



Figure 1: A poster prepared by the Armenian Environmental Front "Dig Armenia until dry" ArmEcoFront / Facebook.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Armenian economy collapsed. Starting in 1993, the government took a neo-liberal path and launched ambitious International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored economic reforms by privatizing most public companies. As a result, a small elite concentrated political and economic power into their own hands and ruled the country until 2018. Before the "Velvet Revolution" (April 2018), which toppled the Republican Party ruling elite, lack of governmental accountability, bad governance, and systemic corruption were a severe threat to Armenia's environment. Under the "oligarchic" system, the environment fell prey to the economic interests of the business elite, who occupied key positions in both the executive and legislative branches of government.² Due to the trade blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan (1993 and 1990 respectively) and because of the Nagorno-Karabakh self-determination war (1990-1994), the Armenian leadership chose the path of extractive economic institutions; the mining sector was seen as the locomotive of Armenia's economic growth.

Despite the negligible contribution of the mining sector to Armenia's GDP, mining accounted for over half of all exports according to a World Bank 2016 report.³ With dozens of mines in operation, mining is considered an important economic sector in Armenia, and it is the biggest recipient of foreign investment in the country.⁴

However, the absence of clear mining policy and strategy in Armenia has given birth to two debates:

To Mine or Not to Mine? A Post-Revolutionary Debate on Mining in Armenia

YEGHIA TASHJIAN

yeghia.tash@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Armenian economy collapsed. Starting in 1993, the government took a neo-liberal path and launched ambitious International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored economic reforms by privatizing most public companies. As a result, a

The first debate is supported by the mining industry, international agencies and industrialists, who claim that the mining sector will create jobs in rural and impoverished areas and will have a positive impact on the economy. They argue that they will protect the environment from any damage and will also take measures to rehabilitate areas after mining is completed. However, grassroots environmental justice activists such as the Armenian Ecological Front and other “Civic initiatives” believe that the way mining is conducted has disastrous consequences on the environment and the well-being of citizens.

This second debate concentrates on the idea that under neoliberalism mining is harmful. Mining and mine tailing have led to widespread deforestation and contaminated rivers. Environmentalists argue that direct action against mining operations is justified because they have a moral obligation to ensure that future Armenian generations will inherit a country whose rivers, land, and air are not contaminated with heavy metals.

With the resignation of former PM Serzh Sarkissyan in April 2018, the ousting of the Republican Party from power, and the rise to power of civil society-backed PM Nigol Pashinyan, environmental activists thought their chances to deter mining were high. However, they were soon to be disappointed. As protestors closed the roads to the mines, the mining industry issued warnings and called on the government to use violence to expel them. Hence, the new government was caught between the two demands; PM Pashinian was under huge pressure from both sides. On the one hand, he was hoping to avoid alienating the activists who helped bring him to power, but on the other hand, he needed to attract foreign investment to fulfill his promises of economic growth and development.

This paper will address how these debates are contextualized within the discourse of post-revolutionary Armenia. In a neoliberal economic system, where the discourse rotates around economic growth, sometimes the environment falls prey to industrialization and foreign investments. I will highlight the main debates argued by international and local mining industries, economists, and environmental grassroots activists, focusing on the mining case of “*Amulsar*”, a mountain in southern Armenia rich in mineral resources, especially gold. The paper will explain how Armenia’s mining sector developed under neoliberalism, identify key environmentalist movements, their disagreements and demands, and finally analyze the role of international actors, wealthy businessmen and political actors in shaping the debates in post-revolutionary Armenia.

The paper will be divided into four sections. The first section will introduce the two key debates, the research question, and the methodology. The second section will briefly explain how mining as a global trend is

perceived in third world countries, under what conditions it was developed in Armenia and how the first resistance groups emerged. The third section will illustrate the two debates which preceded the revolution and further developed after it, the clash of interests and the government's position. Finally the fourth section will conclude and summarize the main debates. Primary and secondary data such as social media posts, academic papers, articles, and official statements will be analyzed. Discourse analysis will be employed to analyze the neoliberal discourse when it comes to economic growth in developing countries and the fact that the environment falls prey to the interests of profit makers. I will highlight and analyze the main narratives used by both sides that have fostered these debates. With the political openness after the April 2018 revolution, these debates have also moved to social media, where both sides have used this arena for their own benefit, to promote their ideas and engage in a "propaganda war".

