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Luys Lnyju®



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**HOW AMBASSADOR  
SWITALSKI MISREAD THE  
FOUNDATIONS OF ARMENIAN  
FOREIGN POLICY**

# HOW AMBASSADOR SWITALSKI MISREAD THE FOUNDATIONS OF ARMENIAN FOREIGN POLICY



## INTRODUCTION

The proficient and harmonious functioning of the Armenian state bureaucracy is a high priority precondition for ensuring an appropriate assessment of complex geopolitical processes in and around the country, understanding their causes as well as prevent the undesired consequences in a timely manner. Naturally, sometimes the domestic political discourse and even the thinking in the expert community may be constrained by too local or emotional perceptions. Therefore duly considering “an outside view” often becomes crucial for the decision-makers, as well as for upgrading the quality of the general public debate on policy matters. For example, the third President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, would often invite to Armenia or meet in overseas trips with leading experts from world-class think-tanks and Universities to privately solicit their thinking and assessment on issues relevant to Armenia, regional politics or the world affairs. Sometimes those meetings were publicized. The fourth and incumbent President Armen Sarkissian has shown greater interest in massive conferences and not private meetings, while no any such encounters or even interest by the Prime Minister of now parliamentary republic has thus far been reported.

A series of significant developments have taken place in the Republic of Armenia in the past decade and each has had dramatic impact on national foreign and security policies. One may think of the decision by the President to partake in the creation of Eurasian Economic Union in September 2013, the small or large-scale social movements since 2014, the Four Day War of 2016 followed by intensive diplomatic process, the hostage situation in the Yerevan Police Station, the signing of Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the European Union in November 2017 and, of course the 2018 April revolution<sup>1</sup> and the devastating 44-day Second Karabakh War in Fall 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that the term “revolution” is used here in the same meaning as in public discourse, without regard to its irrelevance in the context of political science as such.

In the most captivating period of the above described hectic timeline of events the European Union was represented in Armenia by Head of EU Delegation Ambassador Piotr Switalski (2015–2019), who generously shared his memoirs and experience in Armenia in a report entitled "**The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable**", which was published in September 2020 by the Polish Institute of International Affairs and with the support of the Polish Foreign Ministry. In this memoir Ambassador Switalski discussed various aspects of his mission in Armenia with focus on the dynamics of Armenia-EU relations, the Nagorno Karabakh peace process as well as offered a special emphasis on socio-political developments immediately before and then after the April Revolution of 2018.

Such “outside view”, especially one offered by a high-level foreign diplomat posted in Yerevan, must be seen as especially valuable given the present period when the incumbent authorities in Armenia have marginalized any non-partisan, expert opinion and critical thinking as a whole. **And given the author of this “Unfinished Cable” is a seasoned diplomat, tiny nuances in his assessment become even more important, than the big picture narratives the audience may be offered by the media.** In general, memoirs by former diplomats are presumed to answer three groups of questions:

First, how does the diplomat perceive and explain the developments in the host country during his tenure, and what is his understanding of the internal affairs pertaining to policy and decisionmaking – below the veneer of publicity?

Second, how and to what extent the diplomat has contributed to the implementation of the policies of his own nation (in this case: the EU) working with the political and other social groups in the host country, presumably, for the sake of development of bilateral relations?

And lastly, what kind of heritage has he left behind: has he opened some floodgates or he left bridges and arches of triumph? No coincidence in the fact that Switalski’s predecessor - [Romanian diplomat Trajan Hristea](#) – after spending a term in Armenia (2011-2015) as Head of EU Delegation was dispatched to... faraway Mongolia.

This book review will discuss in great detail the foreign policy-related assessments and observations, narrated by Ambassador Switalski, in order to help the reader of this fascinating work to understand and appreciate the work of the chief European diplomat in Armenia. To allow the reader have a better overview in general, we will commence by explaining the main shifts in the international relations in the past decade to contextualise the bilateral and multilateral Armenia-EU relations.

## THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA IN THE PAST DECADE

The international relations in the past decade can be defined as one with shrinking choices and narrowing alternatives for small states that have had adverse impact on their ability to maintain flexible diplomacy.

