

NEW CHALLENGES OF ARMENIAN PARLIAMENTARISM AND MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY: ILLUSIONS AND REALITY. INTERVIEW WITH ASHOT ALEKSANYAN

Magda Arsenyan

EUCACIS in Brief

No. 10
September 2019

PhD Support Programme

The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme



VolkswagenStiftung

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About the Author

Magda Arsenyan is an expert on political issues in the “Bright Armenia” faction at National Assembly of Armenia. She studied political science at Yerevan State University, faculty of International Relations. She obtained her master’s degree from the Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia (PAARA). Currently, she is a PhD student at PAARA, and a fellow of the PhD Support Programme “The EU, Central Asia and the Caucasus in the International System (EUCACIS)”. Her research focuses on the issues and preconditions for the establishment of parliamentary culture in Armenia.

Editorial team

Publishers: Prof. Dr Mathias Jopp, Head of International Programmes, IEP
PD Dr Matthias Waechter, Director General, CIFE

Editors: Dr Susann Heinecke, Programme Manager EUCACIS, CIFE
Janny Schulz, Programme Manager EUCACIS, IEP

Layout: Sophia Klumpp, IEP
Fabian Weber, IEP

Place of publication: Berlin

ISSN: 2627-7204

Internet: www.eucacis.eu

Email: info@eucacis.eu

Hashtag: #EUCACIS

Introduction

The final achievement of the political struggle of the opposition leaders and civil society actors of the non-violent, velvet and popular revolution in April-May 2018 in Armenia were the early parliamentary elections held on December 9, 2018. However, the gap between the new “velvet parliamentarism” and democratic culture lies in the fact that until now the relations between the new parliamentary majority and minority, the new ruling party and opposition parties, remain conflicting. This hinders the implementation of revolutionary citizenship-centric ideas, of democratisation, the transformation of the parliamentary form of governance and of deepening the European integration processes.

Ashot Aleksanyan is a professor at the Center for European Studies and Chair of Theory and History of Political Science of Yerevan State University, Armenia. In this interview, Prof. Aleksanyan evaluates the new trends in the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the opposition after the early parliamentary elections in 2018, as well as the transformation and formation of the new government of Armenia.

Will the results of the early parliamentary elections in 2018 contribute to the development of a parliamentary republic and the formation of a multiparty democracy in Armenia?

A.A.: The democratic significance of elections at all levels is huge for the new Armenian statehood and civil society. Elections form democratic citizenship, educate all of us and show the level of responsibility of the political elite of our country. Civil disobedience and the Velvet Revolution played an important role in the formation of a parliamentary republic and a multiparty system in our country. That changed the balance of political forces and enabled the opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan and opposition groups to form a new ruling elite. The new legitimate “Velvet” reality needed to be legalised, which happened and was supported by the early elections of the Council of Elders of Yerevan on September 23, 2018, and the early parliamentary elections on December

9, 2018. During the period of the election campaign of 2018, the activity of the civil society organisations (CSOs), social networks, the media, new political parties and movements—, which gained practical experience of participating in elections—sharply increased. The diversity of democratisation tendencies and the peculiarities of political development in our country were manifested in the fact that out of more than 100 registered political parties only nine political parties and two alliances participated in the early elections. The early elections in 2018 showed that there is a need to adopt new amendments in the current Electoral Code and Constitutional Law “On Parties” of the Republic of Armenia (RA). These should allow designating the place of political parties in the political system of Armenia as well as their rights and conditions of activity. Further, the amendments should legalise the financial and material sources of party structures, fix the principles for relations of parties with government bodies, identify the main aspects of their participation in election campaigns and in the activities of representative and legislative bodies, and regulate the procedure of liquidation of a political party.

The main obstacles in the process of forming a multiparty system in Armenia are the following: the economic blockade and the closed Armenian-Turkish border, the crisis of the political system and weak political parties, the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, the decline of the role of the trade union, labour migration, weak social, undemocratic and illiberal ideas, and discussions about the choice of development paths.

Despite the obvious weakness of parliamentary traditions, the first steps of parliamentarism caused a hot wave of approval and hope in Armenia. Analysing the past and resent of Armenian parliamentarism, the first thing that catches your eye is that the emergence and revival of political parties and parliamentary institutions in Armenia is associated with the deepest crises of society and state, when the community has discovered complete incapacity of power. The domestic pattern is that, both in the past and at present, the outraged Armenian society demanded changes, and the

revolutionary situation itself was brewing. It is not by chance that the word “revolution” is still preserved in the programs and names of the Armenian traditional parties.

What are the main tasks that should be reflected in the agenda of the new government and parliament?

