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Balancing Between Russia and the West: The Hard Security Choice of Armenia

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Abstract

Armenia's official foreign policy of complementarism aims to sustain national security and development by balancing strategic and friendly relations with Russia, while also engaging in multilevel political, economic, and cultural interactions with the EU and the USA. However, after the 2020 Karabakh War and amidst the increasing confrontation between the West and Russia, complementarism faced unprecedented challenges. To investigate whether Armenian elites still adhere to the line of complementarism and to determine whether they reflect or contradict public perceptions of foreign policy, we gathered novel sociological data on foreign policy preferences in Armenian society through a nationwide survey, outlining changes and continuities in their perceptions over the past ten years. Our study reveals that Armenian elites have started to modify complementarism as they began to doubt Russia's role in Armenian foreign policy, particularly in the context of the European neighborhood. Armenian society's trust in Russia has consistently declined, despite Moscow still being ranked as the main strategic ally in public perceptions. The misbalancing of complementarism by Armenian elites not only challenges Russia's role in Armenian security and public opinion but also offers no viable alternative for the security of Armenia and the Armenian population in Karabakh.

Keywords: Armenian society, Russia, the West, complementarism, Karabakh War, security priorities.

Introduction

In 2013, Armenia and Ukraine were faced with similar opportunities to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Both countries eventually declined due to competing and non-compatible Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) offers preferred by Moscow. Domestic reactions

differed starkly (Caiser 2022). Some scholars have seen this as an identity question of Ukraine and Armenia choosing between a potential Russian 'we' and a European 'we' (Vieira 2020). Armenian society's reaction to the 2013 reorientation from an Association Agreement to deepening integration with the EAEU was not as immediate as Ukrainian society's, as seen for example through the Maidan protests. However, from looking at sociological survey data from the past decade, it is apparent that public perceptions of Armenia's preferred geopolitical orientation began to shift around the same time.

The Armenian foreign political model of balancing between the East and the West, and in some cases bridging the interests of Russia, the EU, and the USA in the region, is referred to as complementarism[1] (Palonkorpi and Iskandaryan 2013; Minasyan 2012). Complementarism, a tenant of Armenian foreign policy since 1991, is defined as a priority of allied relations with the Russian Federation and parallel multifaceted (mainly non-military) interaction with Western countries. This is a policy where Armenia follows a pro-Russian strategic course, simultaneously developing a unique partnership model with the West, including the EU (having particularly friendly relations with certain European states, including France) and the United States (Kostanyan and Giragosian 2017, Mirzoyan 2010). This foreign policy approach steams from a specific geographical and civilizational position of Armenia at the crossroad of the West and the East, as well as Yerevan's ability to rely on its diverse diaspora to lobby its national interests abroad (Manukyan 2021, Aleksanyan *et al.* 2019).

Complementarism is considered unique to Armenia. While it shares many characteristics of the 'multi-vector' foreign policies pursued by other post-Soviet states, according to Sergey Minasyan, complementarianism differs in that the Armenian diaspora plays a critical role "as an advocacy resource and a source of political and economic aid to Armenia." The ability of Armenia to sustain its domestic political plurality is also a key proclaimed difference between complementarism and some of the more authoritarian governments that pursue multi-vector foreign policy (Minasyan 2012,

[1] This foreign policy is also referred to as a "*Complementarian*" foreign policy or simply *Complementarity*, but in this article, we prefer the common term 'Complementarism' as is common in the academic literature on the topic.

p. 272-273). Some commentators even compared Armenian complementarism to the success of Finnish foreign policy during the Cold War, navigating successfully between the two Cold War blocks and maximizing sovereignty (Minasyan 2013). Complementarism was seen as a successful foreign policy for Yerevan during the 2008 Georgia War. Good relations were maintained with both sides and Yerevan successfully refused to acknowledge the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Public opinion surveys demonstrate that since 2013, Armenian society's trust in Russia has slowly declined, with trust for European countries such as France substantially rising. Despite this shift, Moscow is still seen by the public as Armenia's primary strategic partner. In this paper, we discuss reasons for this. We then delve deeper into the issue of how Armenian society's trust in Russia has consistently declined, despite Moscow still being ranked as the main strategic ally in public perception surveys. This conundrum has been previously termed "a security trap" by Laure Delcour (2014). We examine how Armenian elites have managed to maintain the traditional model of complementarism, albeit with some variations. We argue that critique by the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and other revolutionary leaders of Russia's role as the main security pole in Armenian foreign policy partially reflected changing public opinion dynamics in Armenia prior to the Velvet Revolution - that being a growing anti-Russian segment in Armenian society. As a result, the official rhetoric of the revolutionary elites became popular and served as an additional resource for further foreign policy decision-making.

The impact public opinion has on foreign policy has been a developing field for analysts of international affairs attempting to connect the domestic and international policymaking levels. Two traditional camps can be roughly outlined as those who argue voters focus largely on domestic issues and foreign/security policy as a domain of elite decision-making, and a second where public opinion, and hence voter preferences, shape who gets elected and subsequent elected officials' policy mandates (see Tomz *et. al.* 2020, p. 119-121 for an overview of existing debate). There are then sub-arguments on smaller variables within these debates, including but not limited to: if and how leaders

internalize public opinion in decision-making (Foyle 1997), how public opinion is manipulated by decision makers so that it coincides with preferred policy outcomes (Manza *et. al.* 2002), what role media plays in shaping a public's outlook on foreign policy issues (Soroka 2003), and how public opinion may impact security policy and decisions to go to war (Arian *et. al* 1988; Tomz *et. al.* 2020). An overarching summation from these debates in the IR community coincides with the larger debate on if and how domestic issues influence foreign policymaking. The level of influence of public opinion on foreign policymaking and the causal mechanisms of how public opinion exerts influence are ongoing debates (Efimova and Strebkov 2020, p. 94-95). However, recent research on the topic concludes that public perception data offers fruitful insight for the study of foreign policymaking as well as preference formation at the state level (Tomz *et. al.* 2020, p. 138-140).

Most significant for this paper, some authors have conceptualized the public-official relationship in terms of imaginaries - popular geopolitical imaginations, or how the public comes to conceptualize its geopolitical preferences, in comparison to elite geopolitical imaginations, or the official strategy and reasoning that lies behind every day foreign policy (O'Loughlin *et. al.* 2006). From a constructivist and critical geopolitics perspective, there is argumentation that "geopolitical views are socially constructed and subject to interpretation within the geopolitical culture" of a state or region (Efimova and Strebkov 2020, p. 95-96). This offers a useful middle ground in the debate of public opinion's impact on decision-making because it builds on schools of thought arguing that the environment in which perceptions are formed influences decision-making (Jervis 1976).