In essence, the damage of the 2007-08 global financial and economic crisis against the atmosphere of trust and cooperation among great economic powers, the first fractures in the unity of the European family of nations (Greece, Portugal, UK etc), the Obama Administration's (2009-2016) *de facto* "retrenchment" from Eurasia and oft-quoted strategy of "Pivot to Asia" and, last but not least, Trump Administration's (2017-2020) 'transactional' and isolationist foreign policies have gradually and surely deepened the mistrust among nations and gaps in international security architecture. The lowered and even often questioned U.S. commitment for the maintenance of security in Europe and the post-Soviet space have created a window of opportunity for Russia. New division lines were created, the Cold War-era notion of "spheres of influence" was reintroduced and more and more the multilateralism began to be subordinated to unilateralism – despite the optimism in the early period of Obama's tenure in office. The growing self-awareness and more proactive policies of Russia and China, respectively, in post-Soviet space and South China Sea have significantly shrunk the level of flexibility of the regional states. The dependance of the EU on Russian hydrocarbon supplies, despite great efforts in the past decade, produced only rhetorical results and, for example [in terms of natural gas, stayed in the same level of 1/3 of the demand](#) (some Member States had all the way up to 50% dependance). Since the 2003 U.S.-led intervention in Iraq that pushed the oil prices in the international market upwards, and not least because of the worldviews of President Vladimir Putin – Russia has begun attracting its former satellites anew – whether in Soviet space or the societies in the Eastern Communist bloc.

Armenia is no exception.

The 2008 August War in Caucasus was the first alert about the changing environment, where the geographically isolated Armenia, at *de facto* war with two neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey), as well as potentially volatile window to the world in Georgia, has to see its foreign policy priority in maintaining imperishability of strategic partnership with Russia as a guarantor of its economic, military and energy security. Meanwhile, even in that sorry state of geopolitical realities, Armenia – which at the time held the rotating chairmanship in the CSTO - managed to avoid being cornered with regards to recognition of breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Serzh Sargsyan's argument at the time was that relations with neighboring Georgia and Iran must be inviolable for landlocked Armenia.

In 2009 the European Union launched the new Eastern Partnership program, which pursued to give "strategic significance" to the political, economic and trade relations with six former Soviet

republics. In contrast with post-revolutionary Georgia and Ukraine, as well as almost-anchored in Europe Moldova, Armenia declared a lack of European accession agenda, while voicing a commitment to upgrade the relations with the EU to a new level. The next two years (2009-2011) were marked with hyper-activism in Nagorno Karabakh peace process and a failure at the summit in Russian city of Kazan (June 2011), followed by gradually increasing escalation along the Line of Contact and the Armenian-Azeri international border. The new arms race, unleashed by Azerbaijan since 2011, made Armenia worry about hard security in the first place and, therefore, growing reliance on Russia's hard power – while trying hard not to abandon its ambitious reform agenda and EU's soft power.

In a nutshell, the diplomatic activism in this period did not result in the opening of Armenia-Turkey border as Yerevan did not want to bend before the Turkish pressures; military escalation on the border was on the rise because of Ilham Aliyev's maximalist ambitions, Armenia was further moving to Russia's embrace facing no alternatives for its national security reasons, and the relations with U.S., Georgia and Iran continued in the friendly status-quo regime. To put it shorter, this was a textbook example of “revenge of geography”, so well discussed by Robert Kaplan in his book with the same title (Random House, 2013). All these in the foreign affairs were unfolding in near-constant social tensions at home, especially with the social protest movements in 2013-18 where only 2017 stood out with some sense of stability and, therefore, economic growth.

## OVERVIEW OF AMBASSADOR SWITALSKI'S 'UNFINISHED CABLE'

Generally speaking, can anyone plausibly argue that all Armenian Governments, political forces or the civil society have had a good understanding of the EU policy goals in Armenia and the wider region? Had there been common goals for all the EU Member States in the first place? To what extent the narratives or the discourse, facilitated by those networks and individuals that receive funding and/or political support from the EU, conform to the perceptions they have in Brussels? What has been the role of EU Ambassadors in Armenia? What have been the lessons, if any, for both Brussels and Yerevan after the aborted deal in Fall 2013, and have those been carefully considered in the forthcoming policy and strategic decisions ever since?

The above is only the surface of a host of questions one might have had the hope to get the answers when browsing the memoirs penned by Ambassador Piotr Switalski who served in Armenia in 2015–2019.

It must be noted that two other books by retired diplomats, namely one by former Russian Ambassador to Armenia Vladimir Stupishin (“My mission in Armenia. 1992-1994”) released in 2001, and another by the former OSCE Ambassador in Moldova and [retired U.S. State Department officer Philip Remler](#) (“Chained to the Caucasus: Peacemaking in Karabakh, 1987–2012”) released in 2016 have been widely acclaimed by readership well beyond Armenia because they

had been able to draw detailed picture of inner affairs in the corridors of power as well as offered some lessons and recommendations. It's only unfortunate that there is still scarcity of such books.

In the "**The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable**" the author discusses, by varying degree of depth, four key issues and the present review will offer a non-partisan critique for each of those.