A.A.: The expectations of citizens, CSOs and political parties from the newly elected parliament and Velvet Government are very high, as they require the establishment and functioning of such public authority and state institutions that enable the community to implement their political will.

At this stage, the agenda is embedded in the Government's Program of 2018 according to which the new government and the parliamentary majority have to solve the following main tasks: 1) Ensuring internal and external security, sustainable development and improvement of living conditions; 2) Improving the quality of life; 3) Ensuring sustainable growth of real incomes of citizens, as well as the growth of the level of pensions; 4) Reduction of poverty, unemployment, migration and inflation; 5) The fight against corruption; 6) Support of integration processes and technological innovations; 7) Ensuring an accelerated introduction of digital technologies in the economy and the social sphere; and 8) Ensuring economic growth and maintaining political stability.

Undoubtedly, political parties, groups and CSOs signed an important formal proclamation of humanistic principles for the protection of a free, dignified and happy citizen. Especially for international and European organisations, human rights defenders and civil society activists, it was nice to see the readiness of the new government to implement democratic obligations.

Can parliamentary opposition influence government activities and consolidate non-parliamentary political parties?

A.A.: Unfortunately, still, active citizens and members of civil society organizations have failed, and democratic changes are still lingering, because political representation is still fragmented in our country, because of the transit culture of membership in political parties, and the weakness of political leadership and the ruling elite. The main goal of political parties in modern Armenia is to realise the representation in the political system of those voters and social groups whose interests the parties represent. It is through political parties that various platforms can be formed for dialogue between civil society and the state. In today's complex Armenian society, citizens cannot actively participate in political life, since there is a large organisational fragmentation and ideological vacuum. It should be emphasised that in such a transitional system¹, both public authority and civilarchic² control by the community and activists is practically impossible without strong political parties. In this sense, they are mechanisms aggregating the interest of citizens, which on the contrary makes it possible to avoid civil disobedience when the balance of political parties in the parliament of our country is changed. Therefore, the main task of political parties in our parliament is not only the struggle for political power, but also the formation of the ruling elite and the composition of the government associated with it. Unfortunately, under the conditions of a weak parliamentary democracy in Armenia, the political parties are only fighting for power during elections, which continues in parliament.

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- 1 Today in the political space there are numerous and very acute conflict situations that in the short-term can change (or even dramatically) the vector of development of our country.
 - 2 Civilized power - this shows the level of influence of civil society organizations, which is aimed at effective control over public authority, government bodies and local self-government.

Why did the parliamentary opposition become subject of conflict between the political parties “Prosperous Armenia” and “Bright Armenia”³?

The parliamentary elections of 2018 gave all political parties access to the levers of power. This was very tempting for many marginal political groups. In the political struggle, the cause of this conflict is the desire to form the image of an oppositionist in the post-revolutionary parliament. However, each of the mentioned political parties involved in the altercation tries to prove that the main motive of its specific activity is the desire to achieve the maximum possible benefits for its voters. Taking into account the peculiarity of the Armenian political life, it turns out that two political parties and one coalition that won the elections formed parliamentary groups that will be limited to parliamentary activities. Although the struggle for public power is the most important task of political parties, “Bright Armenia” and “Prosperous Armenia” hold different positions in relation to the government and the ruling parliamentary Alliance “My Step”⁴. “Bright Armenia” is the opposition, which aims at developing statehood and the European agenda through liberal-democratic values. At present, “Bright Armenia”—unlike “Prosperous Armenia”—acts as a constructive opposition. It criticises the government if it does not agree with something, it supports the government when it considers its activities as correct. The party “Bright Armenia” participates in various government bodies as a partner of the party “Civil Contract” and other parties. In this case, while being part of the executive power until the parliamentary elections of 2018, “Bright Armenia” bears some responsibility for the conflict. After the parliamentary elections of 2018, the democratic implementation of state power depended mainly on the “Civil Contract” party, since it was in its hands that the broad possibilities of implementing their own solutions to problems are concentrated.

3 The Armenian names of the two parties are “Bargavatch Hayastan” (= Prosperous Armenia) and “Lusavor Hayastan” (= Bright Armenia).

4 „My step” corresponds to the Armenian term „Im Oayl”.

What were the main features of the latest early parliamentary elections?

