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Armenia's creeping revolution: between the #RejectSerzh movement and previous civic initiatives

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Armenia's *creeping revolution*: between the #RejectSerzh movement and previous civic initiatives

Abstract: Mass protests which erupted in Armenia in April 2018 were the biggest demonstrations in this country since the nineties of the XX century. With the dismissal of prime minister Serzh Sargsyan and appointment of the "temporary" government, the so called #RejectSerzh movement has been quickly proclaimed as another *velvet revolution*. The 2018 protests led to such an unexpected outcome because of the number of factors: their well-thought organization based on the civil disobedience methods, simultaneous decentralization of the protesters and clearly defined aim – ousting the incumbent prime minister embodying corrupted, oligarchic political system. At the same time it seems that the #RejectSerzh movement would not achieve such a success without the "legacy" of the civic, grassroots initiatives taking place in Armenia since 2008 and especially since 2013. All of these movements were highly interlinked and constituted continuous (however still incomplete) *creeping revolution* leading to the change of the oligarchic political system in Armenia.

Keywords: Armenia, colour revolution, protests, civil disobedience, *creeping revolution*

Introduction

Mass protests which broke out in 2018 in Armenia and led to election of the new prime minister in the person of Nikol Pashinyan were almost immediately dubbed by its organizers (and by many international news agencies) as a *velvet revolution*. The direct cause of the demonstrations was nomination and then election of the long-time Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan to the prime minister post what happened only after completing the constitutional reform switching the country's political system from semi-presidential into the parliamentary one. As a result, the amendments to the constitution have

been assessed by the majority of Armenians just as a political ploy of Sargsyan allowing him to stay in power despite exceeding two-term limit at the presidential post. Such perception eventually led to the outbreak of the civic protests in March-April 2018 and to the foundation of the *#RejectSerzh* movement.

At the same time it can be however argued, that the real beginning of such a “revolution” had taken place even earlier. At least since 2013 there could be observed a few of the grassroots movements which, because of their *civiness*, represented a qualitative change comparing to the previous opposition rallies organized by the parliamentary forces. Despite the fact that the protests during 2013-2018 period (including the *#RejectSerzh* movement) had different background in each case, in their very essence all of them were actually held against the Armenian oligarchic political system and bad economic situation in the country.

Therefore, the objective of the paper is to demonstrate that the 2018 Armenian protests were motivated not only by the resistance to Sargsyan’s desire to preserve the power but also by the same factors as in case of civic initiatives in the previous years. At the same time the author’s aim is to prove that all of the grassroots protest movements in Armenia in the last time were highly interlinked and in fact constituted one constant process of change in Armenia. To this end, in the paper there are discussed the main factors laying behind the series of the protests in the country as well as the case studies of several Armenian civic initiatives since 2013 and eventually the analysis of the *#RejectSerzh* movement itself.

Having in mind that in the most of definitions term *revolution* does imply the appearance of a sudden, radical change¹, in this specific case the author finds it appropriate to draw up another term underlining rather evolutionary and still incomplete character of the developments in Armenia. Therefore, it can be argued that the *#RejectSerzh* movement and its aftermath (Sargsyan’s resignation, formation of the new government in Armenia) should be perceived only as an another (even if the crucial one) phase of the Armenian *creeping revolution*.

1 J. Chodak, *Teorie rewolucji w naukach społecznych* [Theories of revolution in the social sciences], Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2012, p. 19.

The formal caesura for beginning of such a process may be marked by the year 2013 when the civic, grassroots initiatives in the country (in this case – *I am not paying 150 dram* movement) got massive and started to cover social and political issues. At the same time, from the author's point of view, the finalisation of the Armenian *creeping revolution* will be met only when the early elections will be held bringing the entirely new composition to the Armenian National Assembly².

1 Background to the revolution

It can be observed that the factors which lied at the root of the Armenian *creeping revolution* have had predominantly internal character and included: crystallization of the oligarchic politico-economic system, lack of perspectives for the improvement in the economic sphere and last but not least – constantly rising potential for civic disobedience outbreak. At the same time it can be argued that external factors (e.g. growing animosity towards Russian Federation) did play minor role in the process, resulting in the fact that 2018 protests agenda lacked slogans which would relate to the geopolitical orientation of the country.

