

Teaching Case

Social Media and the Velvet Revolution in Armenia

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ABSTRACT

Armenia is an ancient nation, but a young republic that has gained its independence less than 30 years ago after seven decades of Soviet rule. The country has strong traditions both in computer technologies and peaceful rallies/demonstrations, but it seems nobody ever thought before that the former may serve a promoting and organizing tool for the latter. That is, until the spring of 2018, when the Armenian Velvet Revolution overthrew the Prime Minister, and the rule of the governing Republican Party of Armenia that has been in power since 1999 with a grip on power which seemed indestructible. The opposition used social media to mobilize people discontented with the situation in the country, coordinate and organize actions in a self-managed manner, instantly share information that the government-controlled traditional media kept silent about and do many other things that made the revolution very efficient, effective and successful.

Keywords: Armenia, Velvet Revolution, Social Media, Spreading Information, Countering Disinformation, Slogans and Memes

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this case is to explore the use of social media as a tool for organizing social movements, particularly in protest of government overreach. The case is organized as follows:

- 1) Background on the country of Armenia and its history and politics,
- 2) The history of technology and social media adoption in Armenia,

- 3) The timeline of its recent "Velvet Revolution",
- 4) The role and impact of social media in that revolution, and
- 5) Questions for student consideration.

The Republic of Armenia is a small country landlocked in the area between the Black and Caspian Seas. Time took its toll on Armenia, as it lost and won its statehood multiple times and gradually shrunk to its current size of less than

30,000 sq.km and under 3 million people. In 1991, the country gained independence from the Soviet Union and embarked on a journey of building a state under conditions of a war with the neighboring Azerbaijan in the first years. Even before independence, Armenians started to develop a tradition of rallies and demonstrations, at times reaching hundreds of thousands of people. Remarkably, violence or riots rarely occurred during these rallies, and when they did, it was usually due to the actions of the police (Human Rights Watch, 2008; US Department of State, 2009; Lomsadze, 2015).

The Republican Party of Armenia (RPA, or HHK as it is sometimes transliterated to match the Armenian acronym) came to power in 1999 and has been ruling the country since then with a majority or coalition majority in the parliament, as well as two consecutive presidents, each of which were elected twice and served two five-year terms. The party's grip on power was very tight and they hardly ever yielded to the opposition on any issue, even when there was wide discontent and protest in the population. Admittedly, the RPA-controlled government did make concessions on at least two social problems. In 2013 the government wanted to increase the public transport fee from 100 to 150 dram (dram is the Armenian currency). This vastly unpopular 50% hike was reversed after mass protests under the slogan "Pay 100 Dram" (Mkrtchyan, 2013). And in 2015 the government found a compromise solution to the electricity cost increase that had caused a powerful protest movement called "Electric Yerevan" (Demourian, 2015).

Through a constitutional amendment initiated by RPA, in 2018 Armenia effectively changed from its existing presidential system to a parliamentary one. Numerous powers and authority were reserved for the Prime Minister elected by the National Assembly (Armenia's parliament). This change turned the country's president into a largely ceremonial figure, whereas the new role of the prime minister was often referred to by the opposition and independent media as "super prime minister". The change was viewed by many as an attempt to build an authoritarian or totalitarian system (Public Journalism Club, N.D.). The previous president Serzh Sargsyan was voted into the Prime Minister's office by the RPA majority-controlled National Assembly on April 17, 2018. However, a large part of the Armenian society perceived this as an attempt to become a lifetime ruler (Kopalyan, 2018; PressTV, 2018). On the other hand, most Armenians were doubtful

anything could be done about this, since the RPA had the majority in the National Assembly, as well as numerous political, social, economic and other points of leverage.