A.A.: The main features of the current early parliamentary elections were the revolutionary situation and the obviously low level of political competence of both ministers and deputies with regard to their understanding of the state institutional structure, their skills, knowledge and their ability to manage and boost an efficient development of government and parliamentary performance. This caused a negative influence on the further activities of the new ruling party. In the atmosphere of euphoria as a transitional form of governance, new members of the government as well as the newly elected deputies lacked the ability to identify various political interests and views, to differ national interests from political ones, to throw away the opposition “mask”, and finally, to act as a responsible authority able to form measurable and realistic state development programs and strategies. In addition, the lack of recognition and resistance from civil servants that were in a close relationship with the previous authority resulted in the formation of an aggressive socio-political atmosphere, in calls for non-tolerance, such as the colour based segregation (“black-white” separation) and guided hate speech in social media.

In connection with the revolutionary situation, the former opposition parties and leaders began to treat each other with contempt. Unfortunately, according to the existing practice during that period, such behaviour and activities of the parliament and government can seriously aggravate the internal situation and cause a serious systemic crisis of public and legal institutions. Especially when, due to the lack of administrative experience, it is already possible to observe some tendencies of violation of law, of exertion of political pressure, and of usage of corruption methods or official positions of high-ranking officials.

In this context, elections should have performed a selective function of political alternatives and replacement mechanism for some politicians, hence identifying the most attractive political programmes and attitudes. The recent early elections qualitatively changed not only the composition of the parliament and

the balance of political forces in the country as a whole, but also the mentality and socio-political behaviour of the society in both the digital world and in real life. Unfortunately, it is still impossible to understand or predict the directions of change in citizens' mentality. Parliamentary elections of 2023 will show.

A positive feature of these elections was the liberalisation of the electoral environment in our country, which allowed us to significantly expand our election campaigns and bring more advanced political parties and activists to political life. This concerns the role of social media and the so-called information support of election campaigns, especially the final results of voting and identifying winners, striving to ensure the principle of equality when using campaign materials in the media, prohibiting unauthorised methods of campaigning and propaganda. It is apparent that these elections gain significance in our country. The main indicator is that the election campaigns are turning into a serious domestic political event. The political will of the revolutionary leadership contributed to this by trying to counter it with various anti-corruption measures, including tougher sanctions for such offenses.

What are the main ideological orientations of the parliamentary parties?

A.A.: From the very beginning, the issue of ideological orientation was important in the process of forming coalitions among the political majority and the opposition in the Armenian parliamentary system, since party ideologies help all actors to better understand the mechanisms of political dialogue and partnership in Armenia. In our political system, party ideologies are the weakest link, since political parties are unable to find consensus and form a coalition. Thus, this can lead to a serious political crisis. As an example, the collapse of the coalition and the resignation of the coalition government during the revolutionary events in 2018, did not add stability to the political system of our country. If political scientists could have reliable

analytical tools for analysing and predicting such revolutionary situations as observed in Armenia, then practical recommendations could be developed for overcoming crises related to the formation and functioning of coalitions. In order to understand how modern parliamentary democracy works, we need to understand what ideologies our parliamentary parties have and how coalitions are formed. It can be said with confidence, that the entire political process in our parliament can be viewed through the prism of ideology in order to evaluate the effectiveness of party coalitions. In the context of the elections as well as the revolutionary events of 2018, were characterised by a relatively low level of responsibility and coalition practices of the former parliamentary parties. Party ideology and culture forming coalitions are extremely common in the parliamentary systems of Western European countries, which unfortunately are very weak in Armenia and other new independent countries. For these countries in particular, the experience of the formation of the party ideology and the coalition government of Germany is very interesting and practical.

According to the statutes of the four parliamentary political parties, it becomes clear that three of them have liberal, and one has a centre-right ideology. Nevertheless, in reality "Prosperous Armenia" maintains conservative behaviours and even continues active cooperation with various European parties, as since 2014 the party officially joined the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists. Liberal and democratic values are the political bases for the "Civil Contract" and "Mission" parties, which formed the "My Step" alliance in August 2018 and currently constitute the parliamentary majority, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The victory of 2018 led by the liberals can be interpreted as a counter-reaction to the illiberal regime, and as an attempt of the society to seek for new moral ideals. However, the foundation of new moral ideals goes along with a unification to serve community, which therefore has its weak sides. Liberalism has won at the level of values or language, but it

needs to be adapted at all levels of society, e.g. at the level of civic culture and common consciousness. Liberalism will gradually become part of the everyday content of political culture, lifestyle, social relations as well as all recurring activities of our transitional society, including economical aspects. It is obvious that the victory of the liberal-democratic political parties does not yet mean the victory of liberalism in our society as a whole, since now the value of human rights, the rule of law and democracy develop in the framework of conservative tendencies. At this stage of European integration for the future ideology of liberalism in modern Armenia, the relationship and dialogue of liberalism with conservatism depends on which of the many conservative political parties will gain more influence and dominate socially and politically significant decisions. Practically, this means that the victory of liberal values has created only a certain initial prerequisite in order to transfer the activities of society, and each person to a liberalised society. This highest level of value may turn out to be abstract from the point of view of urgent problems. After the velvet revolution, our transit society is under constant threat that the solution of complex problems at the economic, political, cultural levels at the scale of regions and various groups, despite certain liberal euphoria, will constantly suffer because of the lack of elaboration of liberal values in practical activities of influential political parties.

