

Armenia's European Choice After the 2012–13 Elections

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Abstract

The last 12 months in Armenia were dominated by elections. Parliamentary elections took place in May 2012, followed by the presidential elections in February 2013 and the Yerevan city council in May 2013. In addition to demonstrating how numerous domestic challenges are being planned to be addressed by the contenders, the contests could have become a test of competing visions on the international future of the country: being dependent on domineering Russia and holding on to legacies of the Soviet past versus capitalizing on the window of opportunity of the European choice. Three aspects are of considerable importance: the process of the elections themselves; to what extent the elections meet democratic standards; and communicating proposals to address the existing challenges, among them the issue of international orientation and reactions to international opportunities. However, some factors demonstrate that the international community did not see a sufficiently clear indication of Armenia's European choice, and the issue has been postponed to the post-election period. This period is particularly interesting also because the next national presidential elections will take place in 2018, the year which marks the centenary of the first independent Armenian Republic.

A Litmus Test for Democratic Standards?

The international community perceived the parliamentary elections in 2012 as a test case for overcoming the democratic disaster of the previous presidential elections in February 2008. After these elections, while the opposition indicated mass voter fraud, the OSCE assessed the elections as meeting democratic standards. On March 1, 2008, ten persons were killed after the government forces attacked protesters, and the government declared a state of emergency that significantly curtailed democratic freedoms. The inquiry into the violence was never finished. The events indicated deep democratic shortcomings, and over the medium-term, Armenia's domestic transformation suffered for several years. Perhaps this is the reason why Armenia's European orientation too was less clearly formulated over this period than could have been expected: first, domestically, the new Armenian government, with reduced legitimacy because of the unclear elections and violent events of 2008, could not move more boldly in the European direction, having too many ties with Russia. Second, the West, obliged to react to the democratic shortcomings, was expecting a decisive action from the side of Armenia's government to clear up the March 2008 issues. This action never materialized. Therefore, the West had to move more cautiously in its agenda of deepening ties with Armenia. Thus it hesitated in deepening relations with Armenia, although it never wavered from this agenda. That is why the 2012–13 election period was being watched by the West very attentively, since Armenia's government failed to put a clear full stop to the 2008 events. The new election period was one chance for Armenia's government to demonstrate that if not legally, at least politically, these events are a thing of the past.

Therefore the 2012–13 elections were a test case of whether Armenia would escape the previous bottlenecks restricting a further democratic, and therefore European, orientation. According to international observers, the parliamentary, the presidential and the local Yerevan elections proceeded peacefully and lawfully, and constituted progress in comparison with the previous elections.¹ At the same time, the internal opposition and civil society challenged the results of all three elections very vocally. Indeed, there were many factors which, despite the relative lack of violence and detected fraud on the election days, made the calm façade of the elections doubtful. These factors included lack of clarity with the voter lists (since many Armenians are *Gastarbeiter* abroad, particularly in Russia, the critics claim that their votes are used by the authorities, and, given that the lists of those who voted are not made public, these claims sound quite convincing). The European Union expected that the elections in 2012–13, particularly in comparison with the 2008 elections and the violent escalation afterwards, would make an important step toward greater integrity. Instead the election campaign was very much personality driven, not offering much input to shape the future development of Armenia. One should consider also that the manipulation of elections before the formal start of the campaign could have been the reason why important opposition parties, such as the Prosperous Armenia Party or the Armenian National Congress bloc, refused to nominate any candidate for the presidential election. Despite all this, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Euro-

1 Republic of Armenia Presidential Election, 18 February 2013, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Final Report.

pean Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Štefan Füle, EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, made the following statement after the presidential election on February 18, 2013: “We welcome further progress made by the Armenian authorities in their efforts to hold these presidential elections in line with international standards, notably through improved administration of the electoral process, ensuring possibilities for candidates to campaign freely and better quality of the voter lists.”²

Armenian NGOs criticized the international support of the elections process and the results. (See the article of Isabella Sargsyan in this issue of the CAD, which gives a detailed account of this criticism.) However, the Armenian public should understand that the West had its own reasons to support the results. First, comparatively speaking, Armenia is still far away from being a consolidated autocracy like some other states in the neighbourhood. Second, the West expects from Armenia stability, which should become a basis for Armenia’s Western choice. Armenian civil society itself is in a condition of a cognitive dissonance: if it challenges the government too much, the chance for a European turn may be past, and Armenia may end up as a Russian backyard. If, however, it gives the government *carte blanche*, the latter will feel less obliged to implement the reform agenda and therefore, again, may end up by default as a Russian backyard. Moreover, the public discontent with European support for the election results made the European choice of the government even less easy to put forward domestically. This makes it even more important for decisive offers and actions to be advanced by the West in the post-election period.