1.1. Crystallization of an oligarchic system

Paradoxically, Armenian oligarchic politico-economic system which is commonly linked to the ruling since 1998 so-called Karabakh Clan has emerged earlier – i.e. during the rule of the first Armenian president after 1991, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. It could be developed due to the number of factors: catastrophic situation of the newly born country, necessity of transforming the national economy after the dissolution of the USSR and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict leading to economic blockade of Armenia by the Azerbaijan and Turkey. All of these circumstances has made the perfect ground for rise of a number of subsequent oligarchs who in the future would take control over Armenian economy and politics. These people quickly concentrated their influence over the power ministries, imports of the crucial goods (like oil

2 Currently (June 2018) Nikol Pashinyan's parliamentary faction Yelk has got only 9/105 seats in the National Assembly which makes it highly dependent on former elites votes in the parliament.

products) and voucher privatization³. Moreover, the rising oligarchs have obtained control not only over the most important ministries (the list of the oligarchs included for example the Minister of Defense or Minister of Interior) but also over the Armenian parliament (lobbyist groups controlled by the oligarchs reportedly constituted the majority of the National Assembly of that time)⁴.

Progressive oligarchization of political life in Armenia during the nineties was also accompanied by the growing disappointment with the state of the country's economy and Ter-Petrosyan's strategy of power consolidation (by many perceived rather as a turn into authoritarian practices)⁵. Controversial reforms which largely strengthened the position of the president (such system could be even named as a "super-presidential" or "feudal" one⁶) and the accusations of election frauds against Ter-Petrosyan resulted in alienation of the elites from the people and in the mass opposition rallies which only further deepened the rift between the establishment and the rest of Armenian society⁷. As a consequence, when one of the "ruling coteries" led by the Robert Kocharyan, Vazgen Sargsyan and Serzh Sargsyan (group later described as a so-called Karabakh Clan) has started a palace coup in the 1998 it was not met with any serious discontent of Armenian people.

The change of power did not result in transformation of the newly developed system but rather led to its further crystallization – regarding both the ruling class alienation from the society and the scale of oligarchization within the country. In fact the palace coup of 1998 has only started the process of "reshuffling" among the business and political elites of Armenia eventually bringing to power people close to new president Robert Kocharyan⁸. During the following years it merely led to further concentration of power around the Karabakh Clan what

3 See: D. Petrosyan, 'Oligarchy in Armenia', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 53-54, 2013, pp. 11-19.

4 See: S. H. Astourian, 'From Ter-Petrosian To Kocharian: Leadership Change In Armenia', *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*, Winter 2000-2001, pp. 16-17.

5 See: I. Ghaplanyan, *Post-Soviet Armenia: The New National Elite and the New National Narrative*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 44.

6 Loc. cit.

7 M. Zolyan, 'Armenia', in: D. Ó. Beacháin and A. Polese (eds), *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 89.

8 See: H. E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective (Problems of International Politics)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 356.

subsequently had its effect in restriction of civil liberties in Armenia⁹. The situation did not change in 2008 when the second (last possible) presidential term of Kocharyan has expired. The post of president, despite the brutally dispersed opposition protests resulting in several deaths, has been taken by Serzh Sargsyan – probably one of the closest people to Kocharyan and at the same time key person within Karabakh Clan and Republican Party of Armenia. Sargsyan's rule has only brought the conservation of above-described oligarchic system (including preserving not the best state of human rights¹⁰) until 2018.

1.2. State of national economy

The social and economic problems has been present in Armenia from the very first days of its existence after the USSR dissolution. At the beginning the most important factors in that sphere were: disastrous earthquake of 1988 and its consequences, collapse of the Soviet Union (including its social system) and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resulting in the economic blockade of the country but also in the inflow of around 300.000 of refugees fleeing from Azerbaijan to Armenia¹¹. Because of that factors, newly born Armenian state has found itself in deep crisis at the same time losing 61,2% of its GDP during 1991-1994 period¹² and around 500.000 of its people who decided to leave the country¹³.

Economic collapse of the country was finally stopped (at least regarding the macroeconomic indicators) in 1994-1995 when for the very first time since 1991 Armenia has managed to achieve a GDP growth. At the same time implementation of the market reforms (also with the help from international institutions which provided financial assistance to Armenia¹⁴) and “freezing” of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

9 Ibid., p. 355.

10 See for example Freedom House's annual reports on Armenia: Freedom House, 'Armenia', *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia> [2018-06-20].

11 P. B. Henze, 'The Transcaucasus in transition', *The RAND Publication Series*, 1991, p. 22.

12 About the economic development of Armenia in the nineties see: A. Sarian, 'Economic Challenges Faced by the New Armenian State', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, vol. 14, no. 2, March 2016, pp. 193-222.