1. **The geopolitical rivalry between EU-U.S.-NATO and Russia and Armenia's hard choices;**
2. **The lessons learnt in 2013 and the signing of the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017 November.**
3. **EU's assistance to the Armenia's reform agenda before and after April 2018 and the "geopolitical" context of the 2018 revolution;**
4. **The window of opportunity for the Nagorno Karabakh peace process following the 2018 revolution.**

The overall conclusion of the author may be summarized in the following quote pertaining to the immediate aftermath of the 2018 April revolution: "***Suddenly, all the transformational talk and reform assistance started making sense. The EU could see its modernisation impact amplified if Armenia appreciated the chance offered***". Here is where the skeletons are buried, so to say, and this is what we will volunteer to explore below.

*However before getting to the main part, it must be footnoted that this review discusses only those aspects of the book where assessments, commentary and evaluations pertaining to foreign policy matters are offered, while we will not touch upon issues in internal politics, including the domestic political nuances of the 2018 April revolution.*

**It is unfortunate, that there are no profoundly new revelations or novel commentary on widely known events, with possible exception of one or two episodes – the authenticity of which is impossible to independently establish. First one pertains to author's allegation about pressures on Armenia in 2015 to give green light on "Lavrov plan" for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict resolution where Switalski claims certain EU readiness to provide sizeable financial packages in return. And second – the comment that the appointment of Karen Karapetyan as Prime Minister in 2016 September was "delayed" by the April War.**

*This book has two main flaws: the memories and dialogues shared are not personified and it's impossible to independently certify their accuracy or legitimacy, and one can only trust the author or not. And second – there is no any serious analysis or evaluation of the Armenian domestic/foreign matters and EU's moves in that regard, and this gap is filled with mere reference to widely popular (legitimate or not) narratives. The more successful memoirs by retired*

*ambassadors or other officials are comprised of stories of achievements or failures during their tenure, or some personal recollections about public developments, and – lastly – share some lessons for the next generations. In this regard the attempt of rewriting and further legitimising only those narratives that are appreciated by the incumbent Government of their host country is not the most productive way of spending time and resources, and will inevitably shorten the validity period of the “Unfinished Cable”.*

## THE GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY BETWEEN EU-U.S.-NATO AND RUSSIA AND ARMENIA’S HARD CHOICES

The Head of EU Delegation Ambassador Piotr Switalski began his mission in Armenia (which, as he writes, was going to be his first and last appointment as EU Ambassador) in September 2015 with a political assignment of fully assisting in the negotiations process of the new legal framework for Armenia-EU relations – something he confirmed on the record in his first official meetings in Yerevan. Notwithstanding the fact that as of Fall 2015 the war in Ukraine’s Donbass had entered its 18<sup>th</sup> month and Crimea’s accession to Russia already had taken place, the Kremlin – according to Switalski – was regarding Washington, and not Brussels at all, as its main competitor in the post-Soviet area. Some Russian circles “*disparaged [Europe] as a weak, amorphous, powerless geopolitical entity*” which was void of any security potential and therefore possibly “*never [would] be able to substitute for Russian security guarantees, Russian military presence, or Russian military supplies and technology*” in Armenia. And this, in Switalski’s view, created some opportunities to be seized for Europe.

Seconding almost all Armenian Governments since 1996, Switalski writes: “*Official Armenian policy has been for years to reconcile the privileged security connection with Russia with the inflow of European development assistance, trade, and investment. Armenia wanted to benefit from all possible options. After they started negotiating the Association Agreement with the European Union, the president at that time stated that EU, CIS, and Eurasian integration need not be mutually exclusive*”. Moreover, expanding on the potential of turning bilateral relations with any of post-Soviet republics into a battlefield for EU-NATO-Russia geopolitical rivalry, Switalski reiterates the semi-official approach widespread in Armenia: “*The Armenian leadership before the revolution had invented a formula that was supposed to remove the country from the Europe-Russia rivalry. They claimed that Russia was, for Armenia, a geopolitical choice while Europe was Armenia’s “civilisational” choice. But... what if the civilisational choice becomes hostage to the geopolitical choice*”. This balance to a certain degree had been incorporated in the 2007 National Security Strategy and remained unchanged till at least April 2018.

One may argue that for a high-class diplomat drawing such general observations the conclusion should have naturally been that Armenia’s successive Governments had exhibited continuity in foreign and security policy matters, which is a rare exception in all other political struggles on

Armenian landscape. Instead, he writes: “The present Armenian government declares that it does not want to choose between West and East...” almost claiming this was a revolutionary achievements by the new regime. This is only one example among many that postulate the deep inner contradictions in the book, as if there is an inner struggle between an ambassador and a layman – which is perhaps not a winning quality for a diplomat.

