reads on his political style?

Mr. NIX. I would just say he's been a masterful tactician so far. And in these situations where you have people in the street, there's lots of uncertainty, there's a lot of passion, one of the keys to making progress is to make very clear demands. And I think that's been the key here. Pashinyan has been very clear what it is that the "street," quote/unquote, demands from the government. And so I think that paves the way and positions him as a certain authority. I mean, basically he is being credited as the leader of this movement. It started out, young people—not necessarily political party affiliated—but young people out in the streets, and political parties have joined in. But he is the definitive leader of this opposition movement, this ad hoc movement that has appeared suddenly.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Yes. And I will add to how tactical he is. I've noticed that he is a big fan of repetition which if I can recommend something to everyone, it's that a lot of local media outlets—independent local media outlets have been livestreaming all of the rallies that are happening nightly where Pashinyan gives speeches. And they are doing incredible work with simultaneous English translation. So if you would like to see him in action, you absolutely should.

And because I've been watching for about 2 weeks, at some points I was like, well, tell me something new. I wanted to hear it. But then I realized the brilliance of it is that he repeats. He repeats his demands, but he also, I think, repeats the sort of orders to his followers that have made the movement very successful, which is that—remain peaceful, engage in civil disobedience, but, you know, be peaceful. Absolutely no violence. Do this. And he just keeps saying it. And obviously it's worked.

About his frankness, I will say that I've noticed it as well. To me, some of it is worrying, in that when he says that as they're moving forward that the ruling party because of its role in creating Armenia's democratic problems should be not part of the negotiations. That, to me, has been very worrying. Saying that certain people should be shut out of the negotiations has raised some eyebrows. On the ground, most of it has been met with cheers. I'm not sure if—it's very difficult to tell if that's just the euphoria of the moment or if there are going to be questions that come up. But just because, you know, the negotiations haven't actually happened yet.

So I think as decisions are made and as the public is privy to what's happening—because Pashinyan has asked that journalists be present at all negotiations so that no backdoor deals are made—I think people's opinions may become more clear as things actually move to implementation rather than just rallies.

Mr. PRICE. And I was wondering with an international perspective as well, how do you think these events are being perceived in the Kremlin? And what do you make of the response so far from Russia, and also from the United States?

Mr. NIX. Well, I'd like to commend U.S. Ambassador Mills for immediately addressing the situation, meeting with the government, meeting with opposition folks, and also urging that people remain calm and respectful, that he encouraged people to continue to bring their voice to the streets and protest but do so in a peaceful way. So I give the U.S. Government a lot of credit for getting involved immediately in the situation and playing a helpful role.

With regard to the Russian Federation, it's been interesting to see the statements, very carefully worded, to describe this as an internal affair, a domestic affair, and not something that should include any sort of outside interference, because in my view the Russian Government views any transition of power outside of normal electoral timeframes as troubling. So the statements have been urging calm, internal affair. But you know that Russia is watching very closely these events.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. One statement that I think was made, that I think was one of the last things I managed to see as I was trying to check on the news to see what had changed before I came in here and couldn't keep up with anymore, was that in talks that happened either today or yesterday, Russia did express expectations that things will be resolved quickly and that an interim prime minister will be chosen, and I believe asserted that—you know, the legitimacy of the 2017 election, and the constitution, and that things should, you know, follow in that framework. Which I think is sort of the biggest side we've seen them take, even though it's quite a formulated opinion. It's still very much hands off.

Mr. PRICE. Interesting. Well, I'd like to turn it over to the audience as well. Edwin here has a microphone that he can pass to anybody who would like to ask a question.

Scott in the back.

QUESTIONER. Hi. Thanks. Scott with House Foreign Affairs.

Can I ask about the role of the military over the last 10 days? I saw some news reports about unarmed military-looking people, or people in camouflage uniform. Who were they? What was their role? What was their relationship to the Ministry of Defense? Any details on that would be appreciated.