13 Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, *The Demographic Handbook of Armenia*, Yerevan: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, 2017, p. 39.

14 S. Payaslian, *The History of Armenia: From the Origins to the Present*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 202.

made it possible to relatively stabilize country's economy for a more than a decade¹⁵. However, despite the positive macroeconomic results of the Armenian economy, a number of the problems remained unresolved: the Armenian black market reached the level of 40% of Armenian GDP, particular sectors of economy has been monopolized by the oligarchs or foreign companies and the levels of corruption and social stratification have grown¹⁶. Additionally, taking into account that at the same time the percentage of people living under poverty line oscillated around 40%¹⁷, it could not be surprising that the Armenians quite massively rushed to seasonal emigration from the country (especially to the Russian Federation, such process started to stop only after 2014 when the sharp Russian Ruble decline has been observed).

The problems of Armenian economy exposed themselves in 2008 when the global economic crisis hit the Armenia dependent on raw natural resources exports and remittances from abroad¹⁸. For the time being, Armenian GDP (in current USD) still did not recover to the pre-crisis level in 2008 and the most fundamental social issues like poverty stay unresolved. According to official data, regarding the last years the unemployment rate in Armenia oscillated around 15-20% and the percentage of people living under poverty line remains around 30-35%¹⁹.

1.3. Civil disobedience potential rise

It is often underlined that the protest rallies have become the permanent feature of the Armenian political landscape. Although that is true that such events repeat regularly in Armenia, it should also be noted that over the years their character has changed a lot too when the opposition-organized demonstrations has started to be replaced by the civic, grassroots movements. From the author's point of view

15 A. Nryan, 'Armenia: 20 years of integration into capitalism – consequences and challenges', in: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *South Caucasus: 20 Years of Independence*, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012, p. 202.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 203-210; Payaslian, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-219.

17 Payaslian, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

18 See: H. Khachatryan, 'Armenia: how a small country counters the Global crisis', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 18, 2010, pp. 2-4.

19 Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, 'PART 1 – ARMENIA: POVERTY PROFILE IN 2008-2016', *Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia*, www.armstat.am/file/article/pov-erty_2017_english_2.pdf [2018-06-21].

it can be therefore argued that such a process was also one of the factors leading to the outbreak of *creeping revolution*.

The starting point in that sphere is year 1988 and the beginning of so-called *Karabakh Movement* which in its essence was initiated to demand unification of Nagorno-Karabakh AO with Armenian SSR but at the same time largely contributed to Armenian pro-independence movement and until now serves as an important reference point for the people commenting another waves of the Armenian social protest over the decades²⁰. The revolution of 1988-1991 was indeed a great manifestation of Armenian civil activism potential, however Armenian anthropologist Levon Abrahamian would later argue that it led only to creation of *carnival civil society* and did not result in establishment of the *real civil society*²¹. In this context it has to be noted that although the mass protests took place in Armenia repeatedly over more than two decades (just to mention 1993-1996 period, 2003-2004, 2008 and 2013 cases), all of them were concentrated around the political opposition and not around the civic initiatives or third sector organizations. As a consequence, the diminishing level of public trust to the politicians over the time led to declining in the number of protesters as well (from more than 100.000 in the nineties to around 10.000-25.000 in 2004)²².

It seems that some precursor to the new phase in the history of Armenian protests was the suppression of the demonstrators during the protests of 2003-2004. According to the Armenian researchers, such disproportional usage of force by the authorities resulted in the appearance of "climate of fear" and encouraged the people to start their own grassroots initiatives which would be independent of the politicians²³. It can be additionally argued that another catalysts for

20 See for example: Zolyan, op. cit., p. 88; M. Zolyan, 'Is 2018 the New 1988? Some thoughts on the Karabakh Movement and the "Velvet Revolution"', *EVN Report*, 30 April 2018, <https://www.evn-report.com/politics/is-2018-the-new-1988> [2018-06-21].

21 L. Abrahamian, 'Civil Society Born in the Square: the Karabagh Movement in Perspective', in: L. Chorbajian (ed.), *The Making of Nagorno-Karabagh: From Secession to Republic*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 130.

22 See the estimations brought by Lucan Way: L. Way, 'State power and autocratic stability: Armenia and Georgia', in: A. E. Wooden and Ch. H. Stefes (eds), *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Enduring legacies and emerging challenges*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 112.