Fulfilling international standards is seen as an important precondition for further transformation and to aspire to European prospects. The skin-deep lawfulness of the elections process paved a way, for the West, to declare the trauma of the 2008 elections over. Meeting democratic standards, at least on the surface, opened up further windows of opportunity for continued cooperation with the West. At the same time, the positive outcome should by no means be overestimated, since the structural shortcomings that lead to a violent escalation are more important than single events. According to international reports, overcoming the structural shortcomings in democracy and in the rule of law are still an ongoing task whose fulfilment would safeguard Armenia against another civic trauma.

Taking Reform Seriously?

The post-election period may indicate a new departure, because the re-elected leader should run Armenia through the next presidential elections in 2018, the centenary of the country’s first period of independence. The period of time with no major elections ahead offers the government many opportunities to respond to the electorate’s request to communicate an attractive vision of the country’s future. Traditionally, the political elite bolstered support with issues, such as improving economic development, but that has been particularly weak in recent years, perhaps also because endemic corruption was not seriously addressed. The other eternal questions, such as whether the Armenian leadership will be ready to move towards a resolution of the almost 25-year-old Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, and how to reconsider relations with Turkey by steering memory of the genocide toward conflict transformation and cooperation, are at the forefront of the interest of the West, but are traditionally almost absent from the pre-electoral agendas.

Therefore, these issues, as well as the West’s expectation that Armenia has to clarify its international orientation, can be seen as an almost hidden agenda, perhaps not really shown much internally, which defines Armenia’s relations with the West. Because of the extensive economic dependence on Russia for both imports and exports, Armenian migrants working in Russia, Russia’s vigorous pursuit of Russian-language education in Armenia, and geopolitical dependence, while at the same time being interested in the added value of European cooperation, Armenia has traditionally cooperated with both Russia and the EU. Setting priorities domestically first and foremost depends on Armenia’s European versus Russian choice, as well as on the impact of the international actors. Over the past period, both sides sought key moments to indicate interest in the European neighbourhood (or, as Russia calls it, “near abroad”).

The European Union is challenged to develop and implement the strategy of Eastern Partnership and move it towards successful finalizing of the association agreements with at least some of the Eastern Partnership states, to present during the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit in November 2013 in Vilnius some success stories. Even if the elections in Armenia were interpreted as positive signals and as sticking to European standards, the key country for Eastern Partnership still remains Ukraine, about which the EU is most challenged to offer clear signals. The South Caucasus in general is less of a decisive factor, but one can assume that the Armenian elections have had a positive impact. The Eastern Partnership is particularly challenged by democratic shortcomings in Belarus and Azerbaijan, the uncertainty in

2 Joint Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on elections in Armenia, Reference: MEMO/13/125 Event Date: 20/02/2013.

Georgia, and first and foremost the backsliding of transformation in Ukraine and Moldova. Those two countries were originally seen as best practices cases of EaP for the upcoming Vilnius summit.

From the perspective of Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union that was signed in 2007 and is now on its way to becoming the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 represents the key approach to shaping the post-Soviet neighborhood.³ Perhaps the new Eurasian formats demonstrate less Russian hegemony in its “near abroad” than the CIS institutional framework, at least in the sense that the new ones are planned to be more institutionalized and, therefore oriented more toward following some rules of the game. But joining these institutions would be a strategic choice for the future development of Armenia, in favor of orienting towards Russia and, as a side effect, this could be interpreted as a step against the European Union.

Setting priorities by elaborating an attractive vision is part of meeting existing challenges. This was not really the case during the 2012–13 elections. They were dominated by the absence of any consolidated program and political preferences among the parties and candidates vis-à-vis the Russia versus EU choice. Presenting an effective reform strategy solving the conundrum of orientation between Russia and the European Union was not an issue of the election campaigns at all, which, as mentioned above, on the whole were very controversial, interpreted by some as a case of oligarchic democracy.⁴ Setting the future agenda depends more than ever on the active influence of external actors. These might include the establishment of the Russian-driven Eurasian Union, versus the European Union Eastern Partnership developing its approach further by presenting new offers during the upcoming Vilnius summit.