However, at least one person thought differently. Nikol Pashinyan, a member of the parliament and opposition activist, started a walking journey from Armenia's second largest city Gyumri to the capital city Yerevan, in order to protest Serzh Sargsyan's potential nomination for the Prime Minister (at the time there was not even a formal nomination). The step Mr. Pashinyan took (incidentally, under the slogan "My Step") led to a chain of events that to the surprise of almost everyone in Armenia and the world (and perhaps Pashinyan himself, too) culminated in Sargsyan's resignation in less than a month and, eventually, Pashinyan becoming the Prime Minister of Armenia.

During these events, the organizers of the My Step movement widely used social media to mobilize people discontented with the situation in the country, coordinate and organize actions in a self-managed manner, instantly share information that the government-controlled traditional media kept silent about and do many other things that made the revolution very efficient, effective and successful. The new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continues actively utilizing social media and livestreaming for everything from showing his government offices/facilities to explaining the key decision made by his government.

2. THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN ARMENIA

Computer technologies have a relatively long history in Armenia. One of the first Soviet computers was developed in Armenia, while about 40% of mainframe computers for the Soviet military were designed in this country once dubbed the "Silicon Valley of the USSR" (Bonner, 1994). When Armenia became independent and adopted the free market model, local and foreign businesses alike rushed to capitalize on the brainpower available in the country. In 2017, the number of actively operating ICT companies reached almost 650 (800, if start-ups are included), with an annual growth rate of more than 10 percent (Enterprise Incubator Foundation, 2017).

As for social media, their popularity rapidly grew in Armenia since the late 2000s when the telecom market gradually liberalized, creating grounds for free (and fierce) competition, and the internet affordability and availability increased.

As of January 2018, the number of internet users in the country reached 2.13 million, or about 73% of the total population. At the same time the number of active social media users was 1.2 million, constituting 41% penetration (We Are Social, 2018). These numbers may not seem impressive, but it must be noted that Armenia was a relatively late starter in social media due to limited accessibility and affordability of internet in earlier years. In parallel with the internet access expansion and decreasing prices, social media use grew quite fast. For example, the annual growth of active social media users in 2017 was 24% (up by 210,000 since 2016), while the number of active mobile social users grew by 170,000 or 25% between 2016 and 2017 (We Are Social, 2017).

The development of social media use in Armenia had its peculiarities. Unlike many other countries of the world where most users prefer such platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., for many years the social networking market in the country was dominated by the Russian social media Odnoklassniki (ok.ru) and V Kontakte (vk.com) (ARKA, 2012, Martirosyan, 2015). This can be explained by the language abilities of Armenia's population, the overwhelming majority of which has some command of the Russian language due to Soviet legacy, whereas the number of people who can read and speak English, though growing, is still significantly lower. However, as the social media expanded their language options and thanks to the boom of internet access and usage, Facebook and other social media popular in the world started catching up in Armenia (Panorama, 2016). The two earlier civic protest initiatives mentioned above, "Pay 100 Dram" and "Electric Yerevan" did use social media to gather support and spread information (Aghajanian, 2013; Avedissian, 2015). However, it was done on a limited scale, most likely because social media penetration in Armenia was much smaller back in 2013 and 2015.

3. TIMELINE OF EVENTS

On March 31, 2018, Nikol Pashinyan, 42, member of the Yelk (meaning "way out" in Armenian or figuratively, "solution") faction in Armenia's National Assembly, launched a 200-kilometer march together with his small team from Gyumri throughout Armenia with a final destination of the capital city Yerevan. The objective of the march, as explained on Pashinyan's Facebook page, was to protest Serzh Sargsyan's possible nomination for the post of the prime minister. Pashinyan had a long history as opposition activist, including his participation

in the 2008 mass protests against Serzh Sargsyan's first election as president. This protest resulted in violent dispersal of the protesters on March 1-2, 2008 with 10 deaths among both the protesters and police, over 200 injured and over 100 protesters arrested (including Pashinyan himself, who was subsequently convicted for "organizing mass disorders" and spent three years in prison). In his decades-long struggle, Pashinyan had never really had any political success, other than winning a member of parliament (MP) seat with his own party (Civil Contract) within the Yelk political alliance.