NEOLIBERALISM, MINING AND THE FRUITS OF "CIVIC INITIATIVES"

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenia tried to catch up to Eastern European states with a quick introduction of neoliberal economic policies. Mining was positioned within this context, and the environment and other industries fell prey to it. As a result, a new wave of the environmental justice movement spread in Armenia; its aim was not just a struggle for environmental rights but also, broadly speaking, about the socio-economic well-being of citizens.

The "Dutch disease" hits Armenia

In 1977 the *Economist* first coined the term "Dutch Disease," referring to the poor management of the natural gas sector in the Netherlands.⁵ The sector began dominating the economy at the expense of other sectors, leaving the country highly dependent on the quantity and price of its natural resources.⁶ Later, the term was used to describe similar cases in which a territory faced a boom in natural resources and a decline in other industrial sectors. The dependence on exporting raw materials hinders states from becoming industrialized and promotes extractive economic systems. The imbalance between different industrial sectors and the labor flows towards the extractive sector create a "de-industrialization" process.⁷ This trend has been widely observed in Africa, Latin America and other third-world countries. Acemoglu and Robinson argue that extractive economic institutions developed by states only benefit a narrow segment of elites.⁸ Such a policy widens the gap between different social and economic classes and produces social inequality. The debates around mining have focused on the theory of

"Dutch disease," arguing that countries rich in mineral resources are being overexploited by powerful countries and corporations.⁹

At the beginning of the 1980s mining began to move from the global North to the global South since foreign investors were attracted to countries with less stringent environmental policies. For many, this was seen as a new form of imperial expansion.¹⁰ Armenia with its rich mineral resources and lax mining regulations was attractive to many foreign mining companies.

Neoliberalism and the development of the mining industry in Armenia

When Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union, the government privatized many public sectors. The mining sector was privatized in 1999 with a lenient taxation system and almost no quantitative trade restrictions in order to attract foreign direct investment.¹¹ As a result, by 2005 Armenia was considered the country with the most favorable investment environment in the region.¹² It should be noted that development aid and technical assistance to the post-Soviet countries arrived "ideologically packaged".¹³ That is assistance was conditional on democratic reforms. Moreover, capitalism was never questioned, and any anti-capitalist opposition was suppressed under the pretext of a "communist return". It was during this period that many civil society groups, donor-driven or accountable to higher authority, and NGOs flourished. These organizations were disconnected from local communities, marginalized the poor or less educated people, and were viewed with hostility by conservative societies.¹⁴

In Armenia anti-mining activism emerged as a result of the introduction of neoliberal policies and practices and the failure of NGOs and civil societies to address environmental issues.¹⁵ Resistance to mining, locally known as "Civic Initiatives," was organized by city-based students and youth.¹⁶ Unlike other environmentalist groups, "Civic Initiative" groups such as the Armenian Ecological Front, refused any foreign aid and adopted radical methods - like violence - since they viewed the environmental problem as part of state-sponsored corruption supported by western-backed neoliberal funding.¹⁷ This new wave of civic activism was a result of youth frustration and anger at donor-oriented NGOs as people lost hope and lacked trust in them. This is why they rejected the "NGOization" of civil society and described themselves as "self-determined" citizens who put greater emphasis on independence, indigenous solidarity and self-organization and called people to become the "owners" of their towns and villages.¹⁸

These groups are distinct from NGOs; they are informal, volunteer-based, horizontally structured, lack an organizational hierarchy, and, most importantly, they reject receiving any funding from donors or governments.¹⁹ It is important to note that a horizontal structure is valued since active

participation of all members is encouraged and decisions are made by consensus. Unlike the older generation, who argue that the state must provide services, these groups raise awareness that it is peoples' responsibility to clean up parks and defend public property.²⁰ They argue that environmental problems are connected to the systematic corruption, uncontrolled overexploitation and social injustice that Armenia is facing. Their protests target international development agencies which fund mining projects and governments which support their neoliberal policies. Their practices and discourses are partly shaped by global trends and influenced by radical leftist anti-establishment ideas. For example in 2012 several "Occupy movements" emerged in post-Soviet countries. While challenging corruption and authoritarian governments, they also embraced anti-neoliberal ideas.²¹ In this context, similar to the environmental justice movements in the US, the protests by "Civic Initiative" groups were not only about environmental issues but also about human rights, political participation, and social justice.

The emergence of two debates in post-revolutionary discourse

Two debates have developed regarding the mining sector in Armenia, the post-"Velvet Revolution" government, whose aim was to bring stability and economic prosperity, found itself wedged between two uncompromising interests. The first debate was formulated by environmental activists, who played an important role in bringing PM Pashinyan to power, while the second debate was based on the interests of international agencies and industrialists, who promised to bring foreign investment and economic development through the mining industry.

