

ARMENIA PROTESTS CONTINUE UNABATED

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For more than a week the Armenian and international media have reported the "Electric" protests on Paghramyan Street in Yerevan which is now on its ninth day. Political pundits have already begun analyzing the reasons and repercussions of the development, in addition to commenting on whether the unrest is of domestic origin or is being directed by outside forces--à la the Kiev maidan. A third speculation is whether the "home-made" protest could be hijacked by outsiders. The below news reports--describing the fluid situation--are a sample of what's on the electronic media--Editor.

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armenianow.com

Electric Yerevan: Police warn of possible use of force

28.06.15

The Armenian police have urged protesters campaigning against rising electricity prices in Yerevan's Baghramyan Avenue to unblock the central thoroughfare tonight, warning of possible use of force to 'restore public order'.

Colonel Valeri Osipian, deputy chief of Yerevan's police, described the Saturday statement by President Serzh Sargsyan offering a compromise plan on the electricity price hikes as 'victory' both for the demonstrators and the entire society, including the police, and recommended that No To Plunder activists 'return to the framework of law'.

The protesters want the unpopular decision by the utilities commission to raise electricity tariffs by over 16 percent beginning in August to be scrapped. But at a meeting with senior government officials late on Saturday Sargsyan suggested that the Armenian government will take upon itself

the subsidizing of the increase until it gets the

conclusion of an international audit of the Russian-owned Electric Networks of Armenia company.

Activists of the "No To Plunder" pressure group who have been holding protests in Yerevan since June 19 did not react immediately to the announcement, calling for 'nationwide mobilization' on Sunday to determine their attitude towards the government plan and decide on further actions.

Talking to media hours before the rally, Colonel Osipyan said: 'Within the framework of the law the police will use means to restore public order in Baghramian Avenue. The offenders will be punished.'

The police already used force against demonstrators on June 23, but the heavy-handed reaction then only angered people and they turned out in even larger numbers to get barricaded in Baghramian Avenue later that night.

The police have not used strong-arm methods since then, but have kept reminding the protesters that while peaceful their rallies violate Armenia's law on freedom of assembly.

Deutsche Welle, Germany

June 27 2015

Armenia President Serzh Sargsyan suspends energy price hikes in face of demos

The president of Armenia has announced a delay in electricity price rises in an effort to end days of street protests over the hikes. Demonstrators are to decide what to do on Sunday evening.

President Serzh Sargsyan said that the government would temporarily "bear the burden" of the higher rates pending an audit of the Russian-owned power company on "how justified the tariff raise is and what its consequences would be for the country's economy."

"Annulling the tariff raise is extremely dangerous," Sargsyan told a cabinet meeting, warning that "if an audit confirms that the tariff raise is justified, consumers will start paying according to a new price."

Sargsyan said the money would come from the security budget.

Armenia's power distribution company is owned by the Russian state-controlled holding Inter RAO. It had said the rise was needed due to the devaluation of Armenia's currency, the dram.

Armenia is closely allied with Russia, which maintains a military base in the former Soviet territory. In January, Armenia joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

On Friday night the president had held a meeting with Russian Transport Minister Maxim Sokolov, who co-chairs a Russian-Armenian economic commission. As a result of the talks with Sokolov, Russia agreed to loan Armenia \$200 million (179 million euros) to help modernize its military, according to Sargsyan's office.

Protesters on Saturday dismissed the president's announcement as inadequate and repeated their

demands for the increase to be removed altogether. One of the activists, Baginak Shushanyan told the crowd: "Our demand remains unchanged: the decision to raise electricity tariffs must be reversed."

For a ninth consecutive day on Saturday the demonstrators blocked traffic on the capital Yerevan's main avenue. Some 10,000 people rallied near the presidential palace chanting "we will win."

The announcement of 17-percent increases in electricity prices brought thousands of protesters out on to the capital's streets last Monday. Linked up by social media, they had intended to march on the presidential residence.

When the protesters were blocked by police, they sat down on the road and stayed there for the night. Riot police moved in early on Tuesday morning and used water cannon to disperse the demonstrators, arresting 240 people.

But by the evening more demonstrators had turned out. Police from then on stood by peacefully.

In the following days the protests took on a street party appearance with mainly young demonstrators dancing and singing national songs.

One third of the population of 3 million people in Armenia live below the poverty line.

The Times (London)

June 26, 2015 Friday

Russia says West behind revolution in Armenia

by Nick Holdsworth

Russian nationalists claimed yesterday that western governments were working behind the scenes to foment revolution in the pro-Moscow state of Armenia.

The charges follow heavy-handed police measures trying to halt seven days of popular protest about rising electricity prices.

Demonstrators in the capital Yerevan initially protested against a 16 per cent increase in the cost of electricity, supplied by a national monopoly owned by a Russian state company.

The protests spread amid anger at the country's wider economic problems. The number of demonstrators swelled after the perceived brutality of the police. Some protesters have been seen waving European Union flags and chanting pro-western slogans.

Russian politicians claimed that outside interests were stirring up trouble - a popular conspiracy theory in Moscow. One influential pundit warned that bloodshed was imminent.

Leonid Slutsky, chairman of Russia's parliamentary committee for Eurasian integration, said "foreign instructors" were helping the protest organisers.