Mr. NIX. Sure. Scott, we saw the same reports. We understand that these are garrison troops in the city that left barrack without arms because they wanted to participate in the protests. I don't know very much beyond that in terms of specific units or what was behind it, except that they saw what was going on via television and world of mouth, and decided that they wanted to participate, which in my view was a very strong signal to the government and may have been a factor in the decision of the president.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. I think——

Mr. NIX. The prime minister, I'm sorry.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Yes, I know. It's very confusing. I think the only thing I'll add to that is that it's been a little worrying. Right after we saw this happen, and the news reports came out, activists on the ground grew quite concerned about what would happen to the unarmed soldiers in case Sargsyan didn't resign or even if he did, if there would be any repercussions. So far I am not aware of any, but it's just something to think about. Because, you know, as the protest happened there were some people that you could argue did things that they weren't supposed to. I mean, police beat journalists and participants. And then these unarmed soldiers left to go participate. So these are questions that also are going to have to be dealt with at some point. We just don't know much yet.

Mr. PRICE. I was wondering if you could also address the Freedom House Nations in Transit Report that you worked on. I was briefed on it recently, and they showed a map of the Eurasian region. And it was color-coded with the different kinds of regimes that the Freedom House classifies the governments as, in light of the outcomes of their work and their methodology, and the only one that was a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime—is that their correct term—was Armenia. So it stood out very clearly on the map.

And one of the comments that was made by the briefers what that that is the classification that often correlates the most directly to instability. And that was within a week of these events here. So I was wondering if you could just say a little bit more about kind of your principal findings, some of the general trends. And has Armenia been a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime for long, or——

Ms. AGHEKYAN. I believe for a few years. This was definitely not the first year that Armenia has been a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime. So there is—consolidated authoritarian regimes, the semi-consolidated, and there's the semi-consolidated democracies, and then the consolidated democracies in this report, which looks at all of the post-Communist countries in Europe and Eurasia. So Armenia is very unique in that if you're looking at it in the simplest regional context it's not as bad as Azerbaijan. We're not having media outlets shut down left and right. We don't have scores of journalists in prison. You know, you can at least—there are a lot of things that are very different, though it hasn't made the kind of progress, for example, that Georgia has made. So it is in a very unique position.

I think from having worked at Freedom House previously as a staff member and then recently having been a consultant on this report, I think the instability hadn't quite struck me as one of the things to keep my eye on, just because Armenia had been making sort of steady negative steps, with its score getting lower and lower in very small ways, whether that was because of crackdowns on civil society or generally because of very bad elections, and increasingly worse elections. And then this year, the score that changed was for corruption because after the 2017 parliamentary elections, which really showed that there is minimal opposition in the parliament to speak of, the systemic nature of Armenia's corruption was just—it was bolstered that much more through the ruling party's control of the parliament.

So you know, next year I'm already, you know, who's thinking about who's going to write the report next year and what exactly is it going to say as these things keep developing? And I'm hoping that it will be the first year of positive news for this report. But I'm going to remain cautiously optimistic only.

Mr. NIX. Well, let me just add it's—with regard to the scope and pace of events—it's been incredibly difficult to keep up. And I can say that we altered our draft testimony three times yesterday, and we're even editing it this morning after the news events. Things are happening so quickly, very rapidly, and may continue to do so. So it's important that we all watch very closely.

Mr. PRICE. Yes. I can't thank you both enough for having responded so quickly to this kind of snap briefing that we've been able to put on to help people to understand the unfolding events and the way forward. We're very much in the middle of a fluid situation.

If there is another question from the audience, feel free to raise your hand and I'll call on you. Sure, here in the front.

QUESTIONER. Is the Russian Government involved in any way? Have they expressed opposition, support to what's going on?

Mr. PRICE. Sorry. We're good? All right.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. I can let you reiterate, yes.

Mr. NIX. We've only seen the official statements. We know that Russian diplomats have been in touch with Armenian officials. And my understanding is the message that

has been consistent is that Russia's urging calm and peace, and that this be confined in a domestic affair.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. There was one interesting statement where an official, right after Sargsyan's resignation even said, you know, good job. Russia is with you, Armenians. Which was very unexpected. But so far it seems that the geopolitical element is calm.