In line with a constructivist school of thought in International Relations, sociological analysis of public geopolitical perceptions in Armenia helps shed light on the context in which Armenian foreign policy has sustained, been shaped, and amended over the past 10 years. Critical geopolitics allows researchers to problematize existing preconceptions of space and people. This frame is ideal for considering how Armenian society's trust in Russia may have changed, but faith in Russia as the primary security provider still sustained up until recently, which was also paralleled by official foreign policy decisions. Thus, a critical geopolitical framework and emphasis on geopolitical

imaginaries lets us explore a contextual piece of the puzzle of "how and with what consequences geographical space was actively imagined and reproduced by intellectuals of statecraft acting on behalf of states, institutions and publics" (Dodds 2013, p. 15). This problematizes Armenia's official foreign policy line – Complementarism – as a predominant framework for Armenian perceptions of its own place and preferences in the world. As John Agnew (2013, p. 20) argues, "these assumptions and schemas are seen as socially constructed by particular people in different historical–geographical circumstances and as thereby providing the basis for geopolitical rationales to social and political purposes that are anything but simple reflections of a natural geopolitical order." Within this frame, public geopolitical imaginaries are an integral piece in understanding the context in which official foreign policy is made, giving additional credence to IR arguments assessing the value of public perception data in foreign policy making. Armenia offers an interesting case among post-Soviet countries for investigating popular and official perceptions of geopolitics and foreign policy. Armenia is considered an anomality within the Eurasian Economic Union (Roberts and Moshes 2015, p. 14). It is one of the few post-Soviet states with a high level of freedom when considering the numerous countries in the region that are increasingly turning to 'post-liberal' forms of governance (Lottholz 2022). It is also a country where direct democratic participation and public protests recently changed the ruling elites, as seen in the 2018 Velvet Revolution (Atanesyan 2018).

Regime type is considered another important factor when studying the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy (Efimova and Strebkov 2020, p. 96). Previous studies on Armenian public opinion argue that Armenia "is still a country in transition and public opinion lacks the power to have any real influence on foreign policy making" (Galstyan 2016, p. 234). Galstyan's study is significant for collecting preliminary data on the Armenian public's foreign policy preferences, however, he proceeds from the premise of traditional geopolitics, possibly deemphasizing any conditional influence changes in political culture may have on policy. It is important to note that geopolitical perceptions are not stagnant and tend to shift gradually over time (Kolossov 2003). This is particularly apparent as the information gap in foreign policy making narrows, allowing the public

to become more aware of the impact elite foreign policy decisions actually have (Baum and Potter 2008). In this regard, public perception surveys from Armenia offer a nuanced account of how the public reacted to significant decisions in Armenian foreign policy over the past decade.

The remainder of this article proceeds as such. First, we provide a brief historical context of Armenia's post-Soviet development, with a focus on its relations with Russia and the country's official foreign policy of complementarism. We start from the early years of independence in the 1990s and extend the analysis to the current developments. Next, we offer an overview of the sociological data collected as the core of this research. Nationwide public perception surveys were used for data collection in July-October 2021 across Armenia resulting in 1,530 responses (for more details see the research methodology section). Comparing this data with previous sociological studies on public perceptions conducted in 2011-2019 (CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017, 2020), a clear shift in Armenian public attitudes can be observed. We then conclude with a discussion of our data and the implications of our findings.

The study on public perceptions and attitudes in Armenia regarding foreign policy and the neighborhood offers perspective insights into strategic matters in and around Europe. By examining public perceptions and attitudes from a sociological perspective and combining them with official foreign policy transformations in the context of regional security dynamics, this research sheds light on the complexities and dynamics of foreign policy decision-making, providing a deeper understanding of the region's imagined geopolitical landscape. The study's outcomes can help better understand security dynamics in the European and Russian neighborhood, as well as direct future research in exploring similar patterns and trends in other regional countries, enhancing a broader understanding of the EU's Eastern neighborhood.

Historical context

The Armenian-Russian strategic relationship, inherited by Russian and Armenian societies from the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras, was sustained after the collapse of the Soviet Union by many agreements

and implemented through close cooperation in the political, economic, and military-technical spheres. At the same time, the 1990s also represented an unprecedented inflow of new political and economic actors into the region.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent financial hardships, the European Union (EU) stepped in with technical, financial, and normative-ideological support to sustain and transform numerous state apparatuses and societies in the Newly Independent States. For the South Caucasus republics, the EU Commission proclaimed it was solely responsible for "feeding, heating + helping move all three [republics]" (European Commission 1995). These early economic lifelines developed into political leverage over time, with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine all eventually joining the EU Eastern Partnership programme (EU Neighbours, https://euneighbourseast.eu/policy/). This was a critical period for establishing EU cooperation as a potential geopolitical imaginary in post-Soviet societies. From a security perspective, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also opened the Partnership for Peace programme in the 1990s to offer new forms of cooperation with the Newly Independent States (NATO Partners, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/51288.htm). In establishing these new institutional relationships, Newly Independent States had increased opportunities and leverage in negotiating complex relationships with a new Russian Federation.

In the 1990s, creation of the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) was seen as Moscow's pet project to manage the difficulties of the Soviet collapse: at best reintegrate the post-Soviet security space and at least retain some order in the Soviet military structure, which found itself sprawled across various new state territories follow the Soviet collapse (Kramer 2008). A prime example of this struggle was Moscow's intention in the 1990s to force Newly Independent States such as Azerbaijan into the CIS and common border management agreements Moscow wanted to implement (Sakwa and Webber 1999, p. 404). The traces of these elite networks from the Soviet period highlight the pressure old integration schemes and thus geopolitical imaginaries continued to exert at different decision making levels in parallel to new opportunities offered by the EU and other institutions.

‘Color revolutions’ in the early 2000s were initially hailed as victories for developing middle classes over what some still considered authoritarian regimes. However, over time these revolutions were followed by backsliding to illiberal and corrupt regimes (Sahakyan and Atanesyan 2006), which led to further protests and political upheaval (Fisun 2012, Mitchell 2022). ‘Europe’ remained an aspirational hope for many. That being said, increased interactions with global actors did offer new perspectives. Georgia outwardly chose a greater pro-American course following the Rose Revolution of 2003 and Ukraine began openly reconstructing its national identity in opposition to Russia following the Orange Revolution in 2004. The leaders of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia, who initially focused primarily on domestic reforms, criticized former Armenian elites and questioned the efficiency (but not the role) of Russia, particularly the Russia-based CSTO, in Armenian affairs (Atanesyan, Chelpanova 2021). While emphasizing the continuing crucial role of Russia in Armenian security, the revolutionary elites criticized Moscow’s effectiveness and sought alternative approaches involving the EU and the United States to handle Armenia’s foreign policy matters. This included Armenia’s position in the Karabakh conflict and the pressing issue of recognizing the Armenian Genocide, with the possibility of exerting pressure on Turkey. However, subsequent events demonstrated that neither the EU nor the US were effective balances, leaving Armenia to deal with Russia’s involvement in the Karabakh settlement, which ultimately resulted in Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war.

While Armenia may not be far behind the democratic standards of countries that have recently been awarded EU candidate status, Armenia’s dependence on Russia remains a large inhibitor to further integration (Martirosyan 2022). 2013/14 can be considered a point when public geopolitical imaginaries that coincided with the official line of complementarism began to be reflected on more critically. Despite the visibly balanced foreign policy of Armenia from roughly 1991 to 2018, essential factors emerged beginning in 2013 that disrupted the equilibrium between the pro-Western and pro-Russian orientations of Armenia.

In particular, the process of preparing for an Association Agreement with the European Union at the end of 2013 raised serious questions for the first time about the level of trust Armenians had in the Russian Federation as an ally. Just before the EU Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius (November 2013), Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan was suddenly invited to Moscow, and on September 3, 2013, after negotiations with President Putin, he announced the readiness of Armenia to join the Customs Union and the Unified Economic Space (the future EAEU). This unexpected turn of Armenia from the EU to Russia was perceived as Russia's intervention in Armenia's affairs (Shanyavsky 2016). As a result, both Armenian and Russian leaders lost face in the eyes of the Armenian public.

