Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.05.2018 www.osw.waw.pl

The success of the revolution in Armenia. Pashinyan elected prime minister

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On 8th May the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia elected a new prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, an opposition member of parliament and the leader of the peaceful protests which had forced Serzh Sargsyan, who had been the country's leader for many years (he was the president from 2008 to 2018 and following the change from the presidential to parliamentary political system the prime minister from 17th to 24th April) to resign. Pashinyan, who was the only candidate, was supported not only by his party, the Yelk bloc (Way Out) but also by the remaining opposition parties and several members of the parliament of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) which was in power until then and held 58 seats in the 105-seat parliament.

Pashinyan was elected in a re-run of the vote which is envisaged in the Armenian constitution. In the first vote, which was held the previous week (in which he was also the only candidate) he did not succeed in garnering the sufficient number of votes. In response, on 2nd May Pashinyan called on his supporters to block railways and main roads across the country (including those leading to the border crossings with Iran and Georgia), streets and communications networks in Yerevan and other cities (including roads to the airport in the capital), and administration and government offices. This forced the ruling elite to agree to Pashinyan taking the position of the head of government. Among others, he received a congratulatory letter from the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

A new tour de force

The election of Pashinyan and the appointment to the key position of prime minister in the new political system in Armenia has formally ended the governmental crisis which began following Serzh Sargsyan's resignation. However, the political crisis has continued, as has the crisis of governmental institutions, and it has been the most serious crisis since Armenia regained independence and fought the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The depth of the changes in Armenia will depend on the outcome of the competition between the to date ruling RPA and affiliated circles (state apparatus, business) and the protest movement spearheaded by Nikol Pashinyan, which does not have an organisational framework yet.

The fact that a section of RPA members of parliament voted for an oppositionist has been motivated by the desire to break out of the suspended animation which the country was in, and does not mean support for Pashinyan as the leaders of the party`s parliamentary

grouping announced in a straightforward manner. The RPA holds a sufficient number of seats in the Armenian parliament to block all initiatives undertaken by Pashinyan, his bloc and other parliamentary opposition groups. It appears that the RPA may adopt a tactic of biding its time, assuming that an isolated politician will be forced to strike an agreement with the elite which has ruled to date, an agreement which will guarantee they maintain their assets and influences. This calculation is underpinned by the assumption that the force of the protest movement (the crowds gathering on the streets are Pashinyan's main asset) will wane with the time and that it will become more difficult for him, and more awkward in the present situation, to mobilise his proponents.

As for Pashinyan, he would like to bring about a snap parliamentary election if he succeeds in forcing the parliament to change the electoral system which now favours the current ruling party that has the 'incumbent advantage'.

One alternative scenario to the attempt to subsume Pashinyan into the existing political oligarchic system is the erosion, and with the passage of time, even a breakdown of the present ruling party and a disintegration of the present political scene. The competences and the real power linked with the position of prime minister would suggest this scenario may happen. There have already been several cases of RPA members defecting to the protest camp and it appears that Pashinyan himself is encouraging such moves as he has declared that he will not allow a vendetta to be waged against the present ruling elite. The most spectacular example of this approach was Gagik Tsarukian backing the protests; Tsarukian is the leading Armenian oligarch and the head of the Prosperous Armenia (PA) party, which is the second largest party in the Armenian parliament. In the longer term, the success of this scenario will depend on Pashinyan developing a strong organisational structure – a mass political party (his current political party, the Civil Contract, is part of the Way Out bloc and is marginal). Even though the process of assuming power by the leaders of the protests was peaceful and the state administration is functioning as usual (schools, administration offices, transportation; the exchange rate of the dram, the Armenian currency is stable), the situation in the country is serious. Armenian society has effectively rejected the country's informal political and economic system (the actual monopolisation of politics and the economy by the RPA and the oligarchic system dominated by persons from Nagorno-Karabakh). In the present situation both the interests of the Armenian elites and potentially Russia's interests have been threatened; finally, the circumstances which ensure a relative balance in the Karabakh conflict have changed. It cannot be ruled out that tensions and the resulting chaos will be intensified by opponents of the present changes within the country.

Dependence on Moscow

In his recent speeches Nikol Pashinyan has underlined the necessity of a close alliance with Russia, particularly in the area of security, and he declares that the adopted international commitments will be respected. This is a clear correction of the Way Out bloc's position which qualified itself as pro-Western and submitted a draft law last year regarding Armenia leaving the Russian integration structures (the Eurasian Economic Union). It stems from Armenia's huge dependence on Russia which has many political, military and economic instruments to discipline the government in Yerevan. The most important of them is the

smouldering conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow's favours are the key to maintaining the status quo which would be favourable to Armenia. A Russian military base is stationed in Gyumri in Armenia, Russian companies control essential economic assets in the country, including the energy sector and the railway network.

