

Post-war reckoning. Political crisis in Armenia

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The autumn defeat in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh triggered a deep political crisis in Armenia. It became a catalyst for the consolidation of the opposition, who are trying to force Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to resign and trigger a new election. The methods employed for this range from political pressure and street protests, through pressure from the army top brass and attempts to paralyse the state apparatus, and also to seek the political support of Russia. In spite of the fact that the situation is approaching deadlock, Pashinyan remains in power, but seems to recognise the need to confirm the legitimacy of his rule through early elections – provisionally scheduled for June 20. Paradoxically, despite the large negative electorate, the ruling My Step Alliance is the untouchable leader of the polls (with over 30% approval ratings). However, significant challenges remain: the dominant group of the 'silent majority', and the opposition's influence in parts of the state apparatus, especially in the context of the difficult and dynamic socio-economic and epidemic situation in the country, as well as external tensions. The immediate issue at stake is maintaining stability, the basic principles of democracy and the rule of law. In the longer term, not only the future of the reform camp running the country is at stake but, more broadly, the direction of the revision of the state's political strategy. This latter is inevitable both as a result of the defeat in Karabakh and the internal political deadlock.

On the brink of a disaster

The defeat in the war with Azerbaijan (27 September – 10 November 2020) came as a shock to Armenia. It cost the lives of about 4,000 soldiers, caused the loss of most of the disputed territory, and has resulted in uncertainty over the fragile ceasefire worked out and guaranteed by Russia. In the broader perspective it has awoken atavistic fears about the future of the state and the nation, it has eroded the pillar of independent Armenia's identity which had remained unquestioned up to this point – namely the victory in the 1994 war with Azerbaijan. It has also made some cracks in the myth of an invincible army, and it has placed serious question marks over the value of the alliance with Russia on the one hand, and the credibility of Pashinyan's reformist cabinet (which stands apart from Russia) on the other. The disaster overlapped with a poor socio-economic situation in the country, aggravated by the consequences of the pandemic, and criticism towards the government for its sluggishness in introducing reforms. It has also exposed Armenia's isolation – it highlighted the hostile attitude of its main neighbours (Azerbaijan and Turkey), the weak position of others (Georgia and Iran), the clear distancing of the EU and the USA, and brought disappointment and a sense of being instrumentalised as regards Russia.

Attempting counter-revolution

The defeat and the emotions which accompanied it catalysed the activation of the extra-parliamentary opposition, representing the camp that had ruled Armenia for 20 years and was removed from power due to street protests led by Pashinyan in 2018. Its informal leaders (who are, by the way, usually in conflict with each other) are the former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. On the one hand they are both basking in the glory of being the victors of the Karabakh war in the 1990s and personally connected to Karabakh, as well as being loyal to Moscow, and on the other, they are acting as keystones of a controversial political and business network that until recently dominated the country's politics and economy. The decomposition of this network and the trial of the former leaders for crimes they allegedly committed while holding power has been one of the dominant themes of the country's political life over the past three years. While the actual support shown for them by the society should be described as negligible, their business position, influence in the apparatus (especially in the army and in Nagorno-Karabakh itself) and in Moscow (ostentatious expressions of support from Vladimir Putin and the media, among others) were significant. Bearing in mind the diversity and dynamics of anti-government sentiment and the informal nature of its management, Kocharyan and Sargsyan must be considered the actual leaders of the opposition.

The attempts to seize power were (and still are) surprisingly diverse in nature. Already in the first moments after Pashinyan signed a ceasefire, the seat of government was stormed (the prime minister's office was trashed, and the speaker of parliament was beaten). The threat of an attack on government buildings reared its head again on 1 March. At the same time, the Homeland Salvation Movement was formed, bringing together smaller opposition parties and carrying out continuous street protests of varying intensity. The fact that the hierarchs of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with Catholicos Karekin II, sided with the opposition was of symbolic importance, as was the fact that Vazgen Manukyan, one of the 'fathers of independence', was put at the head of the demonstrations. The pinnacle of the crisis, however, turned out to be the military *coup d'état* attempted on 25 February, involving senior officers of the general staff by calling on the Prime Minister to resign immediately. (The pretext for the coup was provided by the dismissal of the deputy chief of staff, who accused Pashinyan of incompetence after the Prime Minister publicly questioned the quality of Russian equipment used during the war. In response to the appeal of the military, the head of the government decided to dismiss also the chief of staff himself, General Onik Gasparyan – this actually happened despite the protests from President Armen Sargsyan).