On an elite level, managing the problem of this choice in frames of the complementarism agenda was thought to turn Armenia into a unique platform for strategic dialogue between the West and Russia (Second Strategic Political Forum 2013). On a societal level, this 2014 decision can be considered an influential event in the decline of Armenian society's trust in Russia, as the implications of this foreign policy decision became more apparent over time.

After the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, political analysis surmised that complementarism may continue to have value as political rhetoric but would become increasingly difficult as a practical policy prescription (Delcour 2014). Some even hypothesized the emergence of a new 'neo-complementarism' as the European security environment shifted post-Crimea (Abrahamyan 2018). Delcour (2014) argues that although Armenia has tried to diversify its relationship with Russia since the early 2000s, Yerevan's dependence on Moscow for security and support in the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has led to a security trap where Armenia is fully dependent on Russia. While Armenian public perceptions and trust in Russia received a plausible reason to decline already in 2013, Russia remained a primary 'friend' in numerous public perception indexes (Galstyan 2016, p. 255). Armenia increasingly faced the strategic difficulty of complementarism as an effective policy in the 2010s with the deterioration of a post-Cold War European security order.

Despite the participation of Armenia in various NATO programmes, the military-strategic partnership with Russia continues to be considered a strategic priority. Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, membership in the CSTO has no conceptual background and thus, is less a community of values than a loose grouping of states. Therefore, membership in the CSTO may be in Moscow's interest, but it does not seem to translate to favourable influence on societal geopolitical imaginaries in the long term.

In parallel, democratic reforms and developments offer a context for shifting popular geopolitical imaginaries. Projects in fields such as education, human rights and rule of law reforms, media, and communication, while to an extent balanced with EAEU integration, have been guided by the West and orient Armenian decision makers as well as Armenian society towards closer cooperation with the EU and the United States. Some authors argue that this cooperation with the West, for example in education, has been a critical factor in building a more Europe-oriented outlook for younger generations (Keshishian and Hartutyunyan 2013, p. 389). Although democratization and modernization in Armenia have been West-oriented on the surface, Armenia's specific cultural background common to various post-soviet societies (including Russia) has led to a *simulating* rather than *stimulating* of genuine democratic reforms (Sahakyan and Atanesyan 2006).

With the fluctuating plurality of regional actors in the South Caucasus over the past three decades, Russia remains a primary influence in Armenia. Structural factors, legacy, and Moscow as a foil to Western-led globalization continue to influence post-Soviet transitions in general (Krickovic 2014, p. 523-524). Armenia remains one of these countries that officially continues a balancing act between major players in the region, but not committing fully to any. After the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia and especially the 2020 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, questions again arose in Armenian society about official foreign policy priorities, including the relations with the Russian Federation and the West. Despite aspirational claims and hopes on the level of popular geopolitical imaginaries for changes in foreign orientation, there seemed to be greater continuity than change in Armenian official foreign policy. In effect, elite geopolitical imaginaries can be said to

have remained the same as the new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continued Armenia's long-held policy of complementarism, or what some have termed a 'Russia first' foreign policy (Terzyan 2019, p. 38).

The signing of a tripartite statement on the complete ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh on the night of November 9 to 10, 2020 (Statement 2020), ensured the deployment of about 2000 Russian peacekeepers in the Armenian enclave (unrecognized Republic of Artsakh), which remained from the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic after the defeat of Armenia. Russian peacekeepers became responsible for the protection of about 120,000 Armenian civilians in Karabakh.

With the 2022 Russian War in Ukraine, what Russian authorities call a special military operation (Osborn and Nikolskaya 2022), and some term a proxy war between the West and Russia (Gawrich 2022, p. 31), the previous model of complementarism became extremely complicated. The escalating crisis around Ukraine made it necessary to conceptually review existing policies based on the changing structure of regional powers, either supporting one of the sides or at least not becoming a casualty of the larger geopolitical conflict.

This struggle to maintain complementarism can be seen in UN votes. Armenia voted against a UN resolution on the de-occupation of Crimea in December 2018 (Terzyan 2022), but then abstained, rather than vote against, the UN General Assembly's condemnation of Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Asbarez 2022) as well as suspending Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council (Azatutyun 2022). These voting patterns underline the increasing difficulty of maintaining complementarism in a changing regional and global environment.

The visit of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) director Sergei Naryshkin to Armenia on July 18, 2022, immediately after U.S. CIA Director William Burns visited Yerevan to meet Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Armenia's National Security Chief Armen Grigoryan on July 15 (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator 2022), is another example of the sharpening struggle between the West and Russia over what Russia considers its strategic neighborhood.

The visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Armenia on September 17-19, 2022, immediately after her highly publicized visit to Taiwan and in parallel with the attacks of Azerbaijani armed forces on the Armenian border, was primarily intended as a symbolic demonstration of support for Armenia (Gall 2022, Gavin 2022). However, as further developments showed, it remained only symbolic in nature. Concurrently, the visit aimed to symbolize that Moscow is not the sole guarantor of security for Armenia.

In this regard, revealing Armenian public perceptions after the Karabakh War of 2020 is an important component of strategic planning in the context of current security issues, risks, and uncertainty in and around the European neighbourhood.

Research methodology

We conducted a large-scale sociological study in July-October 2021 (after the Karabakh War in 2020 and immediately after the parliamentary elections in Armenia in June 2021) to identify the foreign policy priorities and preferences of Armenian society in the new conditions. This period was of crucial significance for Armenian society, marking its internal polarization around domestic and foreign policy considerations. Between the Karabakh War in 2020 and the parliamentary elections in 2021, Armenia experienced significant political upheaval and a period of transition. The war had a profound impact on the country, leading to widespread discontent and calls for change within Armenian society. Following the war, which resulted in significant territorial losses for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, there was a wave of protests and demonstrations demanding the resignation of then-Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In response to the public pressure, Prime Minister Pashinyan announced his intention to step down in early 2021. Eventually, an agreement was reached and snap parliamentary elections were held on June 20, 2021. Despite the opposition's strong performance, Pashinyan's Civil Contract party managed to retain power, albeit with a reduced

mandate compared to previous elections. The outcome reflected a divided electorate and showcased the ongoing political polarization within Armenian society.

We carried out standardized questionnaire interviews in an offline format, with a nationwide sampling representative for the Armenian population, including 1,530 respondents throughout Armenia. The sampling error is 3%. The socio-demographic structure of the sampling: 37% of respondents are from Yerevan, 63% are residents of ten other regions of Armenia; 48% are men, 52% are women; 26% are aged 18-30 years old, 46% 31-55 years old, and 28% 56 years old or older; 64% are people with incomplete secondary, secondary, and secondary specialized education, 36% hold university diplomas, including 1% with a Ph.D. degree. The survey questionnaire consisted of 52 questions (including socio-demographic and main thematic questions).

The main objective of the study is to reveal the perceptions and priorities of Armenian society in the context of the foreign policy dilemma "Russia - West". We measure the features of the pro-Russian and pro-Western positions in Armenian society through the preference for institutional interaction within the regional military-political and economic unions (CSTO, NATO, EU, EAEU), as well as through the microclimate in Armenian society, including the desire/unwillingness to have a business, friendship, family relations with representatives of Russian and Western societies. We correlate the results and conclusions by groups of respondents (by age, gender, place of residence, and level of education) due to the possible specificity of their perceptions.