Economy First!

The mining sector and its supporters argue that the sector will bring economic development and will not harm the environment. "Lydian Armenia" mining company, registered in a British tax haven and headquartered in the US with shareholders from US, Canadian and European banks and investment funds, used Armenia's corrupt mining legacy to its advantage.²² The company advanced a narrative arguing that it would be an example of responsible mining in Armenia and bring lasting economic benefits. With the support of foreign and local economic lobbies, it advanced the discourse that mining is important in Armenia and it would bring development and economic growth.

For many industrialists, poverty rather than mining is the major threat to Armenia. They argue that between 2008 and 2016, "Lydian Armenia" paid over 3.3 million USD to different municipalities, and this money was invested in heating systems in schools so that "children don't have to wear coats in the classroom".²³ Moreover, roads and highways were renovated through these

funds. The proponents of mining simply argue that mining is the backbone of the economies in Canada and Sweden, with both countries meeting high international environmental standards.²⁴ "Lydian Armenia" also argued that it has produced an "Environmental and Social Impact Assessment" of more than 5500 pages, written by the best environmental scientists in Armenia and worldwide, and spent 6 million USD for this purpose.²⁵ They also warned that any opposition would endanger the flow of foreign investment to the country. Hayk Aloyan, the Managing Director of Lydian Armenia, argued that strong economies are created by investment, and that Armenia must ensure a healthy investment climate. For them, business and environmental integrity are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other.²⁶ Industrialists argued that business needed to make a profit so that society would benefit from investment. Thus the success of Amulsar was to be a success story which would attract further foreign investment in the near future.

Lara Ghazaryan, the Social Sustainability Manager at "Lydian Armenia," claims that mining has direct and indirect benefits for Armenia's economy.²⁷ First, it creates jobs. She stated that over 1300 people worked in Amulsar mining, they got the highest salaries when compared to other sectors, and 40% of the workforce came from the surrounding villages.²⁸ Based on the company's assumptions, when production starts, 700 permanent jobs will be created, and they expect to pay 40-50 million USD in taxes to the state budget annually.²⁹ Already Lydian Armenia is one of the largest taxpayers in the country.

As environmental activists blocked the roads leading to the mines, a propaganda war was waged on social media between the advocates of both sides. The supporters of the mining industry argued that the majority of the protestors came from an NGO background, were based in Yerevan, which is



Figure 2: Photograph taken in Jermuk, the poster reads, "Our gold is our water." (Photo: Tehmine Yenokyan)

far from the mining sites, and did not possess any scientific knowledge about mining and the environment but rather espoused the "dogmatic notion that mining is harmful".³⁰ Armen Stepanyan, Lydian Armenia Company's Sustainability Director, has refuted accusations from the environmentalists, saying that the company will take all necessary measures

to rehabilitate the area after the mining is finished.³¹ He also has stated that all unnecessary infrastructure will be removed and the land returned to the previous owners.³² However, Aragon and Rud argue that even if mines are returned to farmers, the land needs decades before it can be used for agricultural purposes.³³ When environmentalists suggested supporting local agriculture (such as exporting local honey, since the ton of honey is more profitable than a ton of copper, and tourism instead of mining), Aloyan sarcastically asked whether Armenia could annually export 1000 tons of honey, equivalent to the weight of the copper for export.³⁴ He also has cited the example of Australia, saying that thanks to mining, this once agrarian society is now a modern industrial state.³⁵

Finally, "Lydian Armenia" supporters claim that the accusations of the environmentalists are just "myths" and do not meet scientific standards.³⁶ They cited a number of "independently conducted environmental impact studies" demonstrating that the company complies with the strictest international environmental safety standards.³⁷ These findings were confirmed by the European Bank of Development (major shareholder at Lydian), International Finance Corporation.³⁸ While the World Bank refuted some of the studies conducted by others, its report assesses how mining can contribute to "sustainable economic growth and development". The report also claims that there is a significant number of small mining companies that are poorly managed and cannot be seen as environmentally sustainable projects and that the government needs to come up with adequate plans and funds to rehabilitate mine sites.³⁹ Finally, the report notes that the factors behind the lack of environmental sustainability are the irresponsible behavior of companies and failure in supervising and monitoring the activities of some institutions.⁴⁰

"Amulsar Will Remain a Mountain!"

