

BULLETIN

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Dialogue Between the Authorities and the Opposition in Armenia: The Present Situation and Perspectives

Tomasz Sikorski

Talks between the Armenian authorities and the opposition started in July but have not brought any results so far, which means the continuation of mass demonstrations that have taken place since the beginning of the year. Taking into account the uncompromising attitudes of both parties, the most probable scenario is the maintenance of the fragile situation until the parliamentary elections in May 2012 when the new balance of political forces in the country will be set. An uncontrolled escalation of violence cannot be excluded, though. The EU should more closely monitor the situation in the region and put pressure on both parties to return to the talks.

Armenia is the only country in the Eastern Partnership where significant changes to democratise the political system might occur in the short run. So far, the country is referred to as “partly free” by Freedom House. Under pressure from street demonstrations in Yerevan, the authorities in July began talks with the radical, opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) about the resignation of the government and early parliamentary and presidential elections. This dialogue did not bring any substantive results and was interrupted in late August.

Origins of the Protests. Since 2008, Armenia has experienced economic difficulties. In 2009, GDP *per capita* fell by 14% to \$5,000, while in 2010 it increased only by 2%. The strong monopolisation of strategic sectors of the economy turned negative and public finances collapsed, which forced the government to take new loans, mainly from Russia and the International Monetary Fund. In addition, from 2010 to 2011, inflation has risen to between 7% and 9%, which has strongly affected food prices.

Since its independence, all the presidents of Armenia have had a tendency to limit democracy. This process, however, became especially apparent after Serzh Sargsyan’s victory in the 2008 presidential elections. When supporters of his rival, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who held the office of president from 1991 to 1998, contested the results of the election, their protest was brutally crushed by the police and led to the temporary suspension of civil liberties, the introduction of censorship and the imprisonment of about one hundred demonstrators. Despite a gradual easing of the repressions, at the beginning of 2011 there was still a *de facto* ban on public demonstrations and several opposition activists remained in prison.

Although the ANC led by Ter-Petrosyan did not have representation in parliament, it gradually grew in strength by exploiting the increase in social discontent that arose from the deteriorating economic situation of the country. In January 2011, protests in Yerevan began in reaction to a street vending ban, which was introduced by local authorities. The ANC activists supported the protesting vendors, but soon began to criticise not only the city’s authorities but also the president and the government. The ANC publicly threatened a repetition of the North African revolutionary events in Armenia. Since March, the scale of the protests has increased to about 20,000 to 30,000 people. The authorities were on the defensive from the beginning: first, by delaying any reaction and later by meeting some demands of the demonstrators, for example, easing the rules on political demonstrations, releasing the remaining political prisoners and starting an investigation into the riots of 2008. Forcing the state authorities into talks with the opposition in July has been the biggest success for the ANC, so far.

The Course and Evaluation of Dialogue. Negotiations were paralysed from the very beginning by a lack of agreement on basic issues, such as the resignation of the government and early elections. The fruitless talks were accompanied by sharp rhetoric on both sides and attempts to break the negotiations. At the end of August, the opposition refused to continue the dialogue, justifying it by the arrest of the head of the opposition's youth branch on an unreasonable—in the ANC's opinion—charge of assault on a police officer. Since then, there have been attempts to return to the talks and further demonstrations. At the end of September and in early October, the Congress organized weekly street protests and announced a further demonstration for 28 October.

Apparently, the state authorities have agreed to talk with the opposition instead of using force against it for at least two reasons: first, the suppression of the protests could result in large casualties and a loss of image abroad, and, second, the establishment felt that the risk of a loss of power was not large enough to resort to drastic measures. Having consolidated his presidential power since 2008, President Sargsyan could tolerate more resistance than three years ago when he had just taken office.

It is also worth noting that both parties showed only a limited willingness to talk. The course of the negotiations indicated that the main demands of the opposition, i.e., early parliamentary and presidential elections, would not be accepted by the authorities. On the other side, talks between the ANC and representatives of the regime caused a partial weakening of the ANC's criticism towards the government and a decrease in the Congress's popularity, which it had built over three years. Breaking off the talks was therefore, to some degree, in favour of the opposition since it could return to radical rhetoric.

Forecast and Recommendations. There are three possible scenarios. The most probable is the continuation of the street protests and an attempt by the authorities to wait them out until May 2012. Then, according to schedule, parliamentary elections will be held in which the present ruling coalition has a chance to win. The less likely solution involves a return to talks in the coming weeks, but even then it is difficult to expect an agreement between the parties, so the fruitless dialogue probably will continue, as in the previous scenario, until May 2012. There is also the unlikely but real possibility of violence, which will lead either to a revolutionary overthrow of the government or a violent crackdown on the protests. So far, none of the parties wants such a development. Opposition leader Ter-Petrosyan clearly and repeatedly called for calm during the demonstrations, while the authorities in March had already withdrawn police from the immediate vicinity of the protesters in order to prevent possible provocations.

Armenia's domestic situation may have significant international implications. It cannot be excluded that rising instability would tempt neighbouring Azerbaijan to exploit the situation and make an attempt to bring Nagorno-Karabakh, along with nearby territories occupied by Armenian separatists, under Baku's control. Equally probable would be an offensive action by the Armenians of Karabakh, convinced of the necessity of a pre-emptive strike. Regardless of who would start the attack, it would unfreeze the Karabakh war and turn it into a conflict of regional size. Although one can suspect that both Russia, which supports Armenia, and Turkey, which advocates for Azerbaijan, would try to stabilise the situation, it is doubtful that their influence alone would be sufficient to prevent an open war.

The least desirable scenario for the EU countries is therefore an escalation of clashes between the Armenian authorities and the ANC that would lead to increased tensions across the region and create new problems in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership. In this situation, it is necessary for the European External Action Service and countries holding the presidency of the EU Council to raise awareness among the Armenian authorities that any drastic measures against the demonstrators will meet with a negative reaction from the Union. In contrast to the EU's action against Belarus, the pressure on Armenia has a greater chance of success. Despite having close relations with Russia, the government in Yerevan reckons with the EU, on which Armenia is heavily dependent, especially in trade and investment.

The EU should encourage both sides to restart the talks by attracting their attention to the risks associated with the current situation as well as the benefits of dialogue. For the government, seeking agreement with the ANC reduces the risk of a revolution, while for the Congress, the talks give it more chances to gain concessions than it will from street protests. However, the desirability of the EU's offer to mediate the dispute between the authorities and the opposition is questionable because there is a high risk of failure, which would undermine the EU's ability to exert pressure on the Armenian authorities if matters turn negative.