Results and discussion

First, we conducted the study after the two most recent systemic crises in Armenia, including the Velvet Revolution of 2018, accompanying socio-political transformations, and the defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, which was followed by protracted internal political conflict. The findings demonstrate that after these critical events that directly affected the national security of the country, Armenian society continued to consider relations with Russia a priority (Fig. 1). At the same

time, the level of trust in Russia in Armenian society has gradually fallen over the past decade (indicators for 2011-2019 are based on [CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017, 2020]), (Fig. 2).

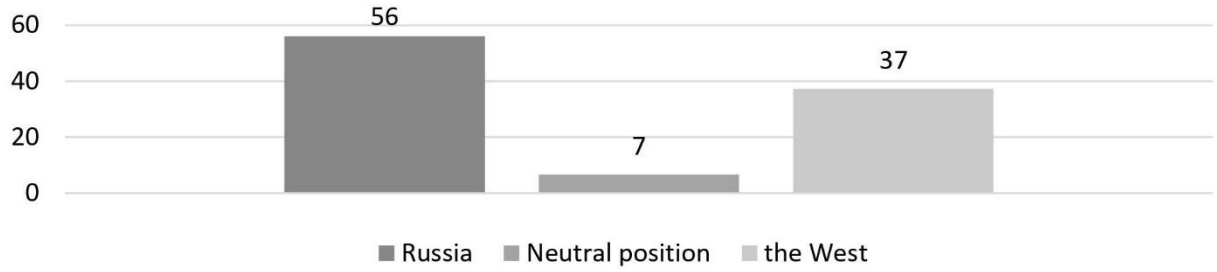

Figure 1: Preferred foreign policy orientation of Armenian society after the 2020 Karabakh War, %

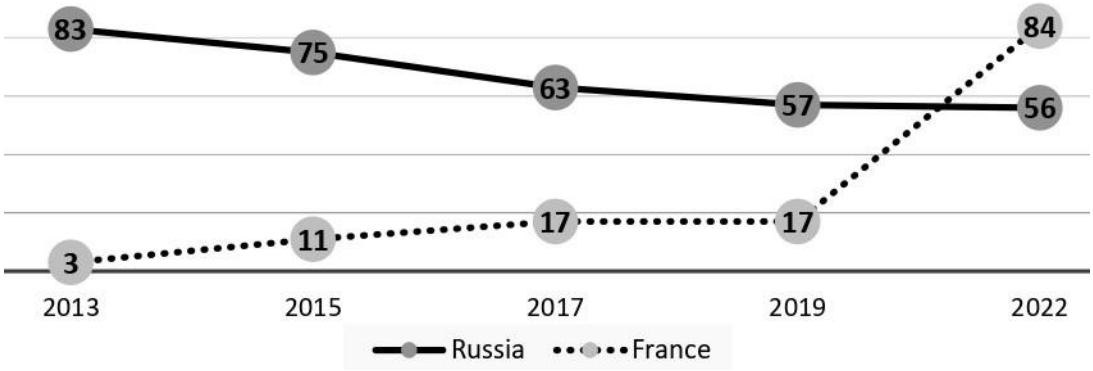

Figure 2. The level of trust in Russia in Armenian society before and after the "Velvet Revolution" and the Karabakh War, % For comparison, we also show the data on the trust in France as the friendliest state from the point of view of Armenian citizens for the same years, %

The data shows that trust in Russia as an ally has been falling during the last decade; this trend has complex and lasting determinants and is not purely a consequence of recent processes. As we have already mentioned in the historical overview, the first serious challenge to Armenian complementarism was posed by the EU's proposition to Armenia to sign an Association Agreement at the end of 2013. This elicited an immediate reaction from Russia, urging Armenia to join the Customs Union and the future EAEU. Armenia announced its readiness to join the Russia-based EAEU and sign an Association Agreement with the EU. However, EU officials declined this option

to demonstrate that Armenia had to choose between pro-Western or pro-Russian orientation and could not equally pursue both options.

Critical attitudes in Armenian society toward Russia as an ally increased over the past decade due to constantly deepening Russian-Turkish and Russian-Azerbaijani economic, political, and military-technical relations (Shiriyev 2019; Mikhelidze 2010). The creation of the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Russia triangle left no place for Armenia, while Azerbaijan gained the most favourable position, purchasing offensive weapons from Russia and Turkey and continuing its armenophobic rhetoric, also threatening the resumption of the Karabakh War. After the war in Karabakh in 2020, this triangle, which excluded Armenia but dealt with Armenian affairs, received a new format. In negotiations on the post-war reconciliation, Armenia is mainly a recipient of the decisions agreed between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

After the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, the level of trust in Russia as an ally remained the same, so the possible disappointment of Armenians with the role and degree of Russia's involvement in the recent war in Karabakh cannot be determined as the primary variable in the decline of public trust toward Russia as an ally. On the other hand, we registered a significant increase of confidence in France as the friendliest Western state (Fig. 2), especially after the war in Karabakh of 2020. Friendly Armenian-French relations have a historical and cultural tradition. The role of France was also unique among other EU countries during the recent Karabakh War and significantly different from the position of the United States, which was busy with presidential elections at the time. In particular, the President of France Emmanuel Macron was the first and the only European leader who openly accused Turkey of providing Azerbaijan with jihadists and terrorists to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh against Armenia (France24 2020), while other European leaders and structures made rather indifferent statements calling on 'all conflicting parties to return to negotiations' (Wesel 2020). The expectations of Armenians regarding France's involvement were lower than those regarding Russia's to begin with. Even though Paris may have done less than Moscow in response to the 2020 war, France gained more appreciation after the war in Karabakh. This is a substantial shift in comparison

to the previous decade. Thus, a shift in public geopolitical imaginaries with regard to friendly countries can be seen as a product of both Russian decisions, as well as offers of support from specific EU countries.

Speaking about the West as an alternative to Russia in the perceptions of Armenian society, one should take into account that the image of the West is stereotypical and internally disproportionate. The ratings of France and the United States as 'friends' in the perceptions of Armenian society after the war in Karabakh were 84% and 38%, respectively. We proposed our respondents answer the question: How much would you like Armenia to be close to either Western countries or to Russia (where 1 means very close to the West, and 10 - to Russia)? The following graphs highlight preferred foreign policy poles by age, level of education, and place of residence (urban and rural) of respondents (Fig. 3, 4). Therefore, we placed reactions to "Russia" as the left-most poll and "The West" as the right-most poll to visually emphasize these two options in our graphs.

