



ARMENIA : WHAT COMES NEXT ?

11 March 2008. A report on an informal discussion on the current situation in Armenia and on the possible consequences of the current crisis.

On 11 March experts working for various organisations in relation to Armenia met in Brussels at Inside Europe's invitation. The purpose of the meeting was to review the current situation and exchange information and analysis. Participants (all participating in a personal capacity) included individuals from the EU institutions, from think tanks and NGOs and from the diplomatic corps.

Participants began by reviewing the events of the last three weeks, including the 19 February elections, 1 and 2 March violent clashes between police and demonstrators, subsequent imposition of a 20-day state of emergency in Armenia, attempts at international mediation and investigations and the clashes on the frontline in Nagorno- Karabagh. Participants also reviewed the activities of the different EU institutions in this regard, including a draft resolution pending before the European Parliament.

The debate addressed aspects of the current situation and of the country's future prospects. Several participants felt that the situation calls for caution and a sense of responsibility, explaining that rash declarations at this stage would help no one. Several also insisted that the EU's reaction to developments in Armenia must take account of the country's general context and situation.

Participants who expressed an opinion, furthermore, also agreed that the recent crisis in Armenia could neither be assimilated to other post-electoral crises in the region (e.g. Ukraine or Georgia), not considered a dispute between clearly contrasting projects regarding democracy in Armenia, international alignment or approaches to conflict resolution.

Investigating the recent past

The OSCE's work in particular was reviewed. It was felt that the role of this organisation in analysing and legitimizing the electoral process is crucial; its work will only be over with its final report on Armenia's elections, due in April; all available reports of provisional assessments.

The credibility of OSCE's reports themselves was discussed. In this respect, some participants mentioned in particular the contrast between general (often positive) OSCE statements regarding the conduct elections, and the heavy and numerous qualifications that follow. As a result of this, and of other experiences, some people in Armenia believe that OSCE statements are politically inspired and this undermines trust in the organisation's statements.

Participants also mentioned how important it is that investigations into the 1 and 2 March violence should be thoroughly carried out. The question of the independence of the investigations and credibility of its conclusions in the eyes of the population was also raised.

Back to normal

The discussion addressed prospects for lifting the state of emergency in Armenia and restoring freedom of the press; two of the provisions of the decree declaring a state of emergency have already been lifted.

The possible format of the government coalition was discussed as well, with reference in particular to the possible outcomes of the dialogue between the Ter Petrossyan-led opposition and the governing majority.

The future

As the uncertainty for the short term gradually subsides, however, the question to be addressed will be: how to avoid such dangerous crises in the future? One aspect emphasized by participants was the issue of the attitudes to elections and public trust in the process which are as important to the viability of the electoral process as respect for the electoral code. This would in particular have to be addressed over time through education.

The opinion was also expressed that the prospect of EU membership would create a context which is sure to accelerate and consolidate reforms: if membership has been offered to "Asia minor" and to Cyprus, why not to Armenia?