



RSC FOCUS GROUP

“Reformulating Western Policy toward Russia in the Post-Soviet Space”

14 March 2016



On 14 March, the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent think tank in Yerevan, convened its latest in a series of special “Focus Groups.” In coordination with a visiting group of graduate students from the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington (GW) University, one of the leading graduate schools in international affairs in the United States, this latest Focus Group was focused on a discussion of one main theme: “Reformulating Western Policy toward Russia in the Post-Soviet Space.” The GW group was visiting Armenia as part of their Capstone Research project, which consists of three country-specific case studies: Armenia, Estonia and Ukraine.

This month’s Focus Group was larger than usual and included observers from the European Union (EU) Delegation to Armenia, as well as diplomatic staff from the Embassies of Japan, Switzerland and the United States.

Similar to our previous RSC “focus group” sessions, which offer an interactive “out of the box” discussion assessing various issues of critical importance for Armenia, the proceedings and recommendations developed in the Focus Group will also form the basis of a subsequent policy report.

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“Reformulating Western Policy toward Russia in the Post-Soviet Space”

SUMMARY NOTES & DISCUSSION

I. BACKGROUND

In order to better “frame” the discussion, RSC Director Richard Giragosian presented a broad overview of US engagement in Armenia, starting with the beginning of independence in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In general, US policy toward the former Soviet Union Countries, beginning in the 1990’s and continuing through the Bush, Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations, was an example of prudent policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union was as much a shock to the US as it was to the countries of Soviet Union. As a result of the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union, countries like Armenia, Ukraine, Estonia, etc, simply were not prepared for independence without having any tradition of democratic politics, not experience of a vibrant opposition.

1990s

- Bush Administration- sudden and swift collapse of the USSR was an unexpected challenge that was handled prudently; US had no experience and no knowledge of South Caucasus (unlike UK, France, Russia, etc.);
- Managing a weak Russia as different threat;
- Armenia- one of only five former states that US opened Embassy immediately: Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but due to their nuclear weapons, and Kyrgyzstan, due to greater democracy at that time;
- Yet US engagement of Armenia and Armenian issues pre-dated independence, as seen by the Wilson “Mandate” for Armenia, the Armenian genocide, and even the December 1988 earthquake, where US humanitarian aid was actually personally delivered by recent US presidential candidate Jeb Bush;

November 1994 election of Clinton

Containment replaced by Enlargement: “democracy and freedom” democratization, market economies and free trade- underscored US economic interests, but also with NATO expansion.

- Energy- “Great Game” led to “Contract of the Century” 1994;
- Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) online in 2005; bypassing Russia & Iran;
- Energy later secondary- decline in oil production in Azerbaijan, marginal role of Caspian, economics and commercial logic trumped geopolitics- end of Nabucco in 2013 & later decline in global oil;

Bush Administration: defining moment 9/11 Global War on Terror (GWOT)

- Georgia- Pankisi Gorge; Azerbaijan- overflight & refueling rights to Afghanistan, southern corridor, rendition, al Qaeda links (attack on USS Cole);
- Overall, South Caucasus a subset of US-Russia (and aspects of policy toward Iran, Turkey); No vital US interests at stake;
- But others differed: Brzezinski: South Caucasus in pivotal position of Eurasia: MacKinder's Heartland theory; buffer zone to stop spread of Islamic fundamentalism;

Obama Administration

During the Obama Administration, US policy and engagement were driven by two factors: the early attempt to “reset” relations with Russia and the later reassertion of Russian power and influence throughout the “near abroad,” or post-Soviet space. For Armenia, there was a modification of US policy in terms of “not giving up Armenia” without fight, and not “writing off” Armenia as merely a “Russian garrison state.” This is also seen in support of Armenia-Turkey normalization.

Yet under the US Reset policy, it inherently underscored a sacrifice of marginal areas and regions under the broader issue of engaging Russia- and played into Moscow's “near abroad” view; then on Syria- “line in the sand” retreat by Obama- Putin sensed weakness and loss of resolve.

II. KEY QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Questions: How to craft a Western policy towards Russia? And how to balance between Russian aggression and the need to bolster the independence and sovereignty of the former Soviet states?

Participants: The post-Soviet states are seeing the sort of protection from Russia or the West. The best option, especially in countries where Russia has been holding an important influence, would be a partnership for economic development or geopolitical position. I don't think that the West would necessarily amend this approach. It seems that Russia doesn't want to cooperate; also the West wants to put its flags. I would see any openness for cooperation more from the West than currently from Russia.

Question: Armenia was doing well in cooperation with EU with three and a half years of negotiations with the EU over an Association agreement with the EU, and in September 2013, the Armenian president announced in Moscow a U-turn in policy. What was driving the Armenian president to sacrifice the Association Agreement?

Participants: The biggest problem is concerning security, and Armenia does not have enough room and capacity to negotiate with EU for security, which is still is a crucial point and less economic, less political. However, this was a striking point in the decision that Armenia made, we were all disappointed with this decision. This disappointment is quiet clear bearing in mind how little Armenia got as a result of accession to the Eurasian Union in both economic and political terms.

Participants: Reflection to the Armenian president's decision, there were also some internal factors, the government as a ruling party is a kind that resembles the Russian ruling party, which means that governmentally there is that interdependence and the loss of the government in Armenia. And talking about Russian dependency meaning to take into consideration the main approach for each individual country.

Questions: Are there things that US can do in Armenia or this region? In areas of economic assistance, education, media, etc.?

Participants: What US should do is take the sample of European Union could do investment in the civil society sector. The civil society in Armenia can make changes and come to the measures to change the government or the policy.

Question: Are there any areas where the interests of Russia and the US converge in the former Soviet space?

Participants: The one issue is that not solving Nagorno Karabakh issue. For Central Asia, the point is that Afghanistan is still processing narco-trafficking, drug dealing which is quite a joint and shared problem. The common issue is also fighting any type of terrorism.

Question: Is there anything that US shouldn't do in this region?

Participants: The issue is that all we talked about is the specific role of these countries saying South Caucasus in the post-Soviet area within the US-Russia relationship. The problem is raising the issue: do these countries mean something to Russia or the US in the matter of investment in Armenia in civil society or other sectors? What happens to Armenia after such investment, or the Russian reaction to that? The most important factor is raising the interest of the US in this region.