23 A. Ishkanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia*, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 50-53; Zolyan, op. cit., p. 95.

that process were: the 1st March 2008 deadly clashes during post-election protests and the growing up of the new generation (for example see student initiatives of 2008: Hima!, Hatuk Gund and others²⁴) “equipped” with a new communication tool which was the Internet. In this context that is not surprising that in various studies it is indicated that the period of 2008-2010 marked the beginning of the new phase of civic activity in Armenia (the period is sometimes even called as an “awakening” (arm. *artonk*))²⁵.

Since 2008 there was annually organized in Armenia a number of grassroots initiatives in very different, particular cases. In the first 5 years (until 2013) most of the actions were taken regarding ecological, urban planning or cultural heritage issues (including the Teghut Civic Initiative, Protect Trchkan Waterfall Movement or Mashtots Park Civic Initiative)²⁶. Many of them were at least partially successful what – among the others factors described before – only furthermore increased the readiness of the society to protest. Such tendency is at the same time mirrored by the results of the surveys conducted within *Caucasus Barometer* project: while in 2008 59% of respondent had been keen to participate in the protests and 35% had thought the opposite, then in 2013 these results were already 70% and 19% accordingly²⁷. As a consequence, since 2013 it can be observed that the civic initiatives in Armenia started to involve more and more people. At the same time also the agenda of the protests switched to rather social-economic and political issues.

3. I am not paying 150 dram movement (2013)

The first of such massively responded civic initiatives in Armenia was the protest action of July 2013 (few months after the unsuccessful, post-election opposition rallies) which was aimed at stopping

24 See: V. Jaloyan, 'New Political Subjects in Armenia and March 1 Events', *Red Thread*, www.red-thread.org/dosyalar/site_resim/dergi/pdf/4349778.pdf [2018-06-21].

25 See for example: A. Ishkanian and E. Gyulkhandanyan, S. Manusyan, A. Manusyan, *Civil Society, Development and Environmental Activism in Armenia*, Yerevan: City Print House, 2013, p. 23.

26 See the whole list of the initiatives of that period: *ibid.*, pp. 24-26.

27 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 'PROTEST: Should people participate in protest actions?', *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC)*, www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-am/PROTEST/ [2018-06-21].

the announced hike of public transport tariffs in Yerevan. Because of the fact that the change of ticket prices included 50% increase of bus fares from 100 AMD to 150 AMD the movement immediately started to be associated with one of the slogans: "I am not paying 150 dram" (arm. *chem vcharelu 150 dram*).

What made a significant difference in comparison to opposition-led demonstrations was the way the people did protest – the movement was not about the rallies (however these were also present on the small scale) but decentralized civil disobedience action in the form of not paying the extra 50 AMD for the bus ticket. Hundreds of activists (mostly young people – students, NGO representatives etc.) were providing information about the protest through the social media but also distributing leaflets and sticking the posters on the bus-stops, however the total number of participants of the movement was much bigger. According to the Freedom House, the number could oscillate around 7 thousand people²⁸ but taking into account the scale of the support for the initiative in the Internet it could be even 2 times bigger.

The whole movement was quickly met with the sympathy of Armenian society²⁹. The initiative was also publicly supported by the Armenian celebrities who made a special video clip backing the *I am not paying 150 dram* movement³⁰ and by some of the bus drivers who decided to charge the unchanged bus fare. Last but not least, it should also be noted that in parallel to the civic disobedience action there was functioning another initiative – *Free Car* – within which celebrities and ordinary citizens offered a free lift to the protesters waiting for their buses at the stops.

The hallmark of the movement was its civic, non-political and egalitarian character which is well illustrated by the fact that during eve-

28 Freedom House, 'Armenia', Nations in Transit 2014, *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2014/armenia> [2018-06-21].

29 S. Martirosyan, 'Yerevantsis Mobilize Against Price Hikes in Public Transport', *The Armenian Weekly*, 23 July 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/07/23/yerevantsis-mobilizes-against-price-hikes-in-public-transport/> [2018-06-21]; see also the exemplary, however very emotional, coverage from the one of the participants of the movement: T. Najarian, 'We refuse to pay 150 Dram for transport! And Other Protests', *Notes of a Spurkahye Finally Come Home Blog*, 23 July 2013, <https://tamarnajarian.wordpress.com/2013/07/23/we-refuse-to-pay-150-dram-for-transport-and-other-protests/> [2018-06-21].