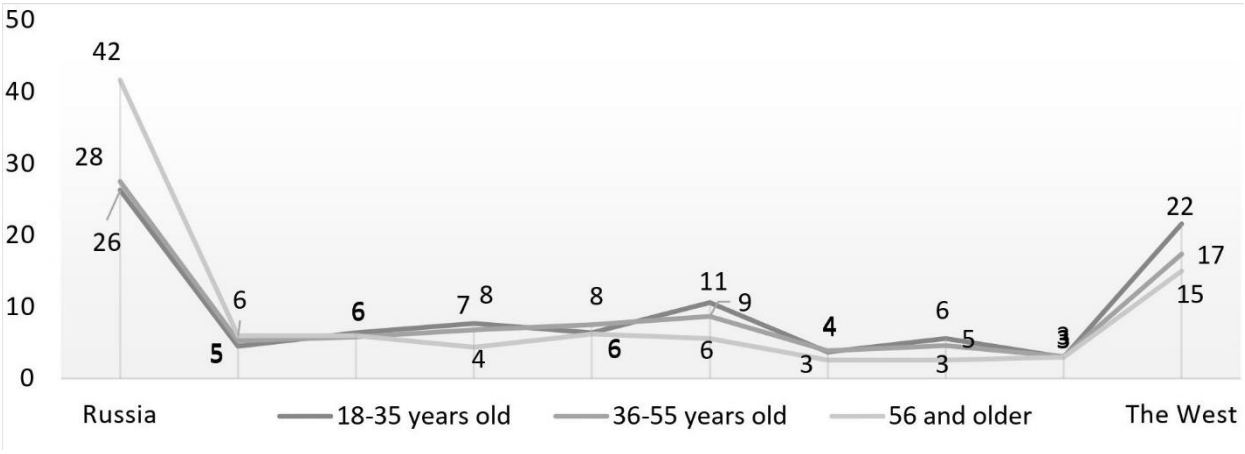

Figure 3. Research results by age groups of respondents, %

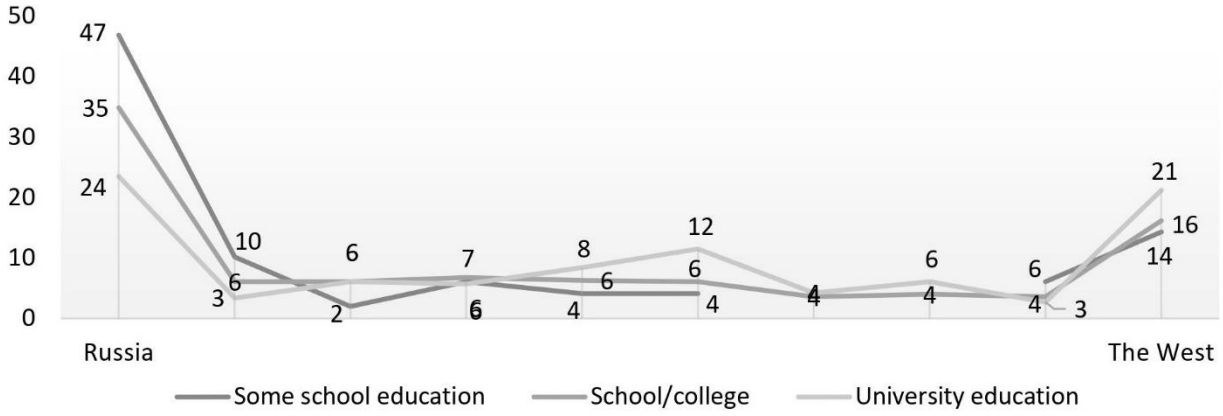

Figure 4. Research results by education level of respondents, %

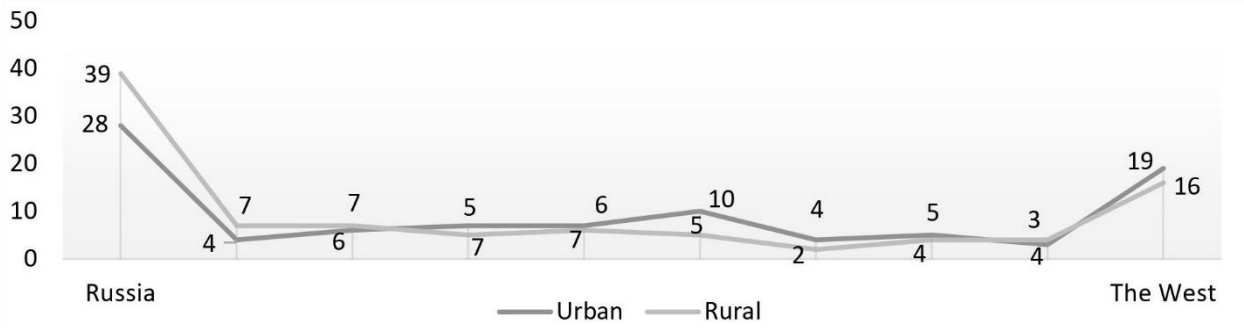

Figure 5. Research results by urban and rural population, %

The study shows that elderly representatives of Armenian society (56 years and older), people with incomplete and completed secondary education, and rural residents are the most pro-Russian. We explain the inclination of these categories of citizens toward Russia and their pro-Russian foreign policy orientation by the nostalgic perceptions of the older generation towards Russia associated with the Soviet Union. Similar conclusions have been presented in previous interview studies (Keshishian and Harutyunyan 2013). Armenians without higher education and rural residents are most actively involved in labour (seasonal) migration, especially in Russia. Being economically dependent on Russia makes this demographic consider Russia a major source of well-being for themselves and their families.

The younger the respondents representing Armenian society, the more they gravitate toward the West. Despite a higher rate of pro-Russian sentiments among Armenian urban citizens, this demographic, overall, is more oriented toward the West than the rural population. Finally, the cross-section of Armenian society with a pro-Western orientation has a higher overall level of education. This also means that a pro-Western orientation is popular among the middle class, intellectuals, and the bureaucracy. Attraction to the West might be a result of the institutional connections that are offered by higher education, white-collar jobs, etc. (Olson 2002). We explain the pro-Western orientation of youth and well-educated segments of the Armenian population with the long-term influence of Western soft power through educational programmes, research, and travel grants, as well

as with tourism in the EU and the USA. The mentioned segment compares their more or less stereotypical understanding of the West with Russia in terms of economic, social, legal, and other indicators that are more favourable to a Western image. This is further impacted by Western cultural influence in Armenian society. Post-Soviet reforms in Armenia associated with the integration and development of universal norms and values, such as rule of law, have also been labelled 'Western' (Ohanian 2007). The prevalence of pro-Western attitudes among Armenian youth and the population with higher education also indicates the impact of Western soft power and thus, can be considered to influence geopolitical imaginaries.

We also tried to assess public perceptions toward Russia and the West through connection with pro-governmental and oppositional political attitudes in Armenian society. This correlation makes it possible to examine the relationship between public support for the post-Velvet Revolution political elites in Armenia and foreign political orientation between Russia and the West. In particular, according to an assumption widely disseminated in the media, citizens who support the Armenian government of Pashinyan have a rather pro-Western than pro-Russian political orientation, resulting in Pashinyan's pro-Western activity. Figure 6 demonstrates this correlation.