On April 13 about 100-150 protesters led by Pashinyan reached Yerevan and rallied in one of the central sites of Yerevan, the France Square. On April 14 with a group of supporters, Pashinyan broke into the offices of the Public Radio of Armenia and demanded immediate live broadcast to deliver their message to the people of Armenia. The management argued that immediate radio time is technically impossible and offered another time, which the protesters rejected. Instead, from the building of the Public Radio, Pashinyan broadcast a video message online through YouTube, and independent Armenian internet media CivilNet and A1plus.

On April 15 there was a rally during which Pashinyan presented the near-term plan, calling for peaceful actions of protest and civil disobedience. He also posted this call on his Facebook page. In response to this call, on April 16 the actions started exactly in accordance to the announced plan. The protesters blocked some of the key streets, intersections and bridges in Yerevan using benches and waste containers as barricades. The police responded by cordoning off the area around the National Assembly and some other government buildings. Clashes between protesters and law enforcement forces occurred, during which Pashinyan injured his hand by grabbing barbed wire. After receiving treatment in a hospital, he promptly returned to the protesters with a bandaged hand.

April 17 was an important day, as the National Assembly held the planned session to elect the country's prime minister. Serzh Sargsyan, nominated by the Republican Party of Armenia and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) factions was elected with little opposition, while the protesters rallied outside. Pashinyan declared he was initiating what he called "a popular, non-violent, velvet revolution". Mass rallies, street and bridge closures, labor and especially student strikes basically shut down Yerevan for the next

days. Social media were a key communication technology to coordinate these events.

Between April 18 and 21 the protests expanded further, encompassing large and small cities alike in Armenia. Usually the protests started early in the morning by street and intercity highway closures, street marches and other peaceful actions, which then culminated in an everyday evening rally at the Republic Square of Yerevan, where the crowds grew bigger and bigger. The protesters would then go home for the night as instructed in person or through social media by the organizers led by Pashinyan, and return to their actions next morning. It was very hard for the police to tackle the situation, because unlike the rallies in the past, people were not concentrated in a single spot, but appeared simultaneously in different places, did their actions, and at a specified time moved elsewhere.

Most of the protesters were young people, including university students (Azatyan & Schiffers, 2018). Where the street traffic was not blocked, many drivers honked their car horns to follow the new slogan, "If you're against Serzh, honk the horn". As tensions accelerated, on April 21 the President of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian (it is the same last name as Serzh Sargsyan's, though transliterated into English slightly differently and the two men are not related) who was elected a month earlier, accepted Pashinyan's invitation and met him in the Republic Square, as the crowd chanted "President, join us!" and "President, reject Serzh!" Whatever conversation they had, it was later announced that Nikol Pashinyan and Serzh Sargsyan would have a meeting next day.

On April 22, now Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and Nikol Pashinyan met at the Armenia Marriott hotel for negotiations, dozens of reporters and camera operators were present, as it was something Pashinyan insisted on. The more old-school Sargsyan accepted it with surprise, wondering how negotiations can be held under so many watchful eyes. Many noted the stark difference between the two – Sargsyan was in an expensive suit and polished shoes, while Pashinyan wore khakis, camouflage T-shirt, baseball cap, had his usual backpack and on top of that his hand was covered with a bandage. Apparently, Sargsyan wanted to have a dialog and negotiate about putting an end to the protests, while Pashinyan made it very clear he came with no intention of dialog, but rather to hold talks about the terms of Sargsyan's resignation. The Prime Minister was outraged as

he heard that, noting that someone representing a parliamentary group which received 7-8% in the elections is in no position to make such demands. He then stood up and promptly left, with the whole talk taking 3-4 minutes.