Moscow, being aware of the infinitesimal room for manoeuvre of the Armenian government, has taken a cautious position on the crisis, avoiding open involvement. Both the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have emphasised that the protests are an internal Armenian issue but it is imperative to respect the law. The Russian state-controlled media, which usually take an unfavourable stance towards anti-government protests in the post-Soviet area, have broadcast the developments in Armenia in a rather reticent and relatively measured way. However, simultaneously intensive consultations have been held with the government and representatives of the opposition. Shortly after Serzh Sargsyan's resignation, President Vladimir Putin held a phone conversation with the then prime minister Karen Karapetyan; representatives of the Armenian government came to Moscow and a consultation was organised with the leader of the protests in the Russian embassy in Yerevan. In the following days a group of members of the Russian parliament also travelled to Yerevan. According to unofficial information, the head of Russian intelligence Sergey Naryshkin arrived in Armenia and talked to Nikol Pashinyan.

It appears that during the consultations Moscow sought to guarantee the inviolability of Russian interests in Armenia and, in the tactical sphere, it pressed for the fastest possible solution to the conflict in a parliamentary framework without repeating the election, and made this a requirement for its possible measures to discipline Yerevan. Irrespective of the guarantees which were most likely given, Moscow does not look favourably on the protests and Pashinyan's ascent to power. Russia responds in a negative way to bottom-up and uncontrolled ways of shifting power in the post-Soviet area, which it deems its sphere of influence. If the chaos were to continue or if the new Armenian government decided to take steps which would be aimed against Russian interests, Moscow would be ready, it seems, to resort to consenting to Azerbaijan launching a limited offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Wojciech Górecki, co-operation: Jan Strzelecki

Appendix

The profile of Nikol Pashinyan.

Nikol Pashinyan was born in 1975 in Ijevan (in north-eastern Armenia). He studied journalism at the Yerevan State University but was not admitted to the final exams due to his conflict with the university management (due to his publications on corruption structures around the university).

In 1993–2008 he worked as a journalist, was the editor of several newspapers (in the Armenian language; alongside his mother tongue he speaks conversational Russian and English) and published articles at the intersection of politics and social issues.

In the 2008 presidential election he was a member of the election team of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia's first president (in 1991-1998) who tried to return to politics. Pashinyan

took part in the riots which accompanied the election (in which 10 people died) and became known as an effective organiser of street actions. He was sought by the police and went into hiding for some time, before turning himself in. In January 2010 he was sentenced to seven years in prison for organising mass riots; he was released in May 2011 following an amnesty.

In 2012 he was elected as a member of parliament for the first time from the list of the Armenian National Congress of Levon Ter-Petrosyan. He left the party to co-establish his own – the Civil Contract. This party participated in the 2017 election alongside two other small parties with which it formed the Way Out (Yelk) bloc. The bloc demanded that Armenia leave the pro-Russian integration structures for the post-Soviet region (in particular the Eurasian Economic Union). The Way Out bloc succeeded in securing nine seats in the National Assembly and Pashinyan became the leader of its parliamentary group.

In May 2017 Pashinyan took second place in the election of the mayor of Yerevan, obtaining 21% of the vote.

In March 2018 Pashinyan initiated the 'Take a step – reject Serzh' action, in preparation for Serzh Sargsyan, completing his second term in office as president, to be elected the new prime minister. Together with a group of his followers he undertook to march on foot across Armenia, ending in Yerevan, during which he called for people to oppose Sargsyan remaining in power.

The decentralisation of the protests came as a breakthrough which enabled the protest movement he spearheaded to develop and to force Sargsyan to resign. Streets and buildings were blocked by independent groups simultaneously in many places, which made it very difficult to disperse them; the successes of the protesters (the paralysed city) also encouraged other people to join the demonstrations. It was most likely that Pashinyan did not have an established plan for the protests; he acted intuitively, following a method of trial and error (the weakness of his expert base is noticeable).

One should also draw attention to Pashinyan's charisma which started to emerge during the April protests and his very effective PR strategy, including a conscious reference to Monte Melkonian (1957-1993, a US Armenian, a veteran of the terrorist organisation ASALA, who fought in the Karabakh war).

Pashinyan certainly has sources of information in the ruling camp since during the protests he threatened to reveal the accumulated assets of the members of parliament implicated in corruption cases as well as their personal data and that of their family members. He is familiar with the sensitive details of several economic agreements the country has concluded.

His political views are difficult to clearly define. The political groups he represents (the Civil Contract party, the Way Out bloc) declare themselves as pro-Western, however in recent weeks Pashinyan has underlined that Armenia's rapprochement with the West cannot be made at the expense of its relations with Russia, which are a priority. Pashinyan's speeches during the protests clearly bordered on populism, which strongly aroused expectations in Armenian society. For example, a section of inhabitants of Yerevan believe that Pashinyan will dismantle the speed camera system (he spoke about bribes that the traffic police received) and that he will make it possible to stop paying off interest on bank loans (the results of his speech on finance).