In fact the Armenian Government insisted back in August 2013 that it was counterproductive forcing Yerevan to “make a choice”. Instead, Yerevan offered to develop the bilateral relations into a role-model to showcase EU-Russia potential for collaboration, like the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship by United States, France and Russia in Nagorno Karabakh peace process, where the cooperation is regardless of geopolitical competition or even rivalry in other regions. Yet, it was the policy of Brussels that left no alternative and required “making choices”. Switalski cites a statement by the spokesperson for the EU

High Representative who made it clear on the record that *“if Armenia were to join any customs union, this would not be compatible with concluding a bilateral Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Armenia”*. This statement at the time killed any existing illusions in Armenia, while the Russian-European standoff in Ukraine, the deepened old concerns in Russia and some other factors eventually exhausted any room for dancing on the tightrope for Yerevan. This was the geopolitical reality when Russian President Vladimir Putin came forward with new offers of economic and military cooperation making Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan’s decision intuitive and void of viable alternatives. Switalski’s assertion then that **Brussels had “a strong consensus on one issue, that the West should in no way force Armenia to make a geopolitical choice” is only one example of internal contradictions in this book.** Later explanations that EU statements at the time *“proceeded from a purely technical point of view”* of incompatibility between two suggested customs regulations were nothing but an attempt to trivialize the matter and protect those guilty in this missed opportunity for both Armenia and the EU. It’s remarkable that few pages later Switalski tries to present in his own words that Armenia in fact lacked diplomatic flexibility due to geopolitical limitations and absence of viable alternatives.

The next EU elections produced a more politically flexible European Commission on issues pertaining to the standoff with Russia. Noteworthy that Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule (2010-14) was at all pushed out of both European and his national Czech domestic political landscapes, which, however, could not correct the damage he caused to Armenia-EU relations. In the brackets, both Amb. Switalski and Commissioner Fule graduated the famous MGIMO University in Moscow in early 1980s, which however in no way or shape altered their negative perceptions of Russia.

The above question has direct link with the domestic and reforms agenda. Those NGOs and opinion leaders (some of whom are listed in the book), who had for years been funded by the EU

or affiliated channels and widened their influence in the public domain over years given the media and internet freedoms in the country, started bashing the authorities because of the ‘September 3 decision’ in favor of the Eurasian Economic Union. Late September 2013 [the EU-funded study by ECORYS](#) was released, where the key conclusion was that Armenian GDP growth after signing DCFTA and introduction of new trade regime with the EU was going to be nominal. It was quite strange that this remained only in the official ‘talking points’ of the Armenian authorities and disregarded by others in Yerevan or Brussels. Neither the EU Delegation, nor Brussels and nor the hyper-active civil society representatives ever referred to the document. Neither a new study was ever commissioned. Concluding on the civil society, it’s incumbent on us to note EU’s role ahead of the 2017 parliamentary elections, marked in the book as constructive, when the civil society representatives, encouraged by the EU Delegation to partake in reforming the Electoral Code, opted out from signing the joint document at the end. Hence it’s not surprising at all, that the Armenian authorities had asked Switalski to help them with facilitating the dialogue with the civil society. At a later stage, in the context of signing the CEPA, the Ambassador recalls this request by the Government to help them build bridges with the CSOs. Of course, he tries in the book to clear himself of this image of having decisive influence on the CSOs and presents them as independent actors, yet it had already then become a certain *«le secret de polichinelle»*, as they say.

The issue of Armenia’s “geopolitical choices” is discussed in the context of the 2018 April revolution too. “*People whom you support financially speak from the stage to the demonstrators*”, Switalski recalls a words by a high-level official telling him those days. The Ambassador confirms the widespread perceptions in Armenia that countries in the post-Soviet space, “*including some quite important for Armenia*”, were watching the Armenian revolution and those developments “*with caution*” – given the numbers of Western-funded NGO activists’ or Western organisations’ local representatives inclusion in the high echelons of the new revolutionary authorities. Despite all the above, the retired diplomat’s assessment is that “***the rebalancing of Armenian foreign ties is unavoidable***” and that **Russia is not going to be able to oppose that since the Kremlin lacks alternative political figures on the map and any attempts to overturn this would face Armenian society’s “unified” resistance.**<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, of course, Amb. Switalski notes that the new authorities used any opportunity to reiterate that Armenia’s foreign policy priorities would stay unchanged, which, “according to some Western observers” was quite often unnecessary.

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<sup>2</sup> The particular wording is the following: “*...the rebalancing of Armenian foreign ties is unavoidable. Armenia cannot allow itself to lose sight of emerging opportunities.... Only one Armenian party (though outside of parliament) now postulates stepping out from the Russian-led integration formats. In theory, Russia could resort to strong instruments of pressure to constrain the pro-Western gravitation of Armenia. But applying them would contain a big risk of damaging its image with Armenian society, especially when that society is quite united and there are no political alternatives to play with on the political scene*”.

