

**PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS  
IN ARMENIA 2013 AND  
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CONSEQUENCES FOR THE  
COUNTRY**

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## **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ARMENIA 2013 AND THEIR POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE COUNTRY**

On February 25 2013 the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) officially announced the final results of the sixth presidential elections in the history of the third Armenian republic. The elections were held on February 18, and the current RA President and the leader of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) Serzh Sargsyan was re-elected in the first round. According to CEC, Serzh Sargsyan got the votes of 58.64% (861,373 votes) of the citizens of Armenia, who took part in the elections. The only candidate strongly opposing to Sargsyan was the leader of the oppositional party “Heritage” Raffi Hovhannisyan with 36.75% (539,693 votes). Other candidates were far behind the main competitors: the leader of “Liberty” party, ex-Prime Minister of Armenia (1993-1996) Hrant Bagratyan – 2.15% (31,643 votes), the Head of the Union for Self-Determination Paruyr Hayrikyan – 1.23% (18,096 votes), the Director of the Radio “Hay” Andrias Ghukasyan – 0.57% (8,329 votes), Vardan Sedrakyan, who was introducing himself as an “expert on epic poetry” – 0.42% (6,210 votes) and the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mountainous Karabagh Arman Melikyan – 0.24% (3,520 votes).

The three political forces having the biggest parliamentary factions after the RPA – “Prosperous Armenia” Party (PAP), Armenian National Congress (ANC) and Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF) neither nominated their candidates, nor supported any of those competing. Considering that the outcome of the elections had been predetermined and the incumbent president would be re-elected by any fair and unfair methods, they most probably chose the tactics of discrediting the elections by their non-participation and postponed their struggle for power for the future, when the positions of Serzh Sargsyan and the RPA would weaken. At the parliamentary elections in spring 2012 those political parties got more than 42% of votes, but by January 18 2013 they had considerably lost their electorate. More than 3% of the ballots were damaged (deliberately, in the majority of cases), which could be considered as support to the direct and indirect appeals of some party leaders, not to support any candidate.

The thing is that elections in Armenia do not involve the voting “against all” and the main method to demonstrate the rejection of all the candidates is damaging the ballots. It might be assumed that the adherents of PAP, ANC and ARF appeared to be in those 40%, who did not vote, but the 60% official turnout has already become traditional for the national elections in Armenia, so the “deserters” (as parties and politicians, escaping from the struggle are sometimes named here) do not have any ground to claim the stay-at-homes as for their own electorate.

The “Prosperous Armenia” Party has the second biggest faction in the National Assembly. It was removed from the struggle mainly by tough pressure on some of its representatives by the power, particularly including the criminal case on money laundering against the ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Vardan Oskanyan, mass checkups in the ministries

headed by PAP representatives before the withdrawal of the Party from the ruling coalition in May 2012. Governors, heads of local administration and businessmen from PAP felt uncomfortable as well. Concerning the ANC, not getting the alliance with the rich PAP, it appeared to be without necessary funds to lead the campaign. Besides, by the last moment both parties counted on the sign from Moscow to support them in the struggle against Serzh Sargsyan. But the sign has never come. Within ARF hot discussions were in the process concerning the participation in the elections, and finally the party preferred the discrediting of the elections like the PAP and ANC, instead of making expenses from its scanty party budget and the quite expected fiasco.

Initially Hovhannisyan was quite convenient and important competitor for Serzh Sargsyan. He was never notable for tough and aggressive critics towards the power, and in comparison with the PAP leader Gagik Tsarukyan and ANC leader, the first RA President (1991-1998) Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was not considered by the public as a real alternative to the current President. At that his participation in the elections partly smoothed the negative impression from the competition deficit and served as a guarantee against the attempts of the opposition to leave Sargsyan alone as a candidate and thus discrediting the elections in the view of the Armenian and international communities.

The President's milieu saw Raffi Hovhannisyan and his party as a "safe" main opposition, which after February 18 would substitute in this status the ANC and first of all the PAP, behind which the shadow of the ambitious second RA President Robert Kocharyan, never giving up his intentions to return to the presidential chair, could be seen. It was important on principle for Serzh Sargsyan's team that the Leader of "Heritage" would pass confidently Hrant Bagratyan, who distinguished himself by consistent and substantial critics towards the government and the President during his campaign. If Bagratyan had placed the second with a considerable percent of votes, the major part of the ANC, disappointed in Levon Ter-Petrosyan, would have joined him after the elections.

It is not excluded that Hovhannisyan even got some resources from Sargsyan's milieu, so that the intended scenario would be guaranteed. The Head of "Heritage" led quite an active campaign, which did not stand for its content-richness, but won by the openness of the candidate and his readiness for direct communication with the people. At that Raffi Hovhannisyan spoke about his main rival, the current RA President quite respectfully. Such conduct of a politician was something new for the conservative Armenian society and was liked by many. It was noticeable that day by day Hovhannisyan got new adherents. The growth of his popularity was assisted as well by the provision of equal rights for the candidates and refusal from the biased television broadcast, plus by absence of obstacles for the promotion meetings with the voters and the open critics towards the power – these are the positive reforms made in Armenia since the parliamentary elections 2012.