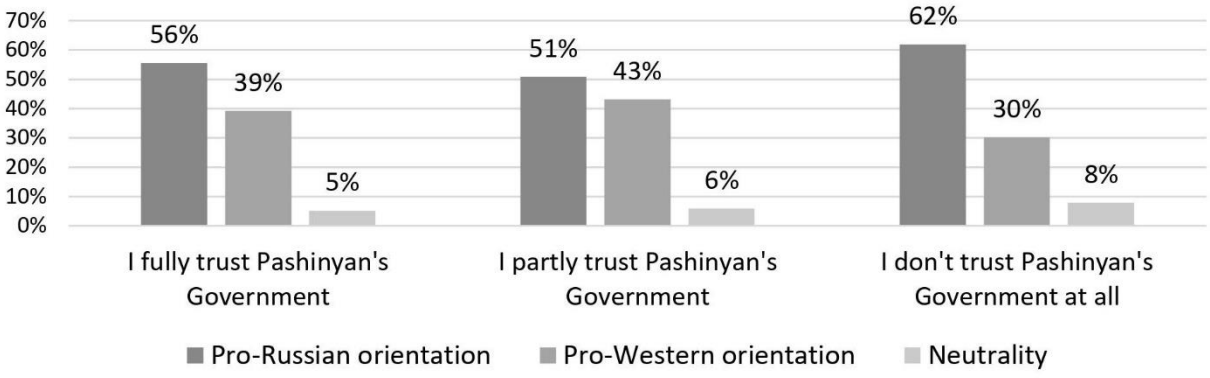

Figure 6. Foreign policy orientations of Armenia citizens according to their domestic political attitudes, %

Despite the stereotype that those citizens supporting the post-revolutionary Armenian government must be more oriented toward the West, the actual situation is different. Those who unambiguously support the post-revolutionary Armenian leadership mostly gravitate toward Russia,

and even more than people with a certain share of critics about the government's domestic policy. At the same time, Armenian citizens with oppositional attitudes are mostly pro-Russian in Armenia.

We measured the foreign policy preferences of Armenian society through their attitudes toward perspectives of Armenia's participation in the pro-Western and pro-Russian regional military-political and economic organizations, including the CSTO, NATO, EU, and the EAEU (Fig. 7).

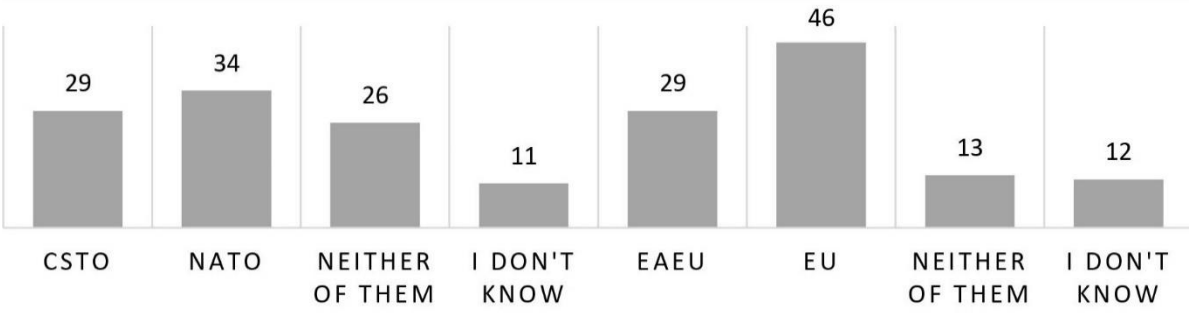

Figure 7. The attitudes of Armenian society to perspectives of interaction with pro-Russian and pro-Western regional organizations, %

While the pro-Russian direction of Armenian foreign policy is still preferable to the pro-Western one for the majority of respondents, it does not seem to be popular on the institutional level of regional cooperation. The majority of respondents in Armenia consider pro-Western regional organizations more effective than pro-Russian ones. This is a marked shift from public perceptions in 2015 when Armenians proclaimed a preference for cooperation with the CIS (60% of respondents) more so than with the EU (25% of respondents) (Galstyan 2016, p. 251).

Despite no announced plans to further deepen the interaction of Armenia with NATO, and no perspectives to join NATO, Armenian society still considers relations with NATO more promising than membership in the CSTO. Most likely, such a low rating of the CSTO is a result of disappointment in Armenian society regarding recent inaction of the CSTO during critical moments in and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Two official appeals of Armenia in the CSTO, including one in Autumn 2020 during the war in Karabakh, and one in September 2022, when Azerbaijan attacked the Armenian territory, received a rather indifferent reaction. One should expect such a passive reaction; different interests and foreign political priorities of CSTO member states and

Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian conflict/war disallowed certain collective steps in favour of Armenia.

Using our survey findings to read developments since 2021, it is plausible to forecast a further decline in Armenian society's trust in the CSTO. On the level of Armenian elites, the refusal to host drills of CSTO peacekeepers in Armenia in 2023, announced by Prime Minister Pashinyan (Ghazanchyan 2023), serves as an illustration of the deepening anti-Russian trend that is now appearing in both official and public perceptions.

The study demonstrates that Armenians prefer a direct alliance with Russia much more than the format of regional organizations with a Russian presence (in particular, the CSTO). At the same time, every third Armenian resident still considers the country's membership in the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) promising.

Despite the predominantly pro-Russian attitudes in Armenian society, the European Union is perceived as the most promising regional structure for further cooperation compared to the Russia-led EAEU. It is notable that Armenian citizens possess a more positive image of the EU (46%) than the image of the West in general (37%, Fig. 1). Perhaps the level of trust in the West (as a separate entity from only Europe) decreases with the presence of the United States, which may be seen as more reputable in neighbouring societies such as Georgia.

Societal perceptions of individuals, or perceptions of micro-level interactions, also offered interesting nuance to our data analysis. In the study, we also tried to measure the tendency of pro-Russian and pro-Western orientation in post-war Armenian society on the microlevel, revealing the preference of Armenians for business, friendship, and marriage (partner relationship) with Russians and representatives of Western societies. For comparison, the research data also includes some other neighbouring nations (Fig. 8).