Literally hours after the failed talks, Pashinyan was detained by the police along with two of his closest associates (also MPs) and other activists as they were rallying in one of the Yerevan's districts. Shock and smoke grenades were used during the operation. As the news about this spread through social media, and then also the traditional information outlets, the protests and rallies erupted with renewed strength and increased number of protesters.

On April 23 the events took a turn hardly anyone expected. Pashinyan and the other detained MPs were released, causing an outburst of joyful postings in social media and cheering in the streets. About an hour after that, Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan resigned, writing in his resignation letter to the Armenian people broadcast via television and his website that: "Nikol Pashinian was right. I got it wrong. The current situation has several possible solutions, but I will not take any of them. That is not my way. I am leaving office of the country's leader..." (Heil and Baumgartner, 2018). A reported 150,000-strong crowd gathered in the Republic Square to celebrate the victory (Civilnet.am, 2018) and in many other cities of Armenia spontaneous festivities followed.

April 24 is a very special day for Armenian people, including those who live in foreign countries and who actually outnumber the population of Armenia. Many of them are descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire during World War I. On this day, Armenians around the world hold commemoration events to pay tribute to about 1.5 million of their compatriots who vanished in the genocide perpetrated on their ancestral lands in what is now eastern Turkey. Regardless of political views, hundreds of thousands of people silently marched to the Armenian Genocide memorial in Yerevan, as they usually do every year.

On April 25 it was announced that negotiations with the Acting Prime Minister are called off, because the format and agenda proposed by the opposition were unacceptable for the RPA. Meanwhile, the other groups in the National Assembly declared their support for Pashinyan's movement. As the news spread through social media, new rallies and protest actions engulfed

Armenia, expanding as far as blocking the road to Yerevan's international airport, border crossings with Georgia, entrances to government buildings and more. The protesters now demanded that RPA give up power and that the parliament elect Nikol Pashinyan as prime minister.

May 1 was the day when in accordance with the constitution the National Assembly gathered to elect a prime minister with a single candidate nominated: Nikol Pashinyan. All but one of the RPA members voted against, and the votes of other factions were insufficient to elect the prime minister. As the constitution requires, it was announced that the parliament would gather again in seven days for another attempt to elect prime minister. From the National Assembly, Pashinyan asked the thousands of people watching the televised session on big screens at the Republic Square to wait for him. As Pashinyan joined them, he called for a total strike and closure of roads, metro, railroad, airport and other significant infrastructure starting from the next morning, in order to show the RPA they have no other way but to let him get elected.

Indeed, on May 2 Armenia experienced something pretty close to a total collapse of any activity, except the activities Pashinyan called for the day before at the rally and repeated through social media. Apparently, it was so overwhelming that the same day the RPA announced their parliamentary faction will support the candidate nominated by one-third of the National Assembly.

On May 8 National Assembly voted 59 to 42 in favor of electing Pashinyan as the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. Pashinyan went again to the Republic Square and celebrated the victory together with a huge cheering crowd of his supporters, and broadcast the message to the world through social media.

4. THE ROLE OF INTERNET SOCIAL MEDIA

The Armenian Velvet Revolution was a striking example of how social media can play a major role in politics and organizing people. Of course, Armenia was not the first country where such a thing happened. It is well known that social media were extensively used in the so-called Arab Spring (Huang, 2011; Harlow, 2013, Wolfsfeld et al., 2013, etc.) and the Ukrainian Euromaidan (Barberá and Metzger, 2014; Bohdanova, 2014). Unfortunately, those resulted in many casualties and many did not have long-term positive outcomes. In Armenia, by contrast, overthrowing the regime was accompanied by

zero deaths and virtually no damage to any property.

So how and why were social media used during the Armenian Velvet Revolution?

4.1 Spreading information

From the very beginning of the movement, Nikol Pashinyan's Facebook page became the primary source of information. Most of the TV companies in Armenia are privately owned, though judging by what and how they broadcast, a significant part of the society suspected they are indirectly controlled by the government. Sure enough, the TV had almost nothing to say concerning the My Step/Reject Serzh movement. So instead of watching TV, people routinely logged in to Facebook and followed Pashinyan's page to learn about the new developments. And he had been posting comments and videos literally about everything he and his supporters did or were going to do.