Mr. PRICE. And what about the media picture in Armenia? How are people getting their news about these events, and what's the general climate for press freedom?

Ms. AGHEKYAN. That is a very good question. Most people who are not participating in Armenia and getting their news just as it happens and is announced, and people abroad as well, are getting their news from, I would say, from a small group of dedicated independent media outlets, like CivilNet.TV; Trace; Azatutyun, which is the RFE/RL Armenia Service; EVN Report, which is a newcomer; as well as from activists who have very active social media profiles. And I think this is—you know, social media has been—and online media have always played a large role in Armenia during protests or in just getting critical news out, just because television is not as objective as it could be. And I would say that this is the height of online media and social media activity that I have seen. And it is absolutely impressive what these small outlets are doing with the few resources they have. They're doing a commendable job, which I think is reason for everyone—whether that's legislators in Armenia or international funders—to see how much support is needed for independent media, that they're doing so many great things on their own.

Mr. PRICE. That's very good to hear. Could you also address a little bit more the tactics that have been used in the protests? I think it's been interesting to read a little bit about the civil disobedience and creative tactics that have been used.

Mr. NIX. Sure. Well, this has been a very organized series of protests. By organized, I mean there seems to be clear direction coming as to where to deploy, where to go, where to move. And so this is not any sort of mob mentality. This is very well-organized, No. 1. No. 2, very peaceful. This group has acted in a very calm, peaceful manner. There has been, as Elen said, no reports of violence. No reports of looting. No reports of disorderly control, drinking, any of that sort of thing. So No. 1 is they seem to be very organized. No. 2, very respectful, and very peaceful.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. And, you know, some of the sort of nitty gritty tactics have been things that I think are designed to just attract people to join, just because it's so easy to engage. Like, for example, on one of the earlier nights of the protest, it was to take out a pot and, like, a kitchen utensil, and in the evening to just go outside your window and for a few hours bang on it, so that the city's sort of engulfed in the noise of the protesters. Blocking streets, just by sort of going across the intersection. Blocking streets has been a huge component. I think yesterday was supposed to be a day in which at around noon cars everywhere were supposed to just stand still, so that everyone just came to a quiet moment. So it's small things like this, which of course have been joined by the things that Armenian protests always feature, which is dancing and barbequing in the streets. So yes, it's been clever. It's been tactical. And it's been clearly designed to just appeal to regular people.

Mr. PRICE. How did protesters handle the fact that the Armenian genocide commemoration fell right in the middle of this dramatic week?

Mr. NIX. Well, it certainly has a—it's such an important day in the history of the country. And it's very important to the people. So, yes, I'm certain—it's my personal opinion that this also had an effect on the mentality of the people and made them think hard about the future of their country. And that could have entered into their decision to go to the streets.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. It's also significant that Sargsyan resigned immediately before—right before April 24th. And you know, as I was thinking about how the protests would evolve, myself I was thinking, what's the tactical approach? What do you do on April 24th if the protests are still happening? Because on April 24th, in Yerevan traditionally, people are out on the streets anyway. It's a day of national remembrance. There is a march that goes all the way to the genocide memorial. So if people weren't on the streets protesting already, then more of them would be joining. So I imagine on the government side, this may have amounted to a small nightmare. And just because it meant multiplied numbers.

And another question, but I'm not sure the validity of it—you know, I haven't heard official reports about it—but a lot of international analysts were saying that there cannot be a crackdown by police so close to Genocide Memorial Day, just because that is not something that any government could allow itself.

Mr. PRICE. And it's a very interesting dynamic.

There's another question here in the second row.

QUESTIONER. Hi. Yes, Mike Henning from USAID.

Just a couple questions, one about the election law and the administration apparatus. That's been an area that the opposition has complained about and has talked about making changes to. So what are the nature of those demands and how likely are they to be enacted and carried out in the short term versus the longer term? And then my second question is on the use of social media. I think the opposition has been very clever about being careful. They were pausing some protests today because of fears of infiltration by agitators and others that might spark some kind of crackdown. Certainly online it's pretty easy to do that sort of thing, and from wherever in the world. So what are the things to look out for on the social media front, as far as infiltration by people that want to manipulate fake news, disinformation, what have you, to drive opinion?

