

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

12 /2013

April 2013

## Report on Armenian Presidential Elections 2013

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### Introduction

Armenia is a country in South Caucasus, situated in the northeast of the Armenian Upland. Armenia's turbulent modern history as a frontier land between Russia, Turkey and Persia makes more relevant than ever the design and implementation of a good neighborhood policy that advances the long-term interests of the country as a meeting point between the East and the West. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, living standards in Armenia were hampered by lawlessness, economic collapse and the Karabakh war with Azerbaijan. Armenian leadership has set for a long time two non-realistic foreign policy objectives: 1. To advance its security and economic relations with the West, while preserving the status of Russia's closest ally in the former Soviet Union and 2. To attract international support for a favorable resolution of the Karabakh conflict without compromising Armenian diaspora funding with a normalization of its relations with Turkey. Despite efforts in the last 21 years to consolidate democracy and modernize elections, there is still a lot of ongoing criticism about democracy, human rights protection and the rule of law. The recent presidential elections are revealing of the main pathologies underpinning Armenian politics since the beginning of transition in the 1990s.

### Background

Instability and chaos in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse facilitated the emergence of strong executives in Armenian politics. Recent years can be considered as a period of weak institutions, flawed electoral processes and strong personalities in the arena of politics.<sup>i</sup> Top-down modernization at the expense of democratization has been a high priority for Armenian leaders. The existence of a weak opposition and state-controlled media prevented a political dialogue under conditions of political competition and fair elections.

At the same time, inequality is rising and the average salary is equal to 75 dollars per week. One-third of adult Armenians are abroad in search of work.<sup>ii</sup> Mass killings of political elites in the parliament during 1999 and street deaths in Yerevan in 2008 gave rise to further social unrest that was culminated with mass protests against Sargsyan's regime in 2011 and continued in the 2012.

### Electoral Campaign

The electoral campaign was marked by a primitive contest of personality than competition of policies and ideology. During a two-week campaign, one candidate was shot and another one was on a hunger strike, refusing to participate in the elections. Low level of political discourse, with less debate and even less of a choice between competing visions or strategic alternatives among the candidates characterized those elections. According to the Regional Studies Center Director Richard Giragosian, the electorate showed their feeling of hopelessness through passive participation.<sup>iii</sup>

Media coverage of candidates and their campaigns was improved. Freedom of expression was more pronounced. Nevertheless, the use of administrative resources as a means of pressure on teachers, civil servants, and others, to attend incumbent Sargsyan's political rallies was continued.<sup>iv</sup> That was done not only to increase attendance rates of Sargsyan's events, but to also test the efficacy of coercive measures by authorities.

### Candidates: Serzh Sargsyan

Although there were initially fifteen prospective candidates, only eight qualified as official candidates. The remaining aspirants failed to meet the requirement of posting an electoral deposit of 8 million drams (almost 20,000 USD) and were automatically denied registration.<sup>v</sup>

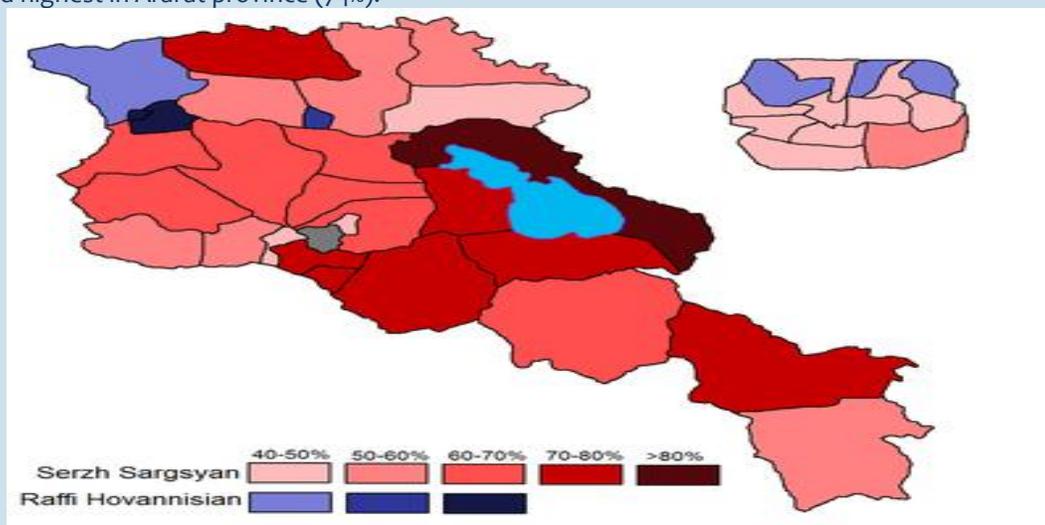
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The most influential candidate and the eventual winner was the current President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan. The incumbent was born in Stepanakert, capital of Nagorno Karabakh. He is a graduate of the Philological Department of Yerevan State University and an honorary doctor of Moscow State University. He was also the Head of Nagorno Karabakh Self Defense Forces Committee from 1989 to 1993. Sargsyan became president in 2008, but his election provoked a domestic crisis, when people started demonstrating on the streets. Sargsyan is a stereotypical post-Soviet politician with a high level of pragmatism and a lack of ideology.

The second candidate Rafi Hovhannisyan represented the opposition, but he had no official support as an opposition leader, something that considerably undermined his position. Hovhannisyan has been the first Armenian foreign minister since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and running for the presidency for the first time. He was born and raised in the United States and returned to Armenia in 1990. He denounced his US citizenship in 2001.<sup>vi</sup> Hovhannisyan is the founder of the opposition party *Heritage* and could be a real competitor to Sargsyan, if not for his impulsive behavior, which caused considerable damage to his image.