Many users would then share and/or repost those videos. The number of Pashinyan's followers in Facebook more than quadrupled in 30 days between April 6 and May 6 from 60,000 to 270,000, propelling him to the 26th most popular Facebook page in Armenia (as of early July it was already the 15th most popular one with about 440,000 followers). Daily livestream videos were especially important, drawing the attention of thousands of viewers. Other internet media and video hosting services picked up, too. Such resources as azatutyun.am (Armenian language service of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), civilnet.am, factor.am, a1plus.am, galatv.am and others livestreamed from the streets using their own, as well as Facebook and YouTube channels.

Other social media were actively used to spread information, too. For example, Instagram users posted expressive photographs and short videos from rallies, marches, encounters with police, etc. Twitter was used to post the most important quick messages. The Russian instant messaging and voice over IP service Telegram had previously been hardly used in Armenia, but suddenly became quite popular. It was used especially when Facebook Messenger traffic was overloaded, because Telegram is a lighter app and its traffic is less congested.

4.2 Countering disinformation

The social media were not only used to disseminate information, but also became a source for the users/protesters to verify

information. The Facebook and other social media accounts of My Step movement leaders turned into tools to prevent the spread of fake news. Essentially, if a piece of more or less important information was not confirmed by Pashinyan or one of his associates, it was then treated by most users as disinformation. On April 27 one of Pashinyan's close associates posted a message on Facebook saying there is much misinformation about the My Step movement and its leaders, and even some fake accounts in social media. He provided correct links to the Facebook pages of Pashinyan and five other movement activists, to make sure the users get "trustworthy information" and avoid "suspicious sources".

During the movement there were some speculative messages thrown into various outlets from Azerbaijan. Particularly, it was claimed that unrest in Armenia will soon degenerate into chaos, and hence, Azerbaijan should or will take the advantage of the situation to attack and take over Nagorno Karabakh. This is a sensitive and very important issue for any Armenian person, but the public basically ignored it. Apparently one of the reasons was that the movement leaders ignored it in the first place. Another, related notice together with a video came this time from a Nagorno Karabakh Army source, showing that there was an advancement of Azerbaijani troops and heavy military equipment towards the border (News.am, 2018). Again, this was largely ignored, as My Step leaders paid no attention to it in social media or otherwise.

4.3 Organizing and controlling

In the past, the protests in Armenia usually took the form of a rally or picket carried out in a single place, sometimes followed by a street march from there. The organizers would announce about the plans for immediate and future actions at the gatherings, since as it was noted before, traditional media usually would provide little coverage of such events or plans. Whenever the government felt they had enough of it, the riot police, knowing exactly where to go, would disperse the protesters and detain or arrest the leaders. Often the police also blocked access to the location of the gathering, and prevented more people from joining. After all that, the erstwhile political protest movements usually weakened or faded away. Many supporters who were not present in the gathering did not know the plans, especially when leaders were in a detention center and there was no street gathering anymore to join for getting such information.

The leader of the My Step/Reject Serzh movement and his associates also made announcements during the gatherings, but these were backed up by calls for action in the social media. These calls often provide details on the time, forms and places for such actions, as well as what activities specifically should be avoided and what conduct/behavior to have. The strategy chosen by Pashinyan and My Step//Reject Serzh movement included multiple civil disobedience and infrastructure disruption actions often carried out simultaneously in many places. The leaders did not have to be everywhere, because their supporters knew through internet exactly what to do. Interestingly, the decisions on locations were often communicated through Telegram, especially at the later stages of the revolution. The reason for using it, other than the already mentioned lighter traffic, was that the activists understood that law enforcement follow their Facebook interactions and sometimes show up in the places designated for action earlier than the protesters, while Telegram group chats and channels helped avoid that.