Switalski is too generous in praising the Armenian revolutionary government, even going so far as to call others to offer them “*a grace period*” and disregard some mistakes or omissions in their early period. Being fair in this philosophy in general, the former Ambassador is so much taken away with his desire to support the revolutionaries (and it’s only one small episode of asking the Prime Minister to sign a baseball cap, one of symbols of the movement, for his wife) that even makes some clearly erroneous claims. Again reiterating the geographical realities, Switalski notes: “*Armenian economic links need rebalancing. The wise strategy of the post-revolutionary government has been to put more emphasis on neighbours*”. Yet the “*wise strategy*” (for example of building new electricity grids with Iran) has been decided upon by the former authorities. In case of Georgia nothing of substance is mentioned at all, the only show of that wisdom being mentioned the increased frequency of bilateral visits. Formerly well quoted expert and now a high-level official that landed in the revolutionary Security Council would in this case sarcastically note that “*presenting dogs between leaders of two countries increased by 100 percent*”.

Anyways, during his tenure in Yerevan Amb. Switalski preferred to stay away from judgments about Armenia’s geopolitical sensitivities, while the local partner organisations of the EU office in Yerevan, as developments showed, were calling for the “*Ukrainian*” scenario.

A seasoned diplomat like Switalski prefers to offer only popular and superficial, but not realistic explanations to this, something that the reader would benefit a lot. Another observation that would have a greater practical impact on the Armenia-EU relations in 2011-13 is that, according to Switalski, by the depth of reforms Armenia was having the fastest progress in the negotiations among all Eastern Partnership countries. But in 2013 it was not about Armenia, but first and foremost Ukraine, then Georgia and Moldova – with consequences already known.

## THE LESSONS LEARNT IN 2013 AND THE SIGNING OF THE CEPA IN 2017 NOVEMBER

It’s only unfortunate that Amb. Switalski does not present the lessons learnt, in his opinion, for Yerevan, Moscow and Brussels in the aftermath of the failure with the 2013 Association Agreement. Instead, he tries to perhaps ridicule the widely accepted conclusion that the new negotiations process that started two years later, in 2015, was EU’s way of “*[having] admitted its own earlier fault*”. If there had not been any forced “*either/or*” choice, if there had not been mobilization of assets in the civil society and the media for the purpose of achieving geopolitical goals, it’s then an open question what triggered the war in Ukraine. The Russian expansionism seems like an easily digested pill to swallow only to sweep EU’s strategic mistakes under the rug.

Being a normative political force, the EU diplomats should never avoid political realism and policies based on sober political calculus. After all, realism continues to remain the guiding star of all states in the international affairs. In this regard it’s only natural that many experts and politicians

in Armenia, as cited in the book, have continuously regarded the EaP as a geopolitical project of separating Ukraine from Russia. Switalski flags in passing that “*EU assistance is not meant to be charity*”, a statement that was frequently heard in 2020 from Brussels with regards to Ukraine’s revolutionary leader Volodymyr Zelensky. This in no way or shape is meant to diminish the role of EU as normative power or soft power or grossly minimize its achievements in the present world order – for which the EU was well qualified to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 “for advancing the causes of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe”.

***“For any diplomat residing in Yerevan, it was clear that [Serzh] Sargsyan wanted the agreement. He instructed his negotiating team to take a constructive approach, and he was ready to engage personally with Armenia’s foreign closest partners to drop their reservations...”***, - Switalski writes, openly admitting that the lessons of 2013 were duly considered at least in Yerevan. Meantime, he is unable to avoid even his misplaced criticism, noting that “...sometimes, like in May 2016, the slow-down (after a very dynamic start) was difficult for the European negotiators to understand” – completely disregarding the fact that the scarce diplomatic resources of small Armenia were busy in May 2016 with the aftermath of the 2016 April War, unleashed by Azerbaijan.

Later he writes, that the CEPA annexes included “...***various benchmarks and standards... [that were] very challenging and sometimes more demanding than the Association Agreements with Georgia or Ukraine***”. This is quite an interesting observation if one keeps in mind the fact that throughout the difficult 2013-14 period no political encouragement was offered to Armenian authorities, in public or otherwise, either from the EU or their affiliated civil society segments, which would have given additional impetus to pro-European factions in the Armenian political elite and advance the European agenda. Overall, the discussion of 2013’s lessons in the book leaves a poor impression in terms of either being superficially informed or avoiding to criticise author’s peers.