What role should civil society organizations play in solving the problems of domestic and foreign policy of Armenia?

A.A.: Undoubtedly, in our country the social network of civil society organizations plays a huge role. The Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU are actively promoting civil society reforms and programs on human rights and equality issues in Armenia. The relevance of the role of civil society in Armenia is not only related to the fact that the EU connects issues of improving governance in the South Caucasus region with the participation of civil society, but also other leading international

organizations proceed likewise. At the same time, international structures are unanimous in the fact that in order to increase the efficiency of its activities, it is extremely important to pay considerable attention to the establishment and expansion of dialogue with the civil society.

The structure of civil society in Armenia includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, trade unions, the media, religious organizations, the church, charitable foundations, social networks and the like, allowing civil society to become an influential part of the political system in Armenia. Our civil society is global, as Armenians live in many countries of the world, and the number of Armenian diasporas exceeds the total population of Armenia itself. In concrete terms, currently the most actual directions of pan-Armenian target programs between Armenia and the diaspora are international integration, educational programs, development of Armenian diaspora schools, protection and development of the nation's cultural heritage, recognition of the Armenian Genocide, peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as the involvement of diaspora entrepreneurs to participate in the economic programs of the republic. In turn, the diaspora provides financial support to the Armenian civil society through charitable foundations.

The Armenian model of interaction between civil society and state in modern conditions is characterized by dualism. It reflects deep internal contradictions in the logic of the historical development of the Armenian state and society. According to the first criterion for the classification of interaction models, a statist model has emerged in Armenia. As far as the second criterion is concerned, the interaction of state and civil society is defined as a dynamic model characteristic of the countries of Western Europe. The dualistic nature of the Armenian model carries both, positive and negative potential. On the one hand, the effect of complementarity can provide conditions for the formation of a more efficient design and on the other hand, dualism is associated with the risk of obstruction.

The post-revolutionary Armenian state itself initiates the intensification of the organization of civil society by means of developing their autonomy. Under these new conditions, the status of political parties is changing, which gradually leads to becoming a tool for the self-organization of the ruling elite. The dynamic model in Armenia is manifested in the use of a flexible adaptation mechanism of state interaction with civil society organisations, which correlates with short-term periods of political regime transformation. The government seeks to prevent open clashes between civil society and the state, by using counter-reform compensation tactics. The dynamic effect of this interaction model is largely being realized in state policy relating the NGO sector. The process of formation and development of Armenian NGOs is accompanied by both, periods of dynamic development of the third sector ⁵and pre-revolutionary periods of state control.

The long-term integration experience of the Armenian civil society under conditions of democratisation of the political system is the evolution of institutionalising relations between the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU with our civil society at both, national and supranational levels. In this context, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is important, bringing together NGOs of the EU and partner countries. Its role is to strengthen civil society and to coordinate the actions of NGOs, which in turn should be involved in the control of ongoing reforms in their countries. The participation of organisations of the Armenian civil society in the European integration process is uneven. This is due to the fact that the process of forming the legal framework for the activities of NGOs and the institutionalisation of the interaction of civil society with the structures of the EU have been consistent since the beginning of the creation of an integration association. To date, the civil society of the EU countries has

reached a level of development where within the framework of the political processes, it has a great potential to influence the determining factors of the future development of the European integration process.

The experiences of European integration and the participation of civil society deserve to be handled creatively meaningful and should be seen as further conditions towards an integration process while building a new system of relations between post-revolutionary state institutions and civil society organizations. The success of the institutionalisation of these relations is only possible if they are broad, open and democratic. The bodies of the post-revolutionary state authorities of Armenia could use the experience of the EU in determining the representativeness and competence of civil society organizations that are equal members of the public councils under these bodies, in order to prevent them of becoming a formal bureaucratic institution. These efforts should be carried out simultaneous with the development of democratic principles within internal structures of the organizations themselves. Considering the high level of development of civil society structures in the EU countries and the effective work of its organizations, Armenian NGOs will get great benefits if they directly develop ties with their European partners, i.e. by sharing best practices.

5 The term "third sector" refers to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs), when commercialization processes and close ties between charity and business (in cases of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility) conflate NGOs and NPOs with government and municipal institutions, as well as with business.