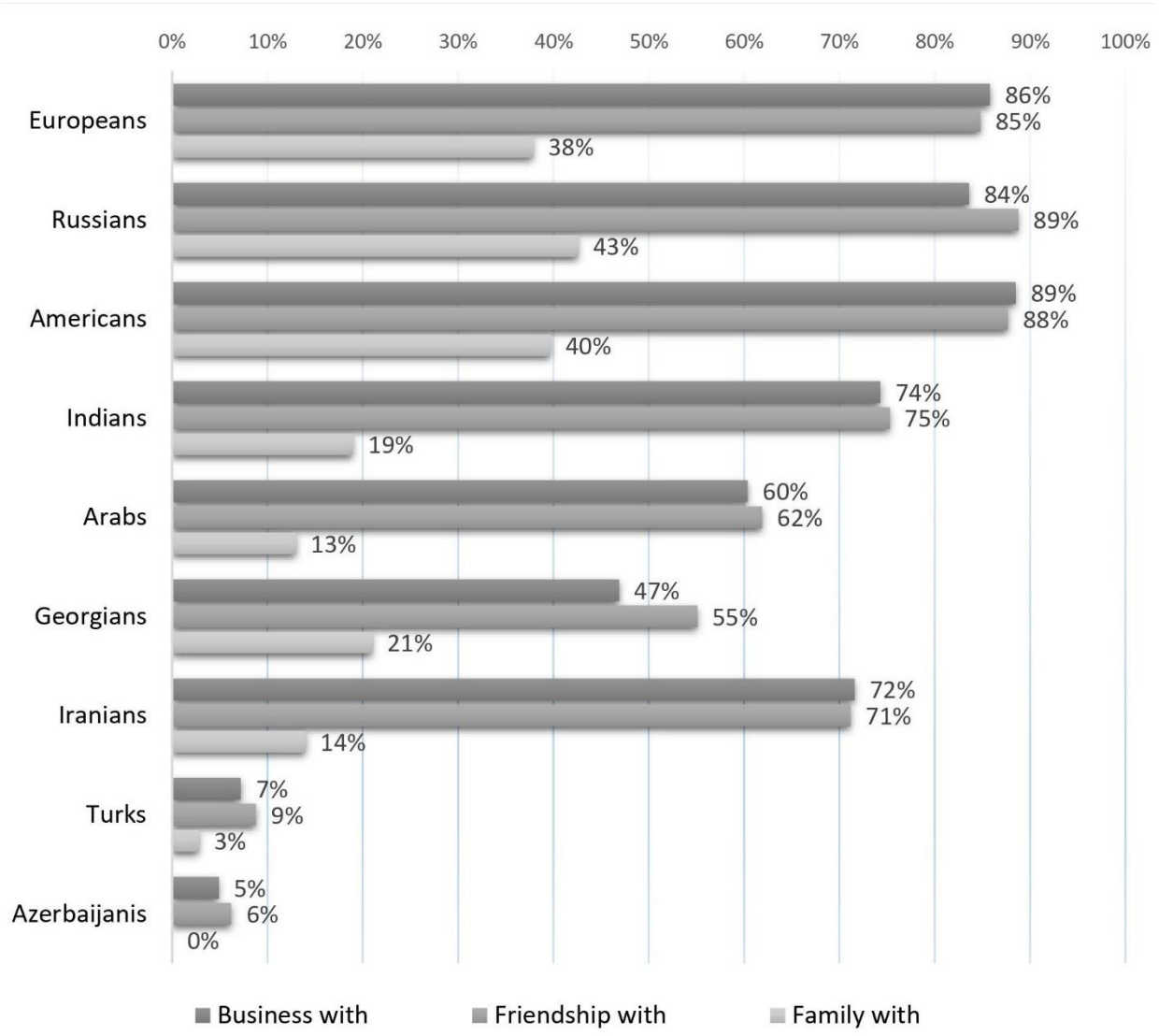

Figure 8. Preference for business, friendly, and family relations with representatives of the listed nations, %

The study results demonstrate that doing business and being friends is almost equally preferable, which means that culturally, friendship implies the possibility of business relations and trust while doing business leads to friendship and is built on informal relationships for Armenians. This also highlights the interpersonal aspects of geopolitical imaginaries and nuancing interpretations of Armenians' preferred geopolitical reference group as a stark, either-or decision with regards to the West or Russia.

Armenians are interested in doing business and having friendships with many nations, first of all, and almost equally with Europeans, Russians, and Americans. Representatives of India, Iran, Arab

countries, and Georgia are considered reliable partners and good friends too; in the case of Russia and even more so Georgia, friendship is preferred over conducting business together.

As we can see from the study, marriage, and family are more conservative topics in Armenian society than friendship and business. Russians, more so than Americans and Europeans, are the most preferred partners for marriage and family for Armenians, while most Armenians do not consider doing business, making friends with, and marrying Turks and Azerbaijanis an option. These results demonstrate that any official political project aimed at reconciliation with Azerbaijan and Turkey, under the current conditions, will be at odds with the opposing public opinion, and thus, popular geopolitical imaginaries or us and them.

Events that occurred after the study confirm the conclusions made about the complex foreign policy choice of Armenia, which will continue to become more complicated. After Azerbaijan violated the mentioned tripartite agreement of November 9-10, 2020, and blockaded the Lachin corridor (starting from December 12, 2022), which is the only root connecting the Armenian enclave of Karabakh (Artsakh) with Armenia, Armenian criticism of Russian peacekeepers in ensuring the security of Armenian civilians in Karabakh became even tougher. As a consequence of the blockade, about 120 thousand Armenians of Karabakh, including children, remained without warmth, food, and medical service (Attarian and Bordoni 2023).

Due to the blockade of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and despite requests of Azerbaijan from Russia, the EU, and the United States to unlock the corridor (Oundjian 2023), Prime Minister Pashinyan voiced disappointment in the role of Russia as a whole. He pronounced that “Russia’s military presence in Armenia not only does not guarantee Armenia’s security but, on the contrary, creates threats to Armenia’s security” (Avedian 2023).

In September 2022, Azerbaijan initiated violent clashes again with an incursion into Armenian territory. Busy with war in Ukraine, Russia could do nothing more for Armenia, while the European Union took the initiative and deployed a new civilian mission (EUMA Armenia) in February 2023 (Krikorian, 2023). While France immediately and wholeheartedly supported the mission, Russia

opposed it. As the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated, “the deployment of a new mission ‘could only be counterproductive’ in building trust since it would not have the approval of the Azerbaijani side” (Tatikyan 2023). Surprisingly, in this case, Russia is not acting as an ally of Armenia, but rather of Azerbaijan, which will likely foster negative attitudes toward Russia within Armenian society, as has previously been the case, and reaffirm the role of France as a friend.

In April 2023, Azerbaijan formally established a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, which had effectively been blockade by Azerbaijan since December 2022. This exerted additional pressure on Yerevan and Stepanakert to accept a peace deal on Baku’s terms. Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders’ meetings were held in the US in early May, in Brussels on May 14, and in Moldova, in June 2023. Additionally, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Moscow. During the Brussels meeting, they discussed several key topics, including border issues, connectivity, humanitarian concerns, and the rights and security of Armenians residing in Karabakh (EEAS Press Team, 2023).

On May 14, 2023, under the guise of EU mediation and complemented by talks with the United States, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed on a longer-term negotiation plan for a comprehensive peace agreement. Since then, the leaders publicly reaffirmed their commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration and the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29,800 km2) and Azerbaijan (86,600 km2) (Gevorgyan, 2023). This indicates that the Armenian government, led by Prime Minister Pashinyan and the majority in the parliament represented by his Civil Contract party, officially recognized the territory of Armenia without Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), and the territory of Azerbaijan with the inclusion of Nagorno-Karabakh.

By affirming Armenia’s territorial boundaries while excluding Karabakh and acknowledging Azerbaijan's borders with the inclusion of Karabakh, both sides are conforming to the post-war situation. This action, however, overlooks the historical fact that the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's self-determination, established through a referendum on December 10, 1991, had been declared well before the signing of the Alma-Ata Declaration, in accordance with Article 72 of the Soviet Constitution and democratic processes (Kotanjian, Atanesyan, 2022). Prime Minister Pashinyan's

statements regarding Karabakh's affiliation with Azerbaijan are seen as a betrayal not only in Karabakh, but also within Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora (Commonspace.eu, 2023).

In this very realistic context, any statement on the need to protect the rights and dignity of Karabakh Armenians after it becomes a part of Azerbaijan, sounds senseless. As the US Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien announced on Public Television of Armenia on July 3, 2023, repeating similar official statements from Washington and Brussels, that *"*people in Nagorno-Karabakh should be able to feel safe in their own homes, in their environment, and be able to lead a peaceful family life and be engaged in their communities, and therefore the US firmly believes that these principles must be ensured in the ongoing discussions towards a solution" (News.am, 2023a).

Addressing the statement, David Babayan, adviser to the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) President, expressed the opinion which demonstrates disagreement with the format of direct negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia without representation of Karabakh Armenians, and guarantees of any protection for them. "I want to ask the American ambassador when she announces the possibility of security guarantees for the 'Armenians of Karabakh' in Azerbaijan: And can't Taiwan be a part of China? And can't Kosovo be a part of Serbia? Maybe you can help with that mechanism, create an Azerbaijani-American fund for the development of the reservation of Artsakh Armenians" (News.am, 2023b). In effect, Babayan is highlighting that while the US has rhetorically supported the security and rights of Karabakh Armenians and Armenia more generally, there have not been parallel actions to ensure this protection.

Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the transformation of Armenian foreign policy, which was originally framed as complementarism with the goal of balancing relations with Russia, the EU, and the USA to ensure Yerevan's own security and development. We demonstrate how the post-revolutionary Armenian elites, who came to power in 2018, have shifted from a pro-Russian alliance to a pro-

Western orientation, albeit without significant progress in the latter aspect. Concurrently, we analyzed the dynamics of public opinion in Armenia over the past ten years, seeking to comprehend whether the official foreign policies of Armenia, both before and after the 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018, and subsequently, following the Second Karabakh War with Azerbaijan in 2020, align with the shifting public sentiments from a pro-Russian stance to a more anti-Russia trajectory.

On the macro level of public opinion, the dominant narrative in Armenian society is to consider Russia as the main ally and strategic partner. This is consistent with public survey research from the last decade or so. Despite the certain disappointment of Armenians with the role Russia played in the Karabakh War of 2020, as well as the critical public discourse on the topic reflected in mass media, the Armenian public's expressed need to rely on Russia has remained relatively consistent. In this regard, popular and elite geopolitical imaginaries remain close, but shifting at different rates. Delcour's argument that complementarism sustains a security trap seems to hold true. Yerevan retains a consistent necessity for Russian protection despite a proclaimed ability to balance great powers in the region. Moscow's contradictory actions highlight that Armenia cannot always obtain the security guarantees they expect from Russia. Societal trust in Russia has been declining over the past decade due to complex factors and is only indirectly associated with the Karabakh War of 2020. The findings of the study also show that most Armenians trust Russians as business partners and friends (the microlevel) more than they want to deal with Russia as an ally; Russians as people and a society have a better image in Armenia than that of Russia as a country.

At the same time, trust in France, perceived as the friendliest and most trustworthy European country has significantly risen in Armenian society. This offers hints at a shifting popular geopolitical imaginary. This is sometimes associated with a larger abstract image of the West, mainly with the European Union, perceived more positively in Armenia than the United States. France's rating sharply increased after the war in Karabakh in the fall of 2020 due to lower expectations in Armenian public opinion for France to offer significant support compared to Russia. This can also be accounted for by the pro-Armenian position of France compared to rather indifferent positions toward Armenia

taken by other EU countries and the USA during the Karabakh War. After the Karabakh War of 2020, the rating of trust in France in Armenian public opinion surpassed that of trust in Russia for the first time in post-Soviet history and is much higher than the rating of the EU, and the United States.

On the institutional level of regional cooperation, Armenian society considers Russia-led regional organizations with Armenian membership (CSTO, EAEU) less functional than pro-Western political-military and economic unions (EU, NATO). These hesitations toward pro-Russian unions qualify Armenian society's level of trust in Russia; Armenians would prefer a direct alliance with Russia to that of institutional cooperation in the frames of Russia-led regional organizations (especially CSTO).

Our results highlight that while complementarism has been a consistent foreign policy in Armenia since the early 1990s, including the period following the Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenian elites and society is now facing unprecedented difficulties with maintaining this model due to ongoing conflict between Russia and the West.

Peace negotiations around the Karabakh conflict as of summer 2023 again demonstrate the increasing severity of the hard security dilemma Armenia is currently faced with. Russia proposed postponing any agreement on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) until both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, as well as Russian mediators, are completely satisfied (Tass, 2022). Through mediation efforts and peacekeepers in Karabakh, Russia claims to protect Karabakh Armenians' security, which can also be seen as an attempt by Moscow to sustain its dissipating influence in the region.

The framework of negotiations built by the EU and backed by the USA encourages both sides to negotiate directly, and on every issue which might challenge the future coexistence of Armenia and Azerbaijan in their close neighbourhood. Any peace agreement directly negotiated between Armenia and Azerbaijan, if enforced by the EU and the USA, may further minimize Russian leverage in the region, strengthening Armenia's perceived dependence on (not partnership with) the West as a new security guarantor. This will also guarantee the full incorporation of Karabakh into Azerbaijan,

which includes the still unprotected Armenian population living in the region. The format of direct negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia (as the respective winner and looser of the 2020 Karabakh War and subsequent post-war incidents), represents an additional loss for Armenia because Yerevan barely has sufficient resources to maintain Armenian security, much less that of Armenians currently living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Armenian society, little by little, is realizing that Moscow cannot offer the full and multilevel security that Armenians expect, with Armenians living in Karabakh only being able to rely on themselves and partially on Russia. This dichotomy is highlighted by post-Karabakh War developments and negotiations on the Karabakh issue. New gaps have appeared between perceptions of Armenian elites and the society, and between Armenian elites, their supporters in the society, and the Armenian population of Karabakh, who are consistently faced with their fragile future.

In this regard, the actual and essential difference between the West and Russia is that while the United States and the EU actively communicate with Armenia on security issues, Russia still remains the only actor willing to physically maintain Armenian security, albeit largely when it is advantageous to Moscow. This, however, has not and does not exclude Moscow from supporting Azerbaijan and Turkey, which often comes at the expense of Armenia. As argued in this article, the Karabakh War of 2020 was not a defining incident in shifting geopolitical imaginaries. It did, however, accelerate larger societal contemplation of the inability of complementarism to achieve Armenian security and prosperity, forcing Armenian elites and citizens to consider if the trade-off of Russia as a security provider, but also a supporter of Armenia's opponents, was a worthwhile strategy. It is unclear if the EU, France, or the US will offer more active support, but the current situation has pushed Armenians to consider acting on new geopolitical imaginaries as the only way out of their untenable security trap.

In the post-2020 environment, this led to substantially new strategies for survival. Most notably Prime Minister Pashinyan relinquished Armenian claims to Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia. By choosing the format of direct negotiations with Azerbaijan within the framework of EU and US

mediation platforms, positioning themselves as the losers of the 2020 Karabakh War, the current Armenian elites are disrupting traditional Armenian complementarism towards the West and downplaying the role of Russia.

The parallel negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the EU platform indicate the willingness of both elites to discuss and resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue without taking into account Russia's interests. This could potentially compel Russia to offer these countries an option that aligns closely with the EU format, albeit with more caution. Accelerating the reconciliation process between Armenians and Azerbaijanis through any means may also prove beneficial to Russia, as it would free up its resources for the Ukrainian war.

Consequently, whether on the EU platform or within the framework of the Russian approach, Armenia will find itself almost without an ally and in the position of the loser of the 2020 Karabakh war. Neither the European nor the Russian format of negotiations on Karabakh will be inherently pro-Armenian. This, in turn, may further impact public perceptions in Armenia regarding friends and enemies, with a likely decline in public trust towards Russia, the EU, and the USA.

Attempting to shift towards a more pro-Western direction, Armenian elites initially garnered public support for this change. However, they encountered significant challenges in restructuring Armenia's security with reduced Russian involvement and increased Western engagement. This was mainly due to a lack of desire and resources by the EU and the USA to functionally replace Russia in providing the same security guarantees to Armenia and Armenians in Karabakh. The pro-Western and anti-Russian efforts of the Armenian revolutionary elites ultimately proved that complementarism, as a balanced approach, could not be easily replaced or abandoned without losses and risks for Armenia and Armenians.

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