*“Some Armenian officials believed by Brussels to be of a pro-European orientation were in private quite in favour of joining the EEAU instead”*, Switalski writes, adding some unnamed sources and references and tried to throw a shadow of uncertainty in various bodies of the government in terms of the foreign policy orientations. In contrast, the Armenian authorities have done their homework and immediately after the formation of the new government in summer 2017 proceeded, by direct instructions of the President, to create an informal interagency Executive Committee, or ExComm, on the level of parliamentary leadership and select deputy ministers, to oversee and synchronize the entire spectrum of actions and statements of the government-as-a-whole – whether in Brussels, Moscow or even Yerevan – to make sure no one would have concerns ahead of the CEPA signing in November. This ExComm met regularly till early December 2017 to produce first synchronized actions and messaging in relevant directions in the aftermath of CEPA’s signing.

Refusing to criticize the revolutionary authorities for their faults and omissions in the CEPA implementation process (ratified in the parliament in April, before the revolution), Switalski only suggests the young and inexperienced officials in the new government have to develop coherent efforts – something that still has to be heard. Sharing some words of appreciation of the 2017-18 technocratic government, Switalski puts another fly in the ointment by alleging that the EU reached “...in the official programme of Karapetyan’s government position number 17” without elaborating what he really means, given that the [2017-22 Government programme](#) leaves no such impression.

Despite the revolutionary euphoria, which Switalski is unable to hide, the EU-Armenia relations experience no revolution of substance. “...the EU fully believed in the good intentions of the new government and trusted its leader... [yet Brussels continued] the pattern of a demand-driven approach”. “The EU increased the level of assistance almost twofold in a period of a few years [till 2020]”, Switalski asserts, while Armenia still lags behind Georgia [exactly twofold in terms of receiving COVID-19 assistance](#).

At the end of the day, Switalski is unable to anyhow explain why “...the 2020 deliverables, which contained very concretely drafted orientation goals... [were] regrettably modest” than expected, as for example on the issue of visa liberalization.

## EU’S ASSISTANCE TO THE ARMENIA’S REFORM AGENDA BEFORE AND AFTER APRIL 2018 AND THE “GEOPOLITICAL” CONTEXT OF THE 2018 REVOLUTION

Ever since 1996 the European Union has been a leading partner in facilitating the Armenian reforms agenda for all successive governments. All EU structures, including the Delegation in Yerevan have actively engaged authorities on wider spectrum of democratization issues. There can be a host of questions pertaining to the effectiveness and efficiency of the EU projects and grants in Armenia, including on the issue of selecting local NGO and individual partners, as well as the content and project goals. These questions re-emerged in April 2018 with a criminal case on [stealing around 1bln Armenian Drams \(approx. \\$25mln\) in grants allocation process](#).

Probably the most noteworthy statement on EU-Armenia relations in the book is the following: “*The revolution in Armenia in 2018 could be seen as a miraculous act producing a ray of hope in times of mounting pessimism. Suddenly, all the transformational talk and reform assistance started making sense*”. In other words, in cooperation with the EU the Armenian authorities had created all necessary institutional basis for the political, social and economic development and, therefore, it would have been fair for Switalski to have courage and praise the deposed authorities for their work in a straightforward manner. **However true, that for a person who called Daredevils of Sassoun (a paramilitary group which took hostage in Yerevan in July 2016) as**

**one of two “most pro-Western and pro-European parties” in Armenia, such appraisal of former authorities would have been unthinkable.** Yet it appears that the former regime was in fact using the EU assistance to create functioning institutional mechanisms in the country despite the assaults and criticism heard from all corners of political spectrum (often justified on other matters), while the revolutionary regime proved to be incapable of developing any new agenda in political relations with EU in 2018-2020, leave alone the near absence of foreign investments. *This incompetence further was demonstrated in the course of Second War in Nagorno Karabakh in Fall 2020, albeit Switalski’s book was released two weeks before.*

Discussing the role of international organisations in Armenia, including the EU, Switalski notes that in post-Soviet space they had adopted the **principle of “strategic patience”**. This entailed efforts not to allow backsliding on human rights in short term and democratic transformation in longer term period – when conducive opportunities for that emerge.

Such a conducive opportunity emerged with the April revolution. And Switalski adds that *“...definitely, the Armenian model is replicable”* – to the awe of those drawing geopolitical conspiracies.