Soil is a basic environmental component of our ecosystem and vital for our survival, but at the same time, it is the most endangered component and open to becoming toxic from various man-made pollutants. Heavy metals are a dangerous group of soil pollutants simply because they cannot be naturally degraded and are able to accumulate in different parts of the food chain.⁴¹ Heavy metal pollution poses risks to agriculture and the health of the people living in the territory.⁴² Mining and smelting operations are the main causes of heavy metal contamination due to activities such as mineral excavation and the disposal of tailings and wastewater around mines. Heavy metal pollution threatens the food chain and also causes respiratory problems, especially among children and the elderly.⁴³

People did not protest before since they felt "Lydian Armenia" was protected by the corrupt state. However, as the government collapsed and a new popular government was installed, locals realized their voice would be heard.⁴⁴ In May 2018, roughly 70 people gathered and discussed what should be done about the mine.⁴⁵ There was no direct voting, and slowly a consensus was generated in the absence of official leaders. Those gathered were mostly youths and Karabakh war veterans. Thus, some in the protestors had military discipline and knew guerrilla tactics, which were used in blockading the roads and destroying the infrastructure of the mining company.⁴⁶ As clashes intensified between the activists chanting "Amulsar will remain a mountain" and mine workers worried about their future, the mining company asked the government to use violence to expel the protesters.⁴⁷

Locals started to complain that tourism in the area was in decline because of the mining project. Gevorg Safaryan, a political activist, believes that the mine at Amulsar is like a toxic bomb planted under Armenia's water resources. He noted that the mine is located not far from the Lake Sevan, the country's largest source of fresh water, so it not only pollutes the fresh water but is also a strategic danger to the state.⁴⁸

The activists criticize foreign actors too. Anna Shahnazaryan, an environmentalist from the Armenian Ecological Front, believes that there is strong international pressure on the new Armenian government from the US and UK on behalf of "Lydian Armenia".⁴⁹ The Armenian Environmental Front Civic Initiative has accused the European Bank of Development of not only supporting and financing the Amulsar mining project but also of Western colonization. They are driving villagers from their farms, and this, they argue, is in itself a colonial mindset which is engaged in modern economic colonization.⁵⁰ For environmental justice activists, Amulsar has symbolized the expansion of corporate greed at the expense of the environment and peoples' health.⁵¹ These activists claim that mining has created health issues and caused environmental damage. They complain that mining activities have not been properly regulated or monitored and have increased poverty in the area, pushing families to migrate from rural areas.

Some activists have taken other tracks. They have raised the issue of leopard migration as Amulsar is an intersection point where leopards migrate during different seasons. In order to protect this endangered animal, environmentalists have demanded the preservation of these areas and raised concerns that mining activities would destroy forests and contaminate water drunk by the villages and leopards.⁵² They are hopeful that several regional environmental organizations will join in their lobbying activities and eventually the government will interfere on their behalf. Nevertheless, until now the

activists have failed to reach a solution while the court has ordered an end to all kinds of protest around the mining site.⁵³

The First Exam: Fail or Pass!

PM Pashinyan, once a sympathizer of the environmentalist front, was forced to mediate between the grassroots activists who brought him to power and western companies and investors who promise to bring the economic development that his government so badly needs. Pashinyan, a while ago a fierce opposition voice to mining, called the activists to “face facts rather than emotions” when he visited Amulsar.⁵⁴ He was criticized by some in his inner circles, such as Erik Grigoryan, the Minister of Nature Protection, who expressed his opposition to the Amulsar project.⁵⁵

Pashinyan, now apparently views the environmentalists’ actions as a possible threat to his authority and a danger to his country’s international economic standing. On June 25, in one of his famous Facebook live streams, he criticized the protestors, stating that they were sabotaging efforts and creating a deadlocked situation for the government. He went further and called for a halt to their civil disobedience.⁵⁶ However, by calling the actions of the activists sabotage, the PM contradicted himself, since he used the same tactics while toppling the ruling government in April 2018.⁵⁷ Encouraged by the PM’s statement, “Lyidian Armenia” threatened that if the government took a decision to shut down the company, then legal action would be taken and the government would be sued in international courts for compensation, thus tarnishing the image of the new government.⁵⁸ It is clear that Armenia’s low annual budget and high level of state debt is being exploited by the company to put pressure on the government,⁵⁹ blocking all its maneuvering options.

