
Out Of Armenia, Something New ?

The Economist, UK - 21/2/2008

Armenia's new president says he is ready to talk to Azerbaijan

A cross by Sarkisian's name ELECTIONS in former Soviet republics rarely yield surprises. The incumbent wins; the opposition cries foul; it takes to the streets. The presidential vote in Armenia on February 19th ran true to form. Serzh Sarkisian, the prime minister, won 53% of the vote, enough to avert a runoff with his main rival, Levon Ter-Petrossian, with 21%. Mr Ter-Petrossian, a former president, said Mr Sarkisian had stolen the vote even before ballots were counted. Independent observers talked of ballot stuffing and intimidation.

Yet, as thousands of demonstrators gathered in central Yerevan, monitors from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe opined that the election was "mostly in line with the country's international commitments", even though the vote count in 16% of stations was "bad or very bad". That verdict makes it more unlikely that the opposition can overturn the result.

Assuming Mr Sarkisian does get the top job, he will have his work cut out. Small and landlocked, Armenia has been blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey since it won a vicious war in 1994 for possession of Nagorno-Karabakh, a province of Soviet Azerbaijan that was mostly populated by Armenians. Russian troops patrol some of its borders and, though economic growth has been fuelled by a building boom and dollops of aid from America and the Armenian diaspora, much of the recent wealth is concentrated in the hands of oligarchs. Russia has a huge stake in the economy.

Like the outgoing president, Robert Kocharian, Mr Sarkisian is from Nagorno-Karabakh. Both men were commanders in the war. But unlike his hawkish predecessor, Mr Sarkisian is "a pragmatist, a skilled manager, and receptive to new ideas," argues Tigran Mkrtchyan, a foreign-policy expert in Yerevan. As defence minister, Mr Sarkisian oversaw Armenia's adhesion to a NATO scheme for former Soviet colonies. This week Mr Sarkisian told your correspondent he was ready to make peace with Azerbaijan so long as it was "an honourable one".

This might include ceding some of the conquered territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh. On Turkey, he struck a more hawkish note, calling Turkey's pre-conditions for establishing diplomatic ties "unacceptable". Yet long-stalled unofficial talks between the two countries are expected to resume once Mr Sarkisian takes over.

What transpires between Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan is not up to Mr Sarkisian alone. Clearing the government of corruption is. One test will be the number of allegedly crooked ministers he boots out of the cabinet. Should he flunk this, Mr Ter-Petrossian's talk of "criminal rule" will ring ever more true.

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