For a few days, the crisis around the chief of staff raised serious questions about the loyalty of the army and the law enforcement agencies towards the government, and about the susceptibility of the president and the judicial system to the influence of the former Armenian elites (including the case of Gasparyan's resignation; and the questioning by the Constitutional Court the basic law provision serving as the basis for Kocharyan's prosecution on 26 March). At the same time, it openly led to street confrontations on the streets – as early as on 1 March both sides called on their supporters to demonstrate their support and only due to the relative balance of forces and fairly small turnout on both sides' clashes could be avoided. One important element of pressure was Moscow's unambiguous support for the demonstrators. This was visible in the media, and also in the show display of force by the Russian military at critical moments of the protests (planes flying over the

participants). However, the Kremlin did not choose to explicitly condemn Pashinyan or to become directly involved in the events. It is symptomatic that, with the relatively broad measures taken by the opposition, the overall support of citizens for the parties directly linked to the *ancien régime* did not exceed 3% during the current crisis.

The power camp

Although Pashinyan and the ruling camp he dominates (the My Step block and parliamentary grouping) have been largely on the defensive for months, there are no signs of a more serious erosion of his immediate base – i.e., a drastic drop in support or dangerous centrifugal movements within the grouping. However, there were fundamental challenges in the threat of cumulative social protests, uncertainty about the mood of most citizens with non-defined political sympathies, and finally – the loyalty of the state apparatus (mainly the army). Pashinyan was apprehensive about the parliamentary elections, and he showed caution in his relations with the administration (for a long time he used a conciliatory tone in his statements) and Russia, as well as determination and patience in playing out the dispute around the thwarting of the military "putsch" and doing away with the disloyal chief of staff. The decision to hold a snap early election, taken under public pressure and so far announced only on the Prime Minister's Facebook page, is a careful attempt to jump ahead while seeking to control the entire process.

Awaiting elections

Bringing about an early election is still a matter remaining to be solved. The first steps were the aforementioned announcement by Pashinyan and the lifting of martial law in Armenia. The next steps should be the resignation of the prime minister and the failure of the parliament to elect his successor twice, which would result in the dissolution of the chamber. The launch of the process will be the ultimate test for My Step and the parliamentary opposition declaring their willingness to hold elections. In light of fairly quite stable polls, the ruling party can currently count on over 33% of support (polls carried out by the Yerevan branch of the Gallup institute and the International Republican Institute in February this year).

There are still some important determinants of the campaign which are difficult to assess: the plight of the population (which has been aggravated by the challenges associated with COVID-19); the question of preserving legal order and the democratic principles in the run-up period; the unstable situation (with emphasis on the tensions around Nagorno-Karabakh over which the government has limited influence, unlike the opposition and Russia).

The Stakes

The current crisis in Armenia needs to be considered the most serious one since the end of the first Karabakh war in the 1990s. Unlike the 1998 coup, the 1999 massacre of political leaders in parliament, the bloody pacification of protests in 2008, or the successful revolution of 2018, it touches the foundations of both internal and external state policy. Maintaining the country's stability and constitutional order are the primary challenges facing the conflicting parties. Despite the high temperature and stakes of the dispute, it is hopeful that so far none of them has decided to use physical violence against opponents on a larger scale, which would derail the chances of putting a lid on ending it easily. Such restraint seems to result from the lessons learned from the recent past and an awareness of the

current potential consequences.

In today's circumstances, it should be assumed that a deep destabilisation of the state and a serious violation of democratic principles or the removal of the ruling camp from power, in addition to important immediate problems, would lead to the degradation and further marginalisation of Armenia, complicating its relations with the West and increasing its dependence on Russia. A takeover – in any form – by the current extra-parliamentary opposition would carry the risk of going back to the pre-2018 apathy, a strengthening of intergenerational tensions and – probably – an increase in the number of emigrants. Externally, costly and controversial militarisation projects with Moscow's support and retaliatory tendencies could be expected.

In the current situation, the renewal of the mandate for the ruling camp offers hope – a limited one but void of any alternatives – for the consolidation of the state and society and the selective continuation of limited internal reforms (ideally with EU involvement), without further increasing the dependence on Russia. The possible victory of Pashinyan seems to be the only option where a de-escalation of tensions (as an alternative to a retaliatory strategy strengthening its opponents) with Azerbaijan and Turkey could be cautiously tested (and, with an extremely positive turn of events, this could even lead to cooperation – this currently lies only in the theoretical domain). This could lead to an attempt to pull Armenia out of the deepening deadlock and break its regional isolation.