As the conflict of interest between the protestors and the company intensified on the one hand, and the government’s inability to solve the crisis was clear on the other hand, foreign pressure on the government increased. The US ambassador interfered, increasing pressure by stating that Lyidian would continue to serve as an example of “responsible mining operating transparently in line with international environmental and social standards”.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, while commenting on the protests, he said that the US was pleased to see Armenia conducting an environmental audit of Lyidian’s Amulsar project.⁶¹ In parallel, the American Chamber of Commerce in Armenia, a leading US business association in America that works closely with the US embassy in Yerevan, welcomed the PM’s decision to bring “international best practice” into the mining sector in Armenia, considering the undeniable role that the mining sector plays in the Armenian economy.⁶² By making such statements, the Americans hinted that the continuation of the

mining project was important for them and any termination might harm American-Armenian business relations.

Finally, few realize that with pollution of Armenian's main freshwater sources, the country will be at risk of importing fresh water from outside, thus increasing its dependence on regional countries. Armenia, which is trying to minimize its economic dependence on Russia, may find itself forced to import fresh water from Moscow. The latter, as with the flow of gas to Armenia, which has been monopolized by the Russian state-led Gazprom company, Moscow will use this opportunity to increase its political leverage by using the "water weapon" against Yerevan's new government, which is pro-Western in Moscow's view.⁶³

The project has turned into an official exam causing anxiety to the ruling elite and creating a challenge on both the domestic and international fronts.

CONCLUSION

It is not clear how and when the government will come to a final conclusion regarding the Amulsar mining. One thing is clear – that the maneuvering space for the government is narrow. The environmental justice movement is fighting to halt the mining activity. It is also questionable and still uncertain whether the fight against "Lydian Armenia" is just a small part of a bigger campaign against all mining activities in the country.

On the other hand, there is a popular demand to put an end to poverty, unemployment, and emigration. People, especially the young, who were the dominant force behind the revolution, hope for a stable and prosperous future. Mining companies, international agencies, and some industrialists, on the other hand, are escalating pressure on the government to take a quick decision in their favor, saying or else the country's international image will be tarnished and foreign investments will be halted. Between these two conflicting positions, the government may find a middle way and continue pursuing negotiations with both sides. While PM Pashnyan is thirsty for foreign investment, at the same time he is cautious not to alienate the activists and encourage internal opposition within the ruling elite. The mining sector, which promises to open up new jobs and attract foreign investment, may also cause a severe environmental crisis. "To mine or not to mine" or try to find a middle ground; either way, the government has to sit for the exam.

ENDNOTES

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**ՀԱՆՔԱՐԴԻՒՆԱԲԵՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ. ԱՅՈՐ, ԹԷ՛ Ո՛Չ:
ՀՀ ՅԵՏՅԵՂԱՓՈԽՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՏՐԱՄԱԽՕՍՈՒԹԻՒՆ ՄԸ
(Ամփոփում)**

ԵՂԻԱ ԹԱՇԾԵԱՆ

yeghia.tash@gmail.com

Ուսումնասիրությունը կը քննարկէ փաշինեանական յեղափոխութենէն ետք Հայաստանի Հանրապետութեան դիմագրաւած տնտեսական, աշխատանքային, ընկերային, առողջական այլեայլ հարցերու քաղաքականութեան ուղեգիծ որդեգրելու մարտահրաւերները:

Յօդուածը համառոտակի կը ներկայացնէ Հայաստանի Հանրապետութեան յետխորհրդային տնտեսական փոփոխութիւնները, կ'արժեւորէ զանոնք, կ'անդրադառնայ անոնց ունեցած հետեւանքներուն եւ կը ծանրանայ ՀՀ դիմագրաւած նոր խնդիրներուն:

Տնտեսական բարեկարգումներու ծիրին առումով լուսարծակի տակ առնելով հանքարդիւնաբերութիւնը, յօդուածը կը կեդրոնանայ Ամուլսարի շուրջ յառաջացած տարակարծութեան եւ կը բարձրացնէ առողջութիւն – տնտեսական բարելաւում հակասութեան խնդիրը, մանաւանդ որ ՀՀ-ի համար հումքի արդիւնաբերութիւնը կը նկատուի տնտեսական հիմնական բաղադրիչ:

Յօդուածը կը քննարկէ այս ծիրին մէջ հայրենի բնակչութեան կարծիքի բեւեռացումը եւ պետութեան ինչպիսի քաղաքականութիւն մը որդեգրելու խնդիրը: Հեղինակը հայրենի տնտեսական քաղաքականութեան ուղեգիծի որդեգրումը կը նկատէ փաշինեանական մեծ քննափորձ՝ յեղափոխութեան օրերուն իր կատարած խոստումներուն եւ դառն իրականութեան դիմաց: