

Armenia's new government

Wojciech Górecki

On 12 May, the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, concluded the formation of his cabinet. It will consist of his colleagues from the Civil Contract party and Way Out (Yelk) bloc, representatives of the parliamentary groupings Dashnaktsutyun and Prosperous Armenia (which backed the street protests – the previous government head, Serzh Sargsyan had to resign as a result of them) and non-partisan professionals who previously held senior functions in the state administration. Seasoned politicians and officials have been put in charge of the key ministries. The new minister of foreign affairs will be Armenia's representative at the UN, Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, who has previously served as deputy minister. The defence ministry will be led by David Tonoyan, who has also served as deputy minister and was recently the minister in charge of emergency situations. The new cabinet has no representatives of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which until recently governed the country and holds the largest number of seats in parliament. The RPA has announced that it will not block the cabinet's work.

Prime Minister Pashinyan took his first foreign trip to Russia. He took part in the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union in Sochi on 14 May (following the changes in the political system, the prime minister performs the role of the head of state). On this occasion he met with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

Commentary

- Armenia's new government is a technical cabinet. Even though the political positions of two deputy prime ministers have been taken by Pashinyan's close aides from his party (an experienced banker became the third deputy prime minister), in most cases the main criterion for the selection of ministers were their competences. This makeup may suggest that the prime minister is treating this as an interim cabinet tasked with administering the country until a snap election is held. Pashinyan would like an election to be scheduled, provided that he manages to push through amendments in the voting regulations which at present favour the RPA. In turn, the presence of representatives of other groupings in the government may suggest that he intends to build a broader coalition to counterbalance the influence of the RPA.
- The fact that Pashinyan chose Russia as the destination of his first official foreign trip proves that he is aware of the key role Moscow plays in Armenia's foreign policy, and also of its destabilising potential (e.g. it could possibly fail to protest were Azerbaijan to resume open conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh). Pashinyan's assurances in Sochi that

strategic relations with Russia are undisputable and that there is a consensus about this in Armenia are at contrast with the declarations he made when he was in the opposition (he insisted that Armenia should leave the pro-Russian integration structures). However, these assurances meet the expectations of the Russian side halfway which most likely made the recognition of the new government dependent on Armenia continuing its previous policy line and fulfilment of its obligations.

- The most serious challenge the government will have to face in the short term will be fulfilling the promises Pashinyan made at the time of the protests (including curbing corruption), while at the same time mitigating the extremely awakened aspirations and exorbitant expectations of the Armenian public (already after Pashinyan was sworn in, protesters blocked the streets of Yerevan, demanding, among other things, the dismissals of Yerevan's mayor and prosecutor general). The long-term challenges will include 'regaining' a state which over the past two decades was treated by the RPA and the oligarchs linked to it as their private property, without adversely affecting the country's defence potential.