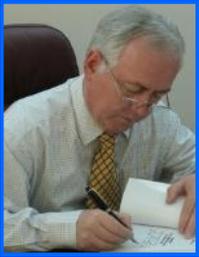


Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory"—I.L.Caragiale

EDITORIAL

Armenia - quo vadis?

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The developments in the former tiny Soviet Republic in the Caucasus were less covered by the international media in spite of major geopolitical events that have been taking place lately. Unjustly, we think since the economic, political and military situation in Armenia may have a great importance on the further developments not only in the Caucasus but also in the Middle East, on the Russian Federation's relations with Europe, the USA and Turkey.

The former president Serzh Sargsyan, whose mandate expired on April 9th, 2018 tried a move similar to that of president Vladimir Putin by transferring, during his presidential mandate, numerous prerogatives to the prime minister and then, benefitting from the parliamentary majority of the governing party (the Republican Party) to be elected prime minister and that happened on April 17th, with a majority of 77 votes. The opposition described his move as taking over the power and ample protest demonstrations were triggered in Yerevan. As a result of these protests, Serzh Sargsyan resigned on April 23rd. Presently, Sargsyan is the leader of the governing Republican Party and member of the parliament. Major protests against Sargsyan's regime took place also in 2011 and in July 2016 the latter ones aimed, according to protesters' declarations, at freeing the political detainees and his resignation for his corrupt regime comes to an end.

The opposition leader, Nikol Pashinyan, aged 42, a former journalist who spent many years in opposition, succeeded in obtaining, on May 8th, his election as prime minister by the parliament after a first vote was inauspicious for him a few days before. As the parliament's structure is known, with a majority of the Republican Party of the former president Serzh Sargsyan, it is expected that the reforms the new prime minister intends to implement will be further met with a strong opposition and the political life in Armenia will not have a smooth evolution from now on.

This crisis proved that Russia still has important control leverage in Armenia: the oligarchic, corrupt system, economic and military dependence, the threat of the conflict with Azerbaijan (in Nagorno-Karabakh). In fact, president Vladimir Putin opted for being an important arms supplier for the rich Azerbaijan (\$5 bil. starting with 2010) and delayed the military equipment to Yerevan, causing thus an unequal power balance between the two countries and refused to join the arms embargo for the conflict zones as recommended by OSCE. This situation allowed Azerbaijan, for the first time since the onset of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, in the 1990s, to retrieve in April 2016 8,000ha of land- according to Armenian sources (20,000 ha according to the Azeris). In fact, ever since the protests in Yerevan begun, Azerbaijan started to deploy an important number of troops and strengthened its military presence on the contact line while the president Aliyev declared immediately after Pashinyan's appointment as prime-minister that he is readying important military actions and that the newly located soil-soil missiles in Nakhchivan may hit any of the enemy's targets. He is aware that a new potential military triumph, no matter how small, will contribute to consolidating his power even if he won the presidential elections in April 2018 with around 86% of the votes.

The new Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, aware as well of the importance of the relations with Moscow, already paid a visit to president Vladimir Putin in Sochi where he thanked for Moscow's neutral position during the demonstrations in Yerevan. He underlined as well the importance of the military cooperation with Russia (the latter safeguards the inviolability of the border with Turkey and has a base with 3,000 troops in Gyumri and an airforce squadron of MIG-29s). As far as the future of the relations between Armenia and Russia is concerned, the new prime minister Pashinyan declared, ever since his appointment, that there is no question of discontinuing the relations with Moscow; in Sochi he was more cautious and stressed that the movement he leads did not set its geopolitical objectives yet. The economic and military dependence on Moscow will make the new leadership in Yerevan maintain important cooperation relations with Russia.

Armenia's future developments will depend on a multitude of factors and the external ones are particularly important in the framework of the regional and global geopolitical evolutions. A new conflict with Azerbaijan is very likely in a near or medium term.