On the one hand, European institutions can formulate expectations more clearly to go beyond formal criteria. Armenia fulfilled the formal criteria for democratic elections but did not indicate a roadmap towards further transformation, which is needed in order to overcome the syndrome of “decorative” democracy evident in the recent elections. Hopefully this roadmap can become the accompanying condition for Association Agreement reforms. Re-electing President Serzh Sargsyan and the Republican Party of Armenia he belongs to opens up two challenges to Europe, if the EU is interested seri-

ously, if at all, in becoming more decisive in its Eastern Partnership strategy. On one hand, it has to compete with Russia if it has any decisiveness at all with its plans to firmly incorporate Armenia into European systems. It looks like currently the EU is more advanced than Russia in this contest, because the Association Agreement is far more advanced than any concrete plans with the Eurasian Union. However, Russia might offer more in the sense of energy and a security framework. Recent developments demonstrate a possible increase of Russia’s pressure, perhaps because it feels that it is losing the contest with the EU: Russia has increased the gas price for Armenia; makes an armaments sales deal with Azerbaijan; tries to monopolize the company which brings gas to Armenia; etc. All these actions took place within the first hundred days of Sargsyan’s second term in office. It seems that Russia is demonstrating that even the moderate inclination of the Sargsyan’s cabinet towards the EU is not going to be acceptable to it. What are the counteractions of the EU? Is the promise of the donor conference going to materialize any time soon? Does the EU have sufficient resources to focus its attention on a small and not very significant country on its far periphery? On the other hand, the second challenge is to make the EU offer more attractive internally to the Armenian population, in other words, to help the Sargsyan administration with this.

The years ahead seem to be an attractive and relatively calm uninterrupted period, in which real reforms could take place. 2018 marks the centenary of the country’s first independence. Can this symbol be used for finalizing Armenia’s European orientation? For this reason, offering suggestions fulfilling strategic challenges with a future vision for Armenia needs to be elaborated and presented to the broader public. Against expectations, the election cycle of 2012–13 did not fulfill this task and left the door open for further debate. Deciding about the international orientation is still on the agenda, since it was not an issue of the elections, neither between the candidates nor among the broader public.

Conclusion

The elections in 2012 and 2013 can be assessed by the West, with some effort, as a further step of Armenia towards democracy and European values, indicating some success in making elections freer and fairer, but no breakthrough was made as of yet in providing strategies for integrating Armenia into European versus Eurasian institutions. The re-elected decision makers in power through 2018 can use the time ahead to stick to Armenia’s 2018 centennial obligations. During the recent election campaigns, deciding Armenia’s geopolitical orientation remained an open issue that did not

3 Iris Kempe, *The Eurasian Union and the European Union Redefining their Neighborhood. The Case of the South Caucasus*. In: *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 51/2, 17 June 2013, http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/DetailansichtPubDB_EN?rec_id=2574

4 Boris Navarsardian, *Parliamentary Elections in Armenia: From Decorative to Genuine Democracy?*, FES Armenia Perspective, June 2012.

generate much input in the election agenda. Russia is trying to use Armenia to increase influence in the South Caucasus and the neighborhood. At the same time, the Russian position still remains quite uncertain about whether to incorporate the country into the Eurasian Union and the Customs Union, which was highly criticized by the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as a rebirth of the Soviet Union. This uncertainty opens a window of opportunity for the EU.

The European Union and its members are offering the strategy of Eastern Partnership, based on the principle of more support for more transformation. Additional offers, such as the idea of a donors' conference, might be provided by the upcoming EaP summit in Vilnius and beyond. Currently, Armenia is already in the process of negotiating the EU–Armenia Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement. Armenia and the EU already signed visa facilitation and readmission agreements. While the EU can be seen as an important partner for modernization and soft security, Russia still matters much more for Armenia as far as hard security is concerned, in par-

ticular given the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the delayed war with Azerbaijan. Can the EU become a serious attractive alternative?

All these issues are part of Armenia's future agenda, and the country itself is challenged to provide input to develop a vision for its future. Since this was not the case during the latest elections, the agenda remains open, and there is an urgent need to formulate a domestic position. At the same time, international actors—Russia and the European Union—are challenged to implement their positions, but are undecided how to develop and implement related strategies. The quick recognitions of the election results by Russia and the European Union in unison signaled that the re-election of President Sargsyan demonstrated that both players postponed their decisive moves to the post-election period. Armenia's challenges can only be addressed by setting further priorities of international cooperation, which was not the case during the elections and still remains a future task, while the room for maneuver was marginally increased by at least partly meeting international standards for democratic elections.

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