Taking into account the previous experience, the inertness of people and their skepticism concerning possible changes might be broken by the consolidation of the opposition

around one united candidate. Under respective circumstances the passive indignation of the people by social unfairness, corruption and unemployment turn the majority of the population into a protest electorate. Shortly before the voting day possible unification of Hrant Bagratyan, Paruyr Hayrikyan and Raffi Hovhannisyanyan was much spoken about. And though it never happened, the public elected their own united candidate and practically all the votes, which should have been distributed among the abovementioned three candidates, were concentrated on Hovhannisyanyan.

As the voting day was approaching, one could observe the growth of ambitions of the "Heritage" team. And the votes, got by Hovhannisyanyan on February 18, made everyone in Armenia believe that he won the elections. Even the primitive calculations of the quantity of real voters are enough to make such a conclusion. According to the most optimistic data, 700-800 thousands of adult citizens out of more than two and a half million, included in the voters' lists, are outside of Armenia, and pessimistically – they are more than a million. Only several hundreds of them have the possibility to vote abroad. Thus, the attendance of the voters should be close to 100%, so that the number of people, who participated in the voting, makes more than a million and a half (official data). While any resident of the country could see by his neighborhood, that the activity was not so high. In other words, the number of overstated additions could make 400-700 thousands. And, of course, the majority of these "votes" went to the current President, providing for his de jure re-election. An essential role in the distortion of the real preferences of the Armenian society was also played by the mass bribery and pressure upon the electorate, as well as the use of the administrative resource. In this sense the presidential elections of 2013 repeated the worst practices of the previous years.

Irrespective of his preliminary plans and agreements, Raffi Hovhannisyanyan should accept the moods of the electorate, otherwise he would completely spoil his political reputation. He did not admit the announced results and headed a protest movement, which is so traditional for the post-electoral period in Armenia. It is of an expressly peaceful character and the "Heritage" leader suppresses any manifestations of extremism and intolerance, which, like his election campaign, is quite a new thing in the political culture of Armenia. Hovhannisyanyan declares his readiness for the dialogue and compromises with Serzh Sargsyan. As one of options he suggests to hold early parliamentary elections. Hovhannisyanyan is being criticized by the radical part of the society, which demanded more resolute steps. And if he is still allowed to head the protest, it is because the fear of the radicals, that without the de facto won candidate the movement would lose its energy.

Notwithstanding the relatively calm process of the electoral campaign, it did not pass without serious collisions. One of the candidates, Andrias Ghukasyanyan, was on hunger strike during 30 days, in the evening of January 30 an assassination attempt was made against another candidate Paruyr Hayrikyanyan, who got a gunshot wound. The elections, in fact, were hung by a thread from cancelation (according to the Constitution, new elections are announced in case of death or inability of a candidate to participate in the campaign

over a long period of time). This concealed tension and unpredictability continued in the post-electoral period as well, despite the peaceful character of the protest actions. As a consequence, there are four possible scenarios of events development: 1) the protest movement begins to decline, and Serzh Sargsyan remains the president for the second term avoiding any concessions to the opposition, although without sufficient legitimacy as well. Raffi Hovhannisyán could secretly assist the implementation of such an “exit strategy”. 2) Certain compromise between Sargsyan and Hovhannisyán is reached, leading to the loss of monopoly of the Republican Party for the power. 3) Protest actions gain such strength that the current president is forced to resign. And though at the new elections Raffi Hovhannisyán remains a favorite, other politicians, who were in the shadow during the last months, may join the struggle. 4) Sargsyan does not compromise, but the protest actions continue with unpredictable outcome, including possible appearance of the third power on the proscenium (particularly, Robert Kocharyán or one of his protégés) and deviation of the situation from the peaceful course.

In case of the first two scenarios the perspective for the continuation of the reforms in Armenia, oriented towards the European integration, as well as relative relaxation of the social and economic problems, is preserved. In particular, if the situation is settled, by the end of March, as it was planned, the next round of negotiations on Association Agreement with the European Union will be carried out and the work on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement will be intensified. The signing of these documents will become possible at the Eastern Partnership Summit, taking place in Vilnius in the end of November 2013, as was intended by the EaP Roadmap. There will also be prospects for the Donor Conference on Armenia, initiated by the EU, which may bring additional assistance of million and a half Euro.

Besides, the US Government will be ready to renew the financing of Armenia within the Millennium Challenge Account. Preliminarily the possibility to provide half a million US dollars assistance is being considered. In due time the participation of Armenia in MCA was suspended because of the problematic elections in 2008, and a new political crisis will finally exclude the country from the programme. It will be difficult to expect “soft” attitude from the Washington DC, since many influential American-Armenian Diaspora circles are disappointment with “stolen victory” from Raffi Hovhannisyán, who was born in US and enjoys sympathy there. While these are exactly those circles, who play major role in lobbying Armenia’s interests before the American leadership.

At the same time it should be noted that the enthusiasm in the Armenian society concerning the convergence with the West and first of all the European Union, declined at some extent after the February 18 elections. It is explained by the extreme discontent about the elections assessment by the international observers, which was mainly positive. People were irritated by the congratulations on re-election addressed to Serzh Sargsyan by many European leaders. These moods may strengthen, if the first scenario will be implemented, and they can weaken in case of the second one.

The scenarios, which suppose certain destabilization, will most probably increase the dependence of Armenia from Moscow, as the lack of essential assistance from the West will make Armenian authorities agree with any conditions for the sake of affordable prices for gas and Russian credits. And the conditions might be entrance into the Eurasian Union and joining to the Customs Union, which have recently become prior directions in the policy of the Russian Federation vis-a-vis the former Soviet Republics.