### Electoral Results

On 25 February 2013, the Central Electoral Committee announced the final election results with Serzh Sargsyan as the president-elect. Voter participation was 1,521,489 (60.2 percent turnout), with the lowest (48.1%) in Kotayk province and highest in Ararat province (74%).



Central Electoral Committee preliminary results:<sup>vii</sup>

Candidate	Nominating parties	Votes	Percent of valid votes
Serzh Sargsyan	Republican	861,378	58.64%
Rafi Hovhannisyan	Heritage	539,693	36.81%
Hrant Bagratyan	Freedom	31,643	2.15%
Paruyr Hayrikyan	UNSD	18,096	1.23%
Andrias Ghukasyan	None	8,329	0.57%
Vardan Sedrakyan	None	6,210	0.42%
Arman Melikyan	none	3,520	0.24%

According to the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), the voting process was orderly and well organized in the majority of polling stations despite overcrowding inside and outside, as well as a number of serious violations during voting hours.<sup>viii</sup> IEOM observers gave positive assessments, although they reported cases of procedural violations and irregularities. On the other hand, according to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly monitoring, in this election the public's interest was limited as the candidates were not genuinely competitive. The noticeable level of apathy among voters about elections could be attributed to the inability of candidates to present their views and

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differences to the public.

### Post-Election

Following the Election Day and the announcement of preliminary results, Hovhannisyan claimed that he won the election. Starting from 20 February, he organized rallies in Yerevan and visited several other cities. The police announced that these rallies were illegal and can lead to administrative liability, but in the end they did not interfere. The Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) cancelled a rally to celebrate the election victory of Serzh Sargsyan at Freedom Square in Yerevan on 21 February 2013, in order to avoid tensions or clashes between the supporters of the two candidates.

Many analysts recognize that this series of demonstrations is only perpetuating the appeal of Rafi Hovhannisyan, who has now emerged as a potential agent of change in Armenian politics.<sup>ix</sup> Serzh Sargsyan is confronted with an opposition, which is growing on a personality rather than political competition basis.

It seems that in this election, there were no elements of political competition observed. There was one leader, Serge Sargsyan, and people seemed to continue trusting him, even in relative terms. Nevertheless, unless further redistribution and economic reforms take place, he is inclined to lose the remaining support of the popular majority.<sup>x</sup>

### Foreign Policy

Over the last years Armenia has been increasingly dependent on Russia for its military, economic and financial survival. In terms of foreign policy, a second, final term may also further allow President Sargsyan to look for new bold ideas or initiatives in foreign policy, similar to his politically risky initiative toward Armenian-Turkish normalization. This will allow him to craft a real and lasting legacy.

Armenian elites have been undecided in their advancement of their relationship with the European Union. While the EU is an instrumental factor for democratic reform and economic governance, Armenia's allegiances to Russia and the United States continue to remain much stronger. In any case, the European Commission offers stimuli for growth and economic development, without having the capacity to engage in Armenian-Turkish relations or the resolution of the Karabakh conflict.<sup>xi</sup>

The elections per did not focus on Armenian foreign policy. All debates were mostly about domestic politics. Therefore, in the near future the reelected president will direct his main efforts in internal restructuring of political power, in order to ensure his office horizon amidst emerging inter-party and inter-elite alliances.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the elections were a step forward, and electoral results have paved the way for a different dynamic inside the Armenian parliament. There are parties that are not part of the governing coalition and play an active role in checking on the government. A strong parliament reinforces the opposition and thus places a serious challenge on the power monopoly of the government. The absence of political discourse in this election made just more interesting how Serzh Sargsyan will co-opt the other presidential candidates using a rhetoric of order and anti-corruption, which began in November 2012.

The polarization of Armenian society has substantially reduced his influence and popularity. It will be interesting to see whether Sargsyan will be able to move away from the shadow of his predecessor, Robert Kocharyan. The normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations and the improvement of growth rates in a country of widespread poverty will be the two main issues that will define his political future.

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<sup>i</sup> Sammut Dennis, “2012: Democracy in the South Caucasus – Time to be cautiously optimistic”, *Caucasus Elections Watch*, December 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Bobinski Krzysztof, “Armenia in Transition – Functioning Democracy or Facade?”, HETQ Investigative Journalists, 25 February 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Giragosian Richard, *Armenia: Pre-election assessment RSC Special analysis*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Regional Studies Center, Yerevan, 1 March 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> The Committee for Open Democracy, *Analysis of the 2013 Armenian Presidential Election and Recommendations*, Armenia, 20 February 2013.

<sup>v</sup> “Decision 2013: Election body registers eight presidential candidates in February ballot”, *ArmeniaNow*, 14 January 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> Rankin Jennifer, “Last of the Mohicans”, *European Voice*, 14 March 2013.

<sup>vii</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Post-Election Interim Report”, 19–26 February 2013, Election Observation Mission, Republic of Armenia, 18 February 2013, 2 March 2013.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> Giragosian Richard, *Armenia: Pre-election assessment RSC Special analysis*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Regional Studies Center, Yerevan, 1 March 2013.

<sup>x</sup> Tsinker Alexander, “Armenian elections were legitimate and democratic”, *Institute of Eastern Europe and the CIS*, 25 February 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Sammut Dennis, “2012: Democracy in the South Caucasus – Time to be cautiously optimistic”, *Caucasus Elections Watch*, December 2012.