

Anti-Russian and anti-government protests in Armenia

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Thousands of people took to the streets on 15 January in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, to protest against Russia and the government. Several dozen people were injured. The protests were provoked by the murder of an Armenian family of seven committed by a soldier from the 102nd Russian military base located in Gyumri. The protesters demanded that the suspect, who is being kept inside the base, be surrendered to the Armenian justice system. More demonstrations were held over the following days in other Armenian cities, in front of government buildings, Russian diplomatic missions and the Russian military base. The protesters were outraged by the fact that the suspect was being kept beyond the reach of Armenian investigators and by the Armenian government's ambivalent stance on the further course of the proceedings (initially, the Armenian Prosecutor General announced that he would not insist on the Russian soldier being surrendered to the Armenian authorities. The president and the prime minister also made rather equivocal statements only a few days after the tragedy).

Russia has made attempts to calm the situation through reconciliatory statements from the ambassador, the commander of the base and then President Putin. However, the soldier in question has not been surrendered to the Armenian authorities.

Commentary

- The protests have reflect the growing resentment among the Armenian public with regard to Russia. Armenians protest against the lawlessness of the Russian troops stationed in their country and, in the broader context, the lack of respect for Armenian sovereignty. The view that Moscow's protectorate has failed to deliver the expected results in the areas of security and the economy is becoming ever more widespread. For Armenians most worrisome is Russia's enhanced co-operation with Azerbaijan and Turkey in recent months (news of weapons supplies to Baku, the intensification of political ties, talk of a gas pipeline crossing Turkey). The Gyumri murder has now raised the additional concern that Russian troops pose a threat to Armenians themselves, even if they are the deterrent to the Turkish threat. Furthermore, Armenia's integration with the Eurasian Economic Union, which was enforced by Moscow, has so far had negative effects on the country's economy: the volume of investments has fallen, trade with the EU, so far the key trade partner, has fallen back, and the Armenian economy has become more sensitive to economic downturns in Russia.

- It is rather unlikely that the Gyumri massacre will undermine Yerevan's pro-Russian policy. Nevertheless, it will have an additional and lasting adverse effect on the perception of Russia in Armenia. It may be expected that the policy of surrendering even more parts of the country's sovereignty to Moscow will be met with growing public resistance.
- The anti-governmental tone of the protests is a symptom of increasing public dissatisfaction with the situation in the country. Over the past few months, the prices of food and basic commodities have risen, the value of remittances from Armenian emigrants working in Russia has fallen (around 21% of GDP, an important source of income for many families), and the Armenian currency has fallen ca. 20% against the US dollar. The government has made attempts to improve the condition of public finances by imposing heavier levies on the citizens (including by increasing the level of pension contributions and transport fees), without launching any reforms to curb the omnipotence of the oligarchs. Since there is no hope that an election could change the situation, the public will be more likely to give vent to their dissatisfaction through participation in street protests. This tendency is likely to become increasingly stronger in the coming months.