After drawing his narrative of post-revolutionary euphoria, Switalski writes probably the most sincere account in the entire book about the Armenian Velvet Revolution: **“Yet, quite quickly some Western politicians seemed to lose the clarity of judgement about the post-revolutionary situation”**. He offers three simple examples:

- The new leaders did not consider it important to explain to the West what exactly had happened in Armenia and what were the main directions of post-revolutionary reforms, *“probably believing that it was all so obvious and needed no explanation whatsoever”*.
- *“For any diplomat working in Armenia, it was—due to the accessibility of officials and politicians—a professional pleasure. All doors were always open...”* In post-revolutionary period the Western diplomats did not understand why the authorities are so closed. Sometimes this was attributed to their lack of experience and certainly a lack of a clear communication strategy towards the West.
- The new government watched the West with caution and suspects, considering perhaps that the EU had sugarcoated the mistakes of the past regime. This suspicion was also about the business circles in the West.
- **“Some Western politicians and diplomats were afraid that such a distrustful approach towards foreign investments made before the revolution would create a precedent, allowing any new government of Armenia to backtrack on previous commitments”, which, according to Switalski, had dramatic effect on the government’s ability to attract new foreign investments. Moreover, some revolutionaries began speaking in**

**favor of preserving the mode of governance which made Armenia “a one man show... that smells inevitably of voluntarism, and voluntarism does not sell well [in the West]”.**

**In any of the above three points raised in the book Amb. Switalski, a Polish national, does not want to speak about the dangers of sliding into political populism – whether in domestic or Armenia-EU affairs. It’s strange because same populism has created many ills and issues in his native Poland, as well as relations with Brussels. Maybe that populism is exactly the reason of why, as he claims, the corridors of powers were shut before him and other Western diplomats breaking with the tradition of the preceding years. The populist revolutionaries, as they had flagged in numerous occasions, now considered Armenia “a bastion of democracy” and alleged henceforth all foreign powers will have to bow before the Armenian state and its people. Hard to speculate whether this is shortsightedness or naivety – on both sides.**

It’s unfortunate, but not surprising, that Armenia’s place in the priority lists of either Russia or the West did not improve. Of course, one may explain this failure with reference to the changing international atmosphere, discussed in the beginning of this book review. Yet given the generous appraisal of the top EU diplomat throughout his text, the only plausible conclusion remains the incapacity of the new Armenian authorities. Neither the “bothsidesism” between democratic Armenia and authoritarian Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh peace process shifted,<sup>3</sup> nor the EU assistance increased, nor foreign investments flooded in. Switalski’s attempt to claim “the Republican elite” had been the reason of failures with the EU, and former President Robert Kocharian was to be blamed for similar failures with the Kremlin look like excuses for the new elite. The assertion that, nevertheless, post-revolutionary Armenia had its “smoothest development” of relations with the EU still needs further proofs. **“Obviously, Armenia can and should have high expectations concerning the attitude of the West. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible...”**, retired Ambassador remarks with a grain of confusion.

Getting to his conclusions and recommendations, Switalski offers probably the most outstanding observation of his book, which puts a bold question mark on all the praise for the new authorities:

***“The assessment of government policies should be fair. After the revolution, the West granted to the new ruling team a grace period refraining from open criticism when it comes to the delays in the implementation of the common agenda. The EU should make it clear that it supports policies and not personalities. Policies that deviate from the European values and the common agenda should be timely identified and exposed”.***

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<sup>3</sup> Note: The book is marked to have been concluded in late May and released in September 2020, two weeks before the Second Karabakh War was unleashed by Azerbaijan on September 27. Hence the book doesn’t discuss the war, hence neither does the book review – to maintain the fairness in treating this work.

It's in fact unfortunate that the author often chose to offer wishful thinking and legitimize popular narratives instead of bird's-eye view level reasonable observations from where the Ambassador sat at the most critical period of modern Armenian history. That's a lost opportunity with this book many readers will find. One of the most vivid examples of this wishful thinking is the assertion that post-revolutionary Armenian society is unified. In contrast, the public opinion surveys, including by reputable International Republican Institute since August 2018, register between 45-55% rejection rate which is a shoutout of a more complex situation of at least that a sizeable segment in the society is emerging into a silent majority. Maybe even disillusioned and disenfranchised. But Switalski is not a hopeless optimist, of course. He admits that the revolutionary euphoria is evaporating when he writes a one-liner that "*...in the revolutionary camp.... the revolutionary rhetoric erodes and becomes less and less mobilising*".

## THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR THE NAGORNO KARABAKH PEACE PROCESS FOLLOWING THE 2018 REVOLUTION

"*The revolution generated a lot of sympathy for Armenia throughout the world*", Switalski writes. But was this meant to or could it at all positively influence the national security issues Armenia faced? Or how could it even open "a window of opportunity" in the prospects for Nagorno Karabakh peace process?

