
Armenia in the Great Game.

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The United States wants an Orange Revolution in Armenia; The Armenian opposition might try to implement an Orange Revolution scenario in the upcoming elections. Artur Bagdasarian is trying to make himself the chief candidate for Orange leader. There are a number of indications that the United States is keeping a close eye on him.

Armenia is one of Russia's most important CIS partners, and its most consistent ally. Will it retain its pro-Russian orientation in the medium-term future?

Armenia's presidential election in 2008 could be a political watershed. President Robert Kocharian will not seek re-election, and the successor problem is becoming increasingly pressing. A parliamentary election is scheduled for May 12, 2007, and this will largely determine the configuration of forces in the lead-up to the presidential race. Twenty-seven parties and one election bloc have applied to participate in the parliamentary election, which will use a proportional voting system. There will be around 1,500 candidates altogether.

Opinion polls indicate that two political forces are in the lead: the ruling Armenian Republican Party (ARP) and the recently-established Prosperous Armenia, headed by a business tycoon named Gagik Tsarukian. Analysts regard Prosperous Armenia as a pro-government party.

Support for the opposition isn't very high. Only three opposition parties have any real chance of making it into parliament: the Law-Abiding Country party (led by Artur Bagdasarian), National Unity (led by Artashes Gegamian), and the People's Party of Armenia (led by Stepan Demirchian). There is also the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which is considered a pro-government party, but doesn't intend to support either the ARP or Prosperous Armenia; it has a small but stable electorate and a good chance of making it into parliament.

The suspense in this election focuses on which of the pro-government parties will score more points. That's if the election goes calmly, within constitutional channels. But there's no ruling out the possibility that the opposition might try to implement an Orange Revolution scenario. Artur Bagdasarian is trying to make himself the chief candidate for Orange leader. There are a number of indications that the United States is keeping a close eye on him. Bagdasarian's articles have been published frequently in the American media, and during a recent visit to the USA he said a great deal about the need to "build democracy" in Armenia. Bagdasarian's main arguments retransmit America's political interests in the region. When he calls on Armenians not to be "imprisoned by the past," he means the genocide of 1915; he proposes normalizing relations with Turkey, de-emphasizing the genocide. He also calls for normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and "resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the basis of reciprocal concession." Bagdasarian says: "Improving relations with Azerbaijan is essential for our long-term energy stability, which can only be achieved by diversifying our energy policy." That reference to "diversification" is aimed against Russia.

So far, Bagdasarian is keeping quiet about how far the concessions may extend.

Where do American interests come into this? The United States is interested in the trade routes linking this region to the Middle East and Asia. The frozen conflicts in the Trans-Caucasus are an obstacle to establishing transit channels. On the one hand, Armenia is effectively in a blockade: no communications with Azerbaijan, a closed border with Turkey, and Georgia closed off since Russia imposed anti-Georgian sanctions. On the other hand, Armenia may be regarded as the territory that obstructs many communications in the region. The American objective is to turn the Trans-Caucasus into an integrated region controlled by the United States. That's the point of the Orange project in Armenia. That's why Bagdasarian is portraying himself as a "peacemaker."

It would be naive to think that the Armenian authorities and Armenian society aren't concerned about the blockade around their country. The problem is the price to be paid for lifting it. Former president Levon Ter-Petrosian was forced to resign after arguing for substantial concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh and facing resistance from public opinion and the political establishment. The present administration, with the help of international mediators, is striving to find a solution that doesn't compromise Armenia's national interests.

Another sign pointing to the possibility of an Orange Revolution scenario in Armenia is the fact that the opposition is pedalling the issue of election fraud. But the configuration of political forces in Armenia is such that the authorities simply have no objective motives to rig elections; the pro-government forces are already certain to win by a large margin. The opposition's only chance of turning the situation around in its favor is to claim election fraud. The examples of Georgia and Ukraine have shown us how this technique can work. In Georgia, the key factor was Eduard Shevardnadze's unpopularity (but Kocharian is the most popular politician in Armenia); in Ukraine there was a split between the Western and Eastern regions (but Armenia is a unified country). The opposition's only hope lies in the dirty techniques of an Orange Revolution project.

Experts don't rule out the possibility that the West (certain circles in the West) may assist the Armenian opposition by organizing appropriate media coverage, sending an impressive contingent of election observers, and so on. A brigade from the BBC will arrive in Armenia a week before the election. The forces being drawn into this are substantial. Will they suffice to cause a social explosion in Armenia? There is no sign of that as yet. But Russia, with an interest in its strategic ally's stable development, needs to monitor this situation closely. It should also provide Armenia with media support and send election observers, facilitating legitimate democratic processes. Armenia will also need our political support.

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Translated by Elena Leonova