30 Kargin TV, *Chem vcharelu 150 dram* [I am not paying 150 dram], *Youtube*, 24 July 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uk4_qzVK8-4 [2018-06-21].

ryday “evening discussions” which accompanied the protest everyone could enter the stage and share his opinions and thoughts³¹. At the same time the organizers of the *I am not paying 150 dram* movement were able to attract many people who until that time had not taken part in any civil disobedience initiatives (according to estimations of the one of the activists of that time, even 80% of the protest participants could be a “newcomers”³²). Because of the above-mentioned factors the movement had a great impact on the Armenian civil society – especially taking into account the fact that the movement turned out to be successful. After only a week of the protests Yerevan authorities decided to cancel the announced bus fare hike.

Although at the first glance *I am not paying 150 dram* initiative was only motivated by the social issues, in fact the movement was also addressing the way that the country is governed within the oligarchic political system. The important role in protest escalation process has been played by the independent watch-dog portal *Hetq* disclosing the fact that the owners of the bus companies in Yerevan were linked to the city’s authorities³³. Therefore the movement was not only about the rise of the ticket prices but also about the people who would benefit from it. In this context it is quite symbolic that the one of the main *Facebook* portal groups was named “We’ll not pay 150 dram because the prime minister needs a new Bentley”³⁴.

4. *Dem em* movement (2013-2014)

Another key Armenian civic initiative in the recent years was *Dem em* (eng. I am against) movement opposing entry into force of

31 See: A. Tadevosyan, ‘Challenges of Transition in Post-Soviet Armenia: Protest Movements, Power, and Society’, in: G. Novikova (ed.), *Regional Security Issues: 2015*, Yerevan: SPECTRUM Center for Strategic Analysis, 2016, pp. 110-111.

32 A. Martirosyan, *V Erevane v ramkah kampanii protiv udorozhaniya proezda proshel obuchajushhij kurs obshhenija aktivistov s policiej* [In Yerevan during the protest against publictransport tariffs hike was held a training course of communication with the police], *Kavkaz Uzel*, 25 July 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/227603/> [2018-06-22].

33 C. Garbis, ‘Yerevan’s Bus Fare Protests: A Timeline’, *The Armenian Weekly*, 29 July 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/07/29/yerevans-bus-fare-protests-a-timeline/> [2018-06-22].

34 Varvachapet, *Menq Chenq Vtwarelow 150 dram, incha t’e varchapety’ nor Bent’li a owzowm* [We’ll not pay 150 dram because the prime minister needs new Bentley], *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/vatvachapet/> [2018-06-22].

the pension reform including additional, obligatory input to pension fund (5% or 10% of the salary depending on the earnings for the people born after 1973) which was planned for January 2014. The movement was founded in the fall of 2013 and was (in contrast to *I am not paying 150 dram*) highly coordinated by the group of 25-30 people³⁵. Finally, it was also at least partially successful – it delayed the entry into force of the already mentioned obligatory input to the pension fund.

The main tactics of the *Dem em* activists were mass demonstrations what was fully intentionally decided by the “steering committee” of the movement³⁶. The first rallies held in December 2013 brought only around 1,5 thousand people, however the further demonstrations during the first half of 2014 were much bigger and at its high point could gather even ten times more participants³⁷ (and at the same time tens of thousands of supporters in the Internet). Except the rallies, within the *Dem em* movement there were also organized a few strikes in Yerevan and plenty of flesh mobs. It should ultimately be noted that the protest actions took place not only in the capital but also in another Armenian cities. At the same time the participants of the initiative themselves represented various age groups, however their core was eventually constituted by the young people (the same like during *I am not paying 150 dram* movement) – in this case those born after 1973 what made them directly afflicted by the pension reform³⁸.

Dem em initiative was supported by the opposition politicians who tried to stop the reform in the parliament and in the courts, however it did not change a fact that the movement remained as a solely civic and grassroots. In this context it has to be underlined that *Dem em* activists were not learning from the politicians experience but from the organizers of the previous civic protests. Arman Avetisyan, person from the core of the movement, indicates that the actions held

35 Y. J. Paturyan and V. Gevorgyan, *Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society*, Yerevan: Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis, 2016, p. 44.

36 Author's own interview with one of the organizers within *Dem Em* movement Arman Avetisyan, June 2018.

37 Interview with Arman Avetisyan, June 2018; A. Martirosyan, 'Protest against pension reforms in Yerevan was about 15,000 strong', *Kavkaz Uzel*, 22 March 2014, www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/27628/ [2018-06-22].

