

Security Challenges in the COVID-19 Epoch: The Case of Armenia

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Since February 2020, the Armenian state and society have been dealing with an aggravating public health crisis and growing economic and social risks. A sharp economic decline in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic is unavoidable.

Although internal challenges stem from a gradually worsening economic situation; however, several issues specific to Armenia should be mentioned.

Internal Challenges

The post-revolutionary Armenian government has been simultaneously introducing and implementing a variety of economic, political, and legal reforms and actions. Many affect the interests of former corrupt political and economic elites. Moreover, some of the economic reforms are not popular among those strata expecting quick and significant changes in their lives. Thus, the anger of the “formers” has coincided with disappointment by that segment of Prime Minister Pashinyan’s supporters who demand more radical measures.

The pandemic became a catalyst. Forces close to former presidents R. Kocharyan (who is on trial for “overthrowing the constitutional order” in March 2008) and S. Sargsyan (charged with embezzlement of public funds) are still able to manipulate some segments of society through a large net of media sources and to a certain extent to sabotage measures taken by the government in many important spheres of public life. In particular, an anti-governmental campaign unleashed through media controlled by the opposition (with close ties to Russian economic and political circles) at the initial stage vigorously criticized measures taken by the authorities to prevent the spread of the virus, and later – a slow reopening of the economy.

A serious split has occurred in the Parliament. Taking advantage of the difficulties

Photo: Ilgar Jafarov



Azerbaijani refugees fleeing from Kalbajar in Nagorny Karabakh in 1993

facing Pashinyan’s cabinet, the largest parliamentary oppositional party “Prosperous Armenia” led by Armenia’s second wealthiest businessman, G. Tsarukyan, began in early June to question the very competence of the government and demanded its resignation. This *va banque* move by Tsarukyan was likely provoked by an investigation opened against him in February. The parliamentary majority, represented only by members of the ruling “My Step” fraction, voted unanimously to deprive Tsarukyan of his parliamentary immunity and to allow his arrest on suspicion of electoral fraud (was arrested on 25 September, and was sentenced for two months). Two oppositional parties – Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia – boycotted this vote and demanded on 2 July an investigation of the government’s response to COVID-19. A special parliamentary commission will be established in September. However, further developments indicate that Tsarukyan is seeking a compromise with the authorities, and trying simultaneously to establish a coalition with non-parliamentary oppositional forces.

Armenia’s internal dynamics intertwine to some extent with its external challenges. Wishing to avoid complications with Russia, Pashinyan’s government announced that it will implement a balanced foreign policy, therefore no shifts will occur in the Armenian-Russian strategic partnership.

Owing to the activity of previous governments, Russia has gained almost full control over major strategic sectors of Armenia’s economy. Influenced by Western sanctions and the coronavirus, the Russian government is using all possible leverage to minimise damage to its economy at the expense of its international partners. For Armenia this posture has resulted, among other developments, in an increase in the gas price, a sharply reduced flow of remittances from Armenian labor migrants, and in disputes centring on the Armenian branch of the South Caucasus Railway. Several former high-ranking Armenian officials, together with a number of oligarchs fleeing criminal charges in Armenia, have found refuge in Russia. However,

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despite some signs of bilateral tensions and disagreements, most important for the moment is a deepening of the Armenian-Russian military partnership.

Serious External Challenge

Further challenges are rooted in the unresolved Nagorniy Karabakh conflict. Immediately after the Parliamentary elections of December 2018, the “Inquiry Committee for Examining the Circumstances of the Military Activities of April 2016” was established. Its findings and conclusions regarding the four-day war in April 2016 will be presented in September of 2020. This document, together with a newly adopted National Security Strategy, is of extreme importance owing to the serious shifts which have occurred in the Armenian security system and in the course of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict negotiations since April 2020.

It should be emphasised that the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict was in its lowest intensity stage in the period from the autumn of 2018 until the spring of 2020. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan were focused mainly on their domestic problems and were imitating a continuity of the negotiations. In the meantime, activities of Russian diplomats regarding the resolution of this conflict became more pronounced. Remarks on 21 April 2020 by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov which indicated a tiny shift toward the Azerbaijani position were met with strong criticism from the Armenian side, and with appreciation from the Azerbaijani side.

Moreover, the Azerbaijani authorities – facing serious economic and political problems at home – attempted to direct the simmering internal tension toward the external enemies – namely, the Republic of Artsakh and Republic of Armenia. A significant alteration in Azerbaijan’s modus operandi must be indicated: Armenia has become a target. In particular, on 13 May, Azerbaijani military forces attacked a civilian object in the village of Berkaber in Armenia’s Tavush Province. On 12 July, the Azerbaijani side attacked an Armenian military position in the same province, and the next two days its artillery shelled the Armenian town Berd. The Azerbaijani army used also a tank and dozens of drones, including an Israeli-made Hermes 900 surveillance UAS (Unmanned Aircraft System). The latter, together with 13 drones, was shot down by the Armenian side.

A serious threat of escalation of the conflict with the involvement of external actors occurred for the first time since an officially-



Photo: Julian NYca

A war-torn building in Shusha, Nagorniy Karabakh

signed ceasefire on the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict in May 1994:

- The recent clashes occurred within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Armenia;
- On 17 July, the Azerbaijani side openly threatened to attack the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, located 36 km west of Yerevan; this statement should be evaluated as state-supported terrorism.
- On the same day, Turkey (which is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group on the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict resolution) announced its readiness to provide full military support to Azerbaijan.
- Russia, the USA, the EU, and NATO called for a ceasefire and a resumption of the negotiations.

The situation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border was stabilised after 6-7 days; however, there is no certainty regarding a resumption of negotiations within the OSCE Minsk Group format. Nonetheless, these small-scale and local military clashes have serious implications for all parties involved.

The Implications for Armenia

- Given present circumstances, the ongoing internal tensions of different intensity in Armenia will be marked by a further consolidation of the ruling elite and its political supporters. The opposition will also try to consolidate its forces before the next parliamentary elections in 2023, seeking to present all broad-ranging negative effects of the pandemic as a failure exclusively of the Pashinyan government.
- A further deterioration of the Armenian-Russian relationship cannot be ex-

cluded. However, both sides need each other more than ever. They will seek to minimise the possible consequences of any disagreement through mutual concessions.

- The security and defence of Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh remain a top priority for Armenia. A growing militarization of the South Caucasus. An arms race between Armenia and Azerbaijan will demand from Armenia a defence budget increase.
- The recent escalation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border has indicated a possible transformation of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict into an international one owing to a series of factors. Prevention of a spillover of this conflict beyond its current borders must be a priority: The international community should strongly condemn any attacks on Armenian civilian targets by Azerbaijan, support the resumption of negotiations as the only possible option for the resolution of the conflict, and an immediate implementation of the agreements regarding an improvement of monitoring along the Line of Contact between Azerbaijan and Republic of Artsakh.
- The Azerbaijani government has been cultivating anti-Armenian sentiments in Azerbaijani society for more than three decades; however, a new phenomenon has occurred. The events on July 2020 sparked interethnic Armenian-Azerbaijani collisions in the Diasporas. Aggressive actions of the groups of Azerbaijanis were organised by the Azerbaijani embassies in several states, in particular in Russia, the US, Germany, Ukraine, and were directed against Armenians living in these countries. ■