

Derision at "Servile" Putin Fan Club in Armenia

Author: [Arpi Harutyunyan](#)
[Haykuhi Barseghyan](#)

Comic turn, or nefarious plot to project Russian power?

The first thing to catch the visitor's eye on entering the club, located in the centre of Armenia's capital Yerevan, is a floor-to-ceiling portrait of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Other walls have more images of Putin, who was recently re-elected for a fresh six-year-term.

Such portraits might be common in Russia, but in Armenia they are a rarity. This is the Putin Club, set up in honour of the Russian leader by Ararat Stepanyan, who argues that Armenians could learn a lot from his hero.

"We see in him a leader who keeps his word in every situation," Stepanyan said.

The club, which opened its doors on February 2, is clearly well-funded, and Stepanyan says it was paid for personally by Andranik Nikoghosyan, an Armenian living in Moscow who heads a youth association of the former Soviet states.

Armenia retains close political and economic ties to Russia, but many here are offended by idea of honouring a living politician, especially one from another country.

"They could at least have opened a club in honour of an Armenian national figure like Aram Manukyan, founder of the [1918] First Republic," Levon Shirinyan, who holds the chair of politics and history at Yerevan's teacher-training university. "If you open a club for Putin, you might as well open an Obama club or an Ahmedinejad club."

The venture, Manukyan said, was an "exercise in servility".

Officials in Armenia are at best ambivalent about the Putin Club. When Education Minister Armen Ashotyan, from the ruling Republican Party, was asked about it on his Facebook page, he replied, "It's a matter of choice for the individual, but I would not join such a club."

Web users have mostly mocked the concept. The Armcomedy group made a spoof film of an opening ceremony complete with vodka. Some Armenian media outlets missed the joke and reported it as if it were real, to the delight of the comedians.

Armcomedy member Sergei Sargsyan said the hoax was meant to show the "absurdity and servility of the real club, and the way it brings shame on the whole country".

The joke was lost on Stepanyan, who promised to open branches of his club in all major towns of Armenia. The next one will open in Ararat region in the south, he said.

There is no formal procedure for joining the Putin Club - anyone interested can sign up to its newsletter to get information about upcoming events.

The club has held three discussion events in the last month, focusing on the Commonwealth of Independent States, Putin's proposed Eurasian Union, and the state of Russian-Armenian relations.

Arman Ghukasyan, 20, is head of a youth movement called International, and took part in all three discussions, although he is not a particular fan of the Russian president.

"If there's an interesting idea, you can use the club as a venue to discuss it," he said. "I can't see anything wrong with it. All they have done so far is hold round-table meetings."

Analysts say the Putin Club reflects the careful balancing act of Armenia's foreign policy. With no diplomatic ties with one neighbour, Turkey, and a hostile relationship with another, Azerbaijan, the room for manoeuvre is limited, and Russia is a key guarantor of both security and economic survival.

At the same time, many Armenians are keen to avoid total reliance on Moscow. According to Abraham Gasparyan, a politics lecturer at Yerevan State University, Russian influence over major sectors like energy and communications has prevented Armenia from expanding its horizons.

Despite this, Gasparyan said, "there are now attempts to gradually move away from Russian authoritarian political traditions, by means of European-style reforms".

Arpi Harutyuyan is a correspondent for Armnews television. Haykuhi Barseghyan reports for the Ankakh daily and its website ankakh.am.

Location: Armenia

Topic: Diplomacy

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/derision-servile-putin-fan-club-armenia>