38 See: G. Sargsyan, *Democracy and Development in the Making: Civic Participation in Armenia; Challenges, Opportunities* (Doctoral Thesis), Trento: University of Trento, 2016, p. 160.

by the *I am not paying 150 dram* organizers were precisely analyzed by *Dem em* (also during the meetings between the activists) and led to particular conclusions on the way the protests should be held³⁹.

At the same time it can be argued that, just like in 2013, *Dem em* movement's agenda was not only concentrated around very specific issue (i.e. pension reform) but reflected much more universal problems within the Armenian sociopolitical system. Already quoted Arman Avetisyan underlines the fact that for the majority of *Dem em* activists the protest was not about maintaining the previous salary but rather about showing their own objection to the way the government is ruling the country and undertaking the crucial decisions⁴⁰.

5. *Electric Yerevan protests (2015)*

Unlike the civic initiatives of 2013 and 2014, mass protests in June 2015 held against the hike of electricity tariffs (therefore known mostly as *Electric Yerevan*) had much more violent course including clashes with the police⁴¹ and the occupation of one of the avenues in the Yerevan. However at the high point of the protests there was actually no single coordinating group, it has to be noted that the whole movement (including the very first demonstrations) was started by the civic initiative *No to plunder* (arm. *Och talanin*) founded back in the fall of 2014 when one of the tariffs hikes (prior to the one that led into mass demonstrations in June 2015) was announced. What is important, *No to plunder* was the initiative of the people who previously had actively participated in 2013-2014 protests⁴² – therefore it should be argued that *Electric Yerevan* since its beginning was naturally interlinked with the *I am not paying 150 dram* or *Dem em* movements.

39 Interview with Arman Avetisyan, June 2018.

40 Ibid.

41 On the clashes and usage of the force by the police during the protests see for example: PJC PublicJournalismClub, '#electricyerevan. A Day of Violated Rights', *Youtube*, 12 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuNOl4z2Xxs> [2018-06-22]; International Partnership for Human Rights, 'BEATEN, BURNT AND BETRAYED: Armenians awaiting accountability for police violence', *International Partnership for Human Rights*, 2016, iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Beaten-Burned-and-Betrayed-Armenia-report-Sept-2016.pdf [2018-06-22].

42 Author's own interview with one of the co-founders of the *No to plunder* initiative Suren Eyranyan, June 2018.

Electric Yerevan is mostly known for the already mentioned permanent, two-week long occupation of the Baghramyan Avenue in the center of Yerevan, however simultaneously similar demonstrations were also held in a number of Armenian cities (possibly even in the 20 cities)⁴³. At the same time the whole movement has grown much bigger than any of the civic initiatives held in the previous years and many of the observers would even argue that it was the biggest Armenian social struggle since the *Karabakh Movement* in the 1988-1991⁴⁴. Just in the Yerevan the number of protesters at its high point could exceed 20 thousands⁴⁵ while, according to available opinion polls, the protest was at the same time also approved by the overwhelming (95%) majority of society⁴⁶. Similarly to the previous initiatives, the core of the protesters group constituted young people – in that case both the participants of 2013-2014 movements and the “newcomers”⁴⁷.

Electric Yerevan can be therefore perceived as a highly linked to the previous initiatives because of the profile of people involved – both the participants and the organizers themselves. Moreover, all of these movements were interconnected because of the fact that 2015 protests had also their anti-systemic character. Just as it was in 2013 or 2014 it can be argued that once again demonstrations in Armenia addressed not only the very specific issue (in that case electricity tariff hike) but also the problem of non-involvement of the people in the decision-making process within the country and alienation of Armenian authorities from the society⁴⁸.

The *Electric Yerevan* protests were to a lesser extent organized and were rather characterized by the spontaneity and “loose, horizontal

43 G. Mirzoyan, 'LOVE and PROTEST', *Chai Khana*, 14 October 2016, <https://chai-khana.org/en/love-and-protest-1> [2018-06-22].

44 Paturyan and Gevorgyan, op. cit., p. 53.

45 K. Avedissian, 'The power of Electric Yerevan', *openDemocracy*, 6 July 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/karena-avedissian/electrified-yerevan> [2018-06-22].

46 Armenian News-NEWS.am, 'Gallup: 95% of Armenia respondents approve Electric Yerevan demonstrations', *Armenian News-NEWS.am*, 21 August 2015, <https://news.am/eng/news/282499.html> [2018-06-22].

47 Interview with Suren Eyranyan, June 2018.

48 See for example the assessment of that phenomenon by Babken DerGrigorian quoted in: J. Goyette, 'The youth protests that have shaken Armenia were years in the making', *PRI Public Radio International*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-06-25/youth-protests-have-shaken-armenia-were-years-making> [2018-06-22].

structure” as Karen Avedissian has described it⁴⁹. In this context it seems crucial that 2015 protests included the unprecedented level of usage of the social media and Internet (even taking into account that these tools were also widely used in 2013 and 2014) to cover and coordinate the course of events⁵⁰. At the same time it also helped a lot to make the protest visible internationally and attract the interest of the biggest news agencies which quickly started to draw parallels between the *Electric Yerevan* and Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity one year earlier.

What is important is also the fact that ultimately the protests were successful and led to suspension of the electricity tariff hike. It can be argued that such a final result of the movement (in combination with the scale of participation and support for it) has turned the *Electric Yerevan* into some kind of point of reference for the Armenians and at the same time brought significant impact on further development of the civil society within the country. One of the co-founders of *No to plunder* initiative, Suren Eyrarmjyan, is strongly convinced that the 2015 protests “played a huge role in society’s civil consciousness and helped people understand that there is a way to impact the government’s decisions”⁵¹. Moreover, it is also visible that the examples of such *Electric Yerevan*’s legacy could be well observed in the references made to the 2015 protests during another events in the following years (especially during the Erebuni hostage crisis in 2016) and in another initiatives brought by the activists of *Electric Yerevan* (e.g. charity crowdfunding initiatives).

6. #RejectSerzh movement (2018) During the following years after the *Electric Yerevan* movement another civic initiatives took place (e.g. demonstrations during Erebuni hostage crisis, 2017 student protests against military service requirements) however their scale was much more limited. As a result, the next such important civic protest after 2015 has been only

49 Avedissian, ‘The power of ...’, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/karena-avedissian/electrified-yerevan> [2018-06-22].

50 Sargsyan, op. cit., p. 166.

51 Interview with Suren Eyrarmjyan, June 2018.

the #RejectSerzh movement. The protests have started in Armenia in March 2018 due to the rumors about possible Serzh Sargsyan's candidacy to the prime minister post and gained their momentum in April when the nomination and election of Sargsyan indeed became a reality.

#RejectSerzh movement was formed by the unification of the several separate initiatives: *My step* (arm. *Im qayly*, "march of resistance" across the Armenia modelled on the Mahatma Gandhi's *Salt March*) organized by the opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan (leader of the Civic Contract parliamentary party, former journalist and a person from outside of the oligarchic establishment) and a few purely civic, grassroots initiatives including the biggest of them *Reject Serzh* (arm. *Merjir Serzhin*). Until that time the process of Pashinyan's gradual move into the position of protests leader could be observed, which however did not negatively affect the newly unified movement's consistency.

The group of #RejectSerzh movement's organizers has included wide range of people including Pashinyan's associates but also the civic activists – both the new ones and the people who organized the protests movements in the previous years⁵². As a result, they managed to gather unprecedented since the nineties number of participants which at its high point could even oscillate around 150,000-200,000 of people⁵³. While the protesters have represented very different social groups, it could be observed that once more the majority of them was constituted by the young people (including many of the participants of the previous movements too).

Analyzing the course of events in April-May 2018 and basing on the available interview with Armen Grigoryan (one of the protest

52 See the interview with one of the leaders of #RejectSerzh movement, Armen Grigoryan: K. Avedissian, 'A real revolution? Protest leader Armen Grigoryan on what's happening in Armenia', *OpenDemocracy*, 30 April 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/karena-avedissian/real-revolution-protest-leader-armen-grigoryan-on-what-s-happening-in-ar> [2018-06-24].

53 The number of the participants is impossible to be accurate estimated due to the decentralised nature of the movement and the fact that the protest actions were held in the whole country. The number of 200.000 people is for example brought by the Armenian scholar and currently Minister of Culture in Pashinyan's government Lilit Makunts. See: L. Makunts, 'After Armenia's Velvet Revolution, New Colors and Vibes in Country's Politics and Society', *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*, 10 May 2018, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/armenias-velvet-revolution-new-colors-vibes-country-politics-society/ [2018-06-24].

leaders)⁵⁴ it may be argued that the strategy brought up by the organizers has been worked out taking advantage of the experience of the previous movements. *#RejectSerzh* movement was based on the idea of decentralization: the participants were instructed only in general manner what to do and finally they had to self-organize themselves to fulfill the “tasks” posed by the leaders of the protest (e.g. blockade of the city center, boycott of the supermarkets belonging to the one of the oligarchs, withdrawal of the all available money from ATMs etc.). As a result, the typical course of the events during the protest included the morning rally, decentralized civil disobedience actions during the day (strikes, blockades etc.) and finally the mass gathering at the evening (the organizers urged the people not to stay overnight to avoid the provocations and possible clashes with the police).