The timing of actions, especially intersection, bridge, or government office blocking, was also coordinated through social media. The protesters understood timing was important, so they closely followed the "schedules" set by Pashinyan or his associates, sometimes literally looking at their watches or cell phones to start an action at the exact time advised by the organizers.

Pashinyan was very keen and consistent in calling his supporters to stay away from any form of violence and not to provoke the police. Starting from April 17 the "non-violent, velvet revolution" and "revolution of love and tolerance" became mantras he repeated daily in his livestream videos, Facebook account and all other possible channels. Social media helped spread this message through shares, reposts and it then spread further through word-of-mouth. It is then no surprise that the crowds never even booed the police, let alone clashing with them on their own initiative or violently resisting when police attempted to disperse and detain the protesters in a few cases. Occasionally, the protestors would even cheer the police, give flowers or even share their water and food with them.

On April 23 a number of uniformed military joined the protesters. Immediately a message appeared on the Facebook page of Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party (which was then picked up and repeated by many other internet media), emphasizing that no soldier or officer should participate in political processes on either side

and that it is important to keep the army neutral. Noting that the army must not interfere with the country's internal affairs, because they have their own tasks of facing external enemies, the troops were urged to return to where they are stationed. No military were seen in the protest actions since then, at least not in uniform.

In another example, Pashinyan posted a video and comment on Facebook on April 26, urging all those who drive their cars without number plates or with covered ones to immediately stop such practice. In prior days many such cars were noticed in Yerevan, which although they honked the horns to "reject Serzh" and "reject RPA", were also noted for reckless driving. Pashinyan made it clear in his video that such behavior is not acceptable. He warned that such drivers would be considered working against the revolution, asking his supporters to stop the cars and explain it to the drivers. Starting the next day there were no cars with covered or absent number plates.

The protesters were very much willing not only to take whatever actions they were asked, but also inaction as My Step leaders and especially Pashinyan would ask through social media. For example, on May 2, when the RPA publicly promised they will back the "people's candidate" for premiership on the next parliamentary session, Pashinyan asked during the rally and repeated it in the social media to stop all protesting and civil disobedience actions next day. Sure enough, on May 3 the whole country was back to business as usual, with the public transport, educational institutions, public and private services, and everything else in Armenia were functioning in regular routine mode, as if nothing happened in the days before. This is especially remarkable for the country whose people are known to be generally southern-type emotional, hotheaded and also quite individualistic.

4.4 Slogans, symbols and memes

Symbolism is a crucial component of any revolution. The Armenian Velvet Revolution came up with a number of slogans, symbols and memes that often gained instant popularity through social and internet media, and only then started to appear in "hard copies" on posters, T-shirts, caps, etc. The most notable ones are discussed below.

As already mentioned, the Velvet Revolution started with the My Step movement, which was also a slogan. Depending on the situation and

context, it was used in several forms and combinations, such as "Make a step", "Make a step, reject Serzh", "Make a step, reject RPA", etc. "Reject Serzh" became especially popular. This was due not only to its meaning that reflects the main demand of the movement at the initial phase of the revolution, but also because it sounds rhymed in Armenian language ("Merzhir Serzhin"), and it is convenient and powerful to chant loudly in a pair of two-syllable words. All these slogans were popularized through social media, especially Twitter, where all these variations had hashtags in Armenian, Russian and English languages (e.g. #mystep, #rejectserzh, etc.). Early in the movement, a song or anthem of the revolution appeared and spread through various internet video channels called "The Citizen's Song" and commonly referred to as "My Step" since that phrase is contained in it. Written by Pashinyan himself in a simple tune and guileless lyrics, the song rapidly gained popularity. It was frequently heard during the rallies and street blocking from the smartphones of the participants and also large speakers.