You don't need to read any reputable author to understand the simple truth that the nature of Azerbaijan's (as well as Turkish) regime and their maximalist approaches vis-à-vis Armenia, irrespective of the April revolution, would remain the same. The only shift possible could be with the reaction and position of the Armenian Government, which is exactly what happened with the two now ill-famous narratives offered by the new Prime Minister. Switalski reiterates and legitimizes these narratives in his book, namely:

- *Armenia cannot represent the people of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) in the negotiations process, since it's not elected by them. Artsakh has to be represented by its own elected authorities.*
- *"Any solution has to satisfy the peoples of Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan".*

Before turning to the post-revolutionary developments Ambassador Switalski reiterates in a number of passages and contexts his reading of the Armenian national security environment and, in particular, the Nagorno Karabakh peace process.

"*Armenians' ultimate point of reference for judging any developments relating to their country is security*", he writes. According to him, since 2015 "*...[Serzh] Sargsyan was exposed to quite strong and unified international pressure to go for a settlement, even a provisional one. The diplomatic circles in Yerevan were speculating about a so-called Lavrov Plan...*". Meanwhile, he

suggests, Armenian diplomats were denying the existence of any “Lavrov plan”, even though many foreign diplomats in town were even speculating about more specific points and content of the alleged plan. According to Switalski, that was indicative that the Armenian side is not at all satisfied with the proposals and behind the scenes some even resented that “*it looked as if it had been drafted in Baku*”.

*It must probably be underlined that the EU in general, and Ambassador Switalski in particular have never been part of the secret negotiation process. Therefore, Switalski’s claims in this regard may not be regarded as trustworthy. There is only thin possibility that he could have been informed of various phases of recent negotiations or the outcomes of those high-level meetings beyond the political speculations or gossips among the corps diplomatique.*

The following three years (2015-18) can be summarized in the following quote from the book:

***“The April 2016 war compounded the shock. Sargsyan looked like he was succumbing to the external pressure...In the perception of the diplomatic community at that time, he wanted to delay the deal but not to exclude it... The July 2016 events (i.e. takeover of the police station by paramilitaries of ‘Daredevils of Sassoun’) gave Sargsyan a strong pretext to delay the deal... His supposedly initial proposal on 23 April for delaying his resignation till autumn 2018 was motivated just by the presumed responsibility to conclude a deal... Western diplomats interpreted his resignation as an act of patriotism”.***

To what extent Switalski’s commentary or the level of his awareness corresponded to the facts on the ground can be tested by his recollection of the April War of 2016. There he almost verbatim reiterates and legitimizes the narratives of the new government (then opposition): *the army had no weapons, they had no food...* These legends were created and then for years reiterated by the political opposition and the civil society activists – later turned into subject of study by a special parliamentary commission by revolutionaries, their findings still in January 2021 being hidden from the public reach.

The book reveals that the EU have in the past commissioned studies to enquire about the socio-economic implications of the Karabakh peace deal, which will be interesting for the EU to put on public domain. Those reports suggested that the resolution can increase the Armenian GDP only by few percentage points. “*The European Union has also committed itself to contributing to the post-conflict rehabilitation effort*”, Switalski writes. Nevertheless, by the time of publication of the memoir in September 2020, no conducive environment for the cause of peace had been created, and even a short escalation on interstate border in Tavush/Tovuz area was reported in July 2020. Switalski suggests that new “conditionality clauses” have to be added to development assistance projects for Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to exert more pressure on both. It’s probably clear

that financial assistance packages with new strings attached were going to add more pressure on Armenia, than oil-rich Azerbaijan.

Noting that the revolution has shifted attitudes towards Armenia into more positive realm particularly in the West, Switalski adds that in the new situation, “*the Armenian Revolution became a factor that made the simple continuation of this [symmetry of attitudes to Armenia and Azerbaijan... in order to show neutrality in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict] policy more complicated*”. Unfortunately, the two years since the revolution proved that the new elite wasted this opportunity in the peace process – especially with the United States and France, two Western co-chairs in the OSCE Minsk Group.

## INSTEAD OF AN AFTERWORD

One last question that we have to ask ourselves in the context of present review is whether Ambassador Switalski’s mission in Armenia has to be evaluated as a success or a failure. Judging by the memoirs and observations, shared with us in the book, the author eventually failed to strike a delicate balance in identifying a golden middle between his personal feelings and, on the other hand, political and professional assessments. The book is full of internal contradictions, unlimited drive to do wishful thinking and, most importantly, does not offer meaningful strategic directions of Armenia-EU relations in the future, except for a suggestion to reward the Armenian people with visa free regime to Europe after the revolution. It’s clear, however, that the visa liberalisation is not going to be achieved in the next few years either not so much because of incapable Armenian authorities, but the systematic and widespread violations of the same regime by nationals of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and the overall migrant/refugee crisis in Europe.