It may be argued that the results of the movement – i.e. Sargsyan’s resignation and election of Nikol Pashinyan as a new prime minister – could be achieved due to the number of factors. First of all, the *#RejectSerzh* protest was started in a well-developed civil society which already has been experienced in the participation in the civil disobedience actions. Moreover, it seems that the key to the success of the movement was also a combination of its *civicness* (like during the previous initiatives) with a presence of a real, charismatic leader (additionally referencing in its image to Karabakh war veteran Monte Melkonian⁵⁵) who was not afraid to present further demands after meeting the initial ones by the authorities (i.e. requesting the formation of the government completely independent of Republican Party after the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan himself). Last but not least, it seems that the result of the movement could be achieved also due to the “legacy” of the previous movements – the people already had an experience of protest participation and already knew that such an action can force the authorities to make particular concessions⁵⁶.

54 See the interview with Grigoryan: Avedissian, ‘A real revolution?..’, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/karena-avedissian/real-revolution-protest-leader-armen-grigoryan-on-what-s-happening-in-ar> [2018-06-24].

55 W. Górecki, ‘The success of the revolution in Armenia. Pashinyan elected prime minister’, *The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) Analyses*, 9 May 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-05-09/success-revolution-armenia-pashinyan-elected-prime-minister> [2018-06-25].

56 Similiar view was formulated by the Suren Eyranyan during the author’s interview (June 2018) but also by the Armenian activists/scholars Olya Azatyan and Babken DerGrigorian. See: S. Schiffers,

Nevertheless at the same time it has to be noted that the successes of the April protests still do not allow to say that the process of change in Armenia has been brought to an end because of the fact that until now (August 2018) that is still not certain that current National Assembly composition will allow the new government to organize early elections and thus conclude the revolution.

7 Conclusions

● Provided analysis of the last years protests in Armenia proves that the process of change in Armenia – dubbed by the author as a *creeping revolution* – has started earlier than in 2018 and included not only the #RejectSerzh movement but also many previous civic initiatives (especially since 2013 when they started to gain momentum and cover social and political issues). Last decade in Armenia was the time of constant growth of the people's readiness to attend the protest actions and such a tendency was also reflected by the rising number of the participants during the protest movements over that period (which gained the sympathy of the majority of the society as well). At the same time those grassroots initiatives were in many cases at least partially successful forcing the authorities to make particular concessions. As a result, above-mentioned factors allow to argue that the civic protests taking place in Armenia since 2013 constituted the qualitative change comparing to previous opposition protest rallies until that time.

Assuming the distinctive character of the *creeping revolution* in Armenia, at the same time it has to be noted that all of the major Armenian civic initiatives since 2013 (*I am not paying 150 dram*, *Dem em*, *Electric Yerevan*, #RejectSerzh) were also highly interlinked and in their very essence they covered the same issue which was the way the country was governed by the ruling class. Moreover, the particular movements were organized basing on the experience from the previous ones or were even founded partially by the very same people.

'Why Armenians Call for a Velvet Revolution', *Polis Blog*, 20 April 2018, <https://polis180.org/polisblog/2018/04/20/10482/> [2018-06-26]; M. Ellena, 'The Armenian Velvet Revolution is over: Pashinian voted in as prime minister', *bne IntelliNews*, 8 May 2018, www.intellinews.com/the-armenian-velvet-revolution-is-over-pashinian-voted-in-as-prime-minister-141261/ [2018-06-26].

Last but not least, the protest initiatives in the last five years “shared” not only the same organizers but the significant number of “ordinary participants” too. Therefore, in the author’s belief it should be concluded that the success of *#RejectSerzh* movement (however still impartial due to the National Assembly composition) would not be able to be achieved without the prior grassroots protests in Armenia since 2013 or even 2008. In this context it seems thus that the Armenian revolution has rather evolutionary character and should not be limited to the few months of the 2018. It has started years before the *#RejectSerzh* movement and is still incomplete what allows to perceive it as a *creeping* one.

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