Figure 1 – The Armenian Velvet Revolution merchandise and memorabilia

Source of the pictures: designbyhumans.com

Another immensely popular slogan that swept through social media was "Dukhov" or "Duxov" ("kh" or "x" here denote an Armenian letter/sound that has no equivalent in English,

and is close to how “j” in Spanish language). A slang mixture of Russian and Armenian, the closest meaning probably is “with courage” or “be brave”. Basically, it was understood that one must not fear any punitive acts the government may employ against the protesters and valiantly stand up for the cause of the revolution. Such merchandise as T-shirts, scarfs, hats and caps, pins, mugs, bumper stickers, etc. with this slogan were produced and distributed by the thousands (Figure 1), and a baseball cap also permanently ended up on Pashinyan’s head (Figure 2), replacing the one he wore at the beginning of the movement.

evolutions often utilize specially designed emblems or symbols that signify something they are about. The Armenian Velvet revolution did not really use that type of symbols, other than “My Step” or “Duxov” words stylized in a special font and an occasional graphic art portrait of Pashinyan. Instead, some more original and interesting symbols were used. The “Revolution Granma” was certainly one of them (Figure 3). An elderly petite woman with gray hair and wrinkled face showed up in almost every rally and her pictures went viral on social media (Kocharyan, 2018). As it turned out, she was indeed a veteran revolutionary – she had participated also in 2008 protests against the first election of Serzh Sargsyan as the country’s leader (Ayres, 2018).



Figure 3 – The “Revolution Granma”
Source: (Kocharyan, 2018)

However, the first symbol of the My Step movement was probably Chalo, a homeless dog that somehow joined Pashinyan’s initial two-week walking journey to Yerevan, walked with the team and participated in the rallies. The protesters later came up with a new name for the dog – Qaylo, alluding to My Step, because in Armenian language “qayl” means step. This living mascot of the Velvet Revolution got its own Facebook page Qaylo.dog, where it called itself the first dog ever to be a proud citizen of Armenia, urged the people to take a step towards freedom no matter how many legs one has, told stories about itself and the revolution, etc. There is also an Instagram account #qaylo with the dog’s pictures in various situations.



Figure 2 – Nikol Pashinyan at a press conference wearing a “Dukhov” baseball cap

Source: VANO SHLAMOV/AFP/Getty Images

A social media account for a pet is not something new, but the same for an inanimate object probably is. During those revolutionary days, Nikol Pashinyan almost always appeared with a backpack and baseball cap. Both these things became symbols of sorts, signifying the difference with government leaders. In addition, due to constant outdoor activity, excessive speaking in a loud voice and possibly tear gas impact, at some point Pashinyan started losing his voice and often coughed. Someone cleverly created Nikol’s Backpack, Nikol’s Cap and Nikol’s Cough Facebook accounts and started posting witty comments related to the ongoing events. For example Nikol’s Backpack had such comments as: “Nikol, don’t worry, I have your back”, “I feel empty today”, “The RPA and I have something similar – we both are a burden on someone’s shoulders. They are on Armenian people’s, and I am on Nikol’s”, “I am going to meet Putin’s nuclear briefcase”.

The protest movement also produced some memes. The memes “Ashot” (an Armenian male first name) and “Ashot’s grandmother” also came

out of a livestream video. The video was being shot where the riot police cordoned off an area, standing with shields, helmets and equipment for dispersing crowds. In a tense silence, a protester suddenly shouted looking towards the policemen: "Hey Ashot (as if referring to a specific police officer), your grandmother is here with us. Are you going to beat her, too?" From that day "Ashot" became a meme. It symbolized law enforcement rank and file who must follow orders acting against the protesters while their families support the revolution. Interestingly, after the revolution won, the man who was calling Ashot admitted in a video interview he has no acquaintance in police with such name, and that he impromptu staged the whole thing to appeal to the conscience of the policemen. However, that had not prevented "Ashot's grandmother" from creating a Facebook page and actively posting in support of the revolution.

5. CASE QUESTIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

The following questions are provided to spark additional thought and research into various aspects of social media and political activity.