Thanks.

Mr. NIX. Why don't I speak to the election law aspects. One of the common complaints throughout the years of international election groups that have monitored elections in the country is the failure of the election commissions at the local level to enforce the law, the bribery, pressure, use of administrative resources, those types of things. Many reports of ballot stuffing and interference and inaccurate tabulation of a ballot. So I think in terms of what the opposition would like to see in the event that there were a special election, they'd like to see change in the central election commission makeup. But they'd also like to see change in the makeup of local and regional commission as well. But they'd also, I would imagine, would push hard for significant changes in the law in terms of the powers of local commissions, and ensuring that the law was administered fairly—not just nationally, but at the local level as well, because it's been replete with problems in the various elections that just have never been addressed.

Mr. PRICE. Could I ask you real quick, are those changes that could be made in advance of an election?

Mr. NIX. Given the timeframe that I've outlined for everyone today, it would be difficult to do so under the terms of the special election. But I was speaking more in terms of the long term. And it may be that a special election is not called. But if there's a new prime minister and a new government, I think one of the priorities that the street will demand is radical election reform.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. Absolutely. Especially since after the new electoral law came out I know there were—civil society was consulted, but a lot of their suggestions and a lot of their criticisms were just not properly addressed. And that has everything to do with—it's mostly the commissions, as you've said, but it also has to do with things like the thresholds. That parties and alliances have differing thresholds. So there's a whole host of issues. And I'm not sure if they're going to ask to go back to the drawing board and go through a process that includes everyone in a fair manner, which happens very rarely in our meeting, or if they're going to make some small fixes to ensure the independence of the process. But that's a pretty big question.

So on the social media front, it's—in elections and in protests for the past few years, social media has been huge in just communications and news gathering, news sharing, simple information sharing, and organization as well. I will say that, you know, in contrast to the 2017 parliamentary elections, when there was a lot of fake news, a lot of bot activity, especially on Twitter, that went so far as to lead to the temporary blocking of a few prominent media and civil society accounts right on the eve of the election, this year we haven't seen anything as problematic. People, whether that's activists or organizers or ordinary people or journalists, are very active.

And while you do see some things like accounts that are clearly bots just because they've been formed very recently or they're not active consistently, they have generic names, no photos, and are always—you know, you can read through their tweets that it's not quite a regular person observing the news and commenting on it—there are some. And we always notice those. You know, some activists notice that they get followed by a lot of bot accounts, right on the eve of something significant. Usually I think I've seen this time that they haven't been as active, just for example in the parliamentary elections. And I'm hoping they stay that way.

Mr. PRICE. Since we've framed the title of this briefing as a question, I feel like we should pose the question: Is this a revolution? Is the R word appropriate for what we're seeing here? And if not, why?

Mr. NIX. Well, that depends on how you define a revolution. Certainly it's been interesting that the Russian Government has not described these events as a colored revolution. But I think the Russians define that a different way than we do. This is certainly a people's mandate for change, a people's demand for change. And it's a great exercise in democratic and human rights for people to gather and to unite in a cause greater than themselves singularly. So whether or not we call it a revolution, whether we call it a color revolution, this is definitely an expression of freedom and free will and choice that I think is what a democracy is all about. So I'm encouraged, writ large. I'm extremely encouraged that so many youth are involved in this. And like Elen, I'm very positive about the outcome. There's a number of scenarios, as I outlined. But even in the minimalist scenario, you are going to see some change. And that's what people are advocating. So there will be change coming to Armenia. How much remains to be seen.

Ms. AGHEKYAN. I agree. I think I can't add anything more.

Mr. PRICE. I think that's a great note to end on.

Well, thank you both very, very much, again, on short turnaround to appear here and prepare remarks in such a fluid situation. I know it's challenging. But I'm grateful for both of you helping us understand these situations together.

Thank you.

Mr. NIX. Thank you, Everett.

Mr. PRICE. And thank you all for coming. [Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 5:03 p.m., the briefing ended.]

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