- Why did Nikol Pashinyan insist on the presence of all kinds of traditional and internet media reporters during the negotiations with Serzh Sargsyan on April 22, rather than negotiating behind the closed doors?
- If everything was livestreamed and/or posted, people really did not need to go to the streets in order to learn any new information and therefore, Pashinyan risked diminishing the number of people participating in rallies and marches. Why did he continue informing (often personally) about the developments through social media?
- What was it about the My Step/Reject Serzh movement leaders' social media pages that made them the most credible sources for the people during the revolution?
- Is this level of credibility something that could be scalable to larger/more diverse countries? Why or why not?
- Do you think the social media pages of Pashinyan and his associates will keep the same level of credibility and popularity months after the victorious finale of the Armenian Velvet Revolution?

The following questions may require a quick additional research:

- The two prior civic protest initiatives in Armenia, "Pay 100 Dram" and "Electric Yerevan", used social media to gather support and spread information, although on a much smaller scale. It is suggested in the case study that it was probably because the social media penetration in Armenia was much smaller back in 2013 and 2015. What could be some of the other reasons?
- Why was the livestreaming through social media and other live internet broadcasts important?
- Armenia had known multi-thousand strong rallies and marches in the past, and their participants were usually from all age groups. Why were the overwhelming majority of the My Step/Reject Serzh movement street protesters young people?
- It is clear from the case that fake news, disinformation and fake accounts had virtually no effect on the revolution and its supporters. What could be the reasons for that, other than the ones already described? Do you think after the revolution people will continue to ignore any information that does not come from or is not verified by My Step movement leaders' social media pages?

The following questions are assignments that may require a deeper additional research:

- During the described events, apart from a few individual officials, the government/RPA largely relied on traditional means, forms and techniques for communication/propaganda. Obviously they totally failed and lost both the game and their power. What could the government or other parties have done to counteract the social media activity of the revolutionaries? What could the protesters have done in turn? Hint: in answering these questions researching similar events in other countries might be useful.
- Investigate the various tags, social media/web pages, internet memes and the like relating to the Armenian Velvet Revolution, especially those not mentioned in the case. Show how these were used and bring some prominent examples. Note that most of those are in Armenian language and the machine translation may result in loss of subtleties or even the whole meaning, so you may need to rely on or double-check with English-language materials.
- This case provides an example of using social media as a tool mainly for the benefit

of the people of Armenia (or so it currently seems). Please bring actual examples from around the world when social media were used for malicious purposes. What could be done or was done to prevent and/or thwart it?

6. CONCLUSIONS

The internet and social media obviously played a large, if not decisive role in the Armenian Velvet Revolution. This case study provides a detailed look at the various forms and methods of using internet resources and social media for political purposes. Some of the key developments of this bloodless revolution are examined in the light of their practical implementation with the help of such social media as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and others, the nature of each of which provides different type of opportunities to inform, organize, control, motivate and lead a protest movement. The case helps the reader understand how the political technologies can be coupled with information technologies to achieve astonishing changes in a whole country. A note of precaution seems appropriate here, because although in Armenia the Velvet Revolution so far has been successful and generally appears to have had positive effects on the society, many other countries where revolutionary movements used similar methods and technologies in recent years experienced drastic deterioration in almost every aspect of their people's life. On the other hand, so far Pashinyan has spent little time as Prime Minister, and it is not clear yet what results he would be able to achieve for Armenia, especially that there are countless problems to solve inherited from the old regime, as well as quite a few already "produced" by his own government

We encourage the readers to analyze each section of this case, make logical links between their different components and understand what worked well or what could have been done better and how.

Finally, it is important to realize that social media, as any other information technology, is just a tool (however powerful it is). Whether this tool is put to use for good or bad, depends on the ones who utilize it and how they do it.

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Editor Notes: Teaching Notes are available for this teaching case, please contact the authors directly.

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