"Opposition leaders have called people to the street and unfortunately it is clear this can be traced to foreign instructors," said Mr. Slutsky, a member of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin analyst, suggested that "the attack on Yerevan was expected". He said: "There are probably a lot of fighters from Ukraine and it is being directed from an external headquarters. The main aim of the organisers now is bloodshed."

However, those on the streets disagreed, claiming that their protests were simply about the economic crisis. "No one is controlling us from either West or East," said Yeghia Nersesian, 36, a photographer and protest organiser. "We will look after ourselves." There is no sign that the protesters, many of whom go to work during the day but return at night to their barricades, are going to back down. They have defied a police response earlier this week including the use of water canon; 10,000 have joined the protests.

The Kremlin, which maintains a force of about 5,000 troops at two military bases in Armenia, has downplayed the protests. Moscow fears that Armenia is heading towards a Ukrainestyle breakdown.

EurasiaNet.org

As Protests Continue In Yerevan, Russia Concedes To Armenia On Soldier Murder Case June 27, 2015

by Joshua Kucera

Russia has agreed to let Armenian courts try a Russian soldier accused of murdering seven members of an Armenian family after deserting Russia's major military base in the country. The move is a major concession by Moscow, and comes as large-scale street protests in Yerevan against Armenia's Russian-owned electricity company have been gathering strength.

The soldier, Valery Permyakov, walked off Russia's 102nd military base in Gyumri on January 12, walked into the nearby home of the Avetsiyan family and opened fire; six died immediately and a seventh, a six-month-old baby, died later in the hospital. The case outraged Armenians and led to unprecedented protests against the base.

From the beginning, Armenia and Russia have disagreed about who should be able to try Permyakov: Armenia wanted him tried in Armenian courts, while Russia wanted him to be tried by a Russian military court, albeit on Armenian soil.

On June 26, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan met with a Russian government delegation to discuss energy fees, the issue that sparked the Yerevan protests. But the scope of the discussions was apparently wider than that, and Sargsyan's office issued a surprise announcement after the meeting:

"At the meeting ... Sargsyan took the opportunity to express appreciation to the Russian law

enforcement organs, in particular to the prosecutor's office for effective cooperation with the Armenian prosecutor's office on the investigation the inhuman crime in Gyumri in January," Sargsyan's office said in a statement, news agencies reported. "The decision about the transfer of the criminal case to the Investigative Committee of Armenia and the appropriate authorities in Armenia, reflects the spirit of partnership and brotherhood and fully corresponds with the position of the Armenian-Russian agreement on the status of the Russian military base in Armenia."

On top of that, Russia also apparently agreed to give Armenia \$200 million in credit for arms purchases.

Various Russian officials have been darkly warning that the protests in Armenia represent an anti-Russian, U.S.-backed "maidan," *a la* Ukraine, and advising Sargsyan to take a harsher stance against the protesters. But this move shows that Moscow also realizes it needs to try to assuage Armenian public opinion, which has been wounded not just by the electricity issue and the Permyakov case, but arms sales to its enemy, Azerbaijan. Will this concession be enough to tamp down the anti-Russian sentiment on the streets of Yerevan? Stay tuned.

Newsweek

June 27 2015

Why Have Armenia's Youth Spent a Week Protesting?

By Aleksandr Gorbachev and Lucy Westcott

6/27/15

What's happening in Armenia?

Protests over planned hikes in electricity tariffs entered their seventh day on Thursday night in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. Police response to the protests, which began last Friday, has been violent: police batons and water cannons were used against peaceful protestors and more than 230 demonstrators and journalists were detained on Tuesday as marchers made their way to the president's residence in the capital, The Washington Post reports. According to officials, most of those detained have been released.

Controlled by a subsidiary of Russian company Inter RAO UES, Armenia's power grid, the Armenian Electricity Network, said last month it would raise electricity prices by up to 22 percent due to the devaluation of national currency. Protesters say the new energy prices, which are expected to come into effect on August 1, will be unaffordable. They also blame the increase on mismanagement and corruption within the Network, PRI reports.

'Spread the word, fill the streets and don't pay your electric bill,' shouted one organizer this week in Yerevan's Republic Square, recently the site of commemorations for the 100-year anniversary of the

Armenian genocide. 'If we all don't pay our electric bills, they can't do anything about it,' he added. Protesters have also been chanting: 'We are the owners of our country.'

The protesters are mainly young people who organized through social media, with the hashtag #ElectricYerevan being used to share photos and information on Twitter. They waved both Armenian and European Union flags, The Wall Street Journal reports. The slogan 'No to Plunder' has also been adopted by demonstrators, according to The Telegraph.

Armenia has seen its all-important Russian remittances drop by half this year. "Russian remittances contributed to 21 percent of Armenia's national income in 2013 and 11 percent in 2014", according to the World Bank' and is largely dependent on the Russian economy, has suffered the knock-on effects of Russia's economic strain. Russia's recession over the past year was partly spurred by European Union sanctions related to its role in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Last December, the Russian parliament voted to allow Armenia to join the Eurasian Economic Union, an economic bloc that includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The U.S. Embassy in Yerevan in a statement released on Tuesday said it was 'concerned about reports of excessive police use of force to disperse the crowd on the morning of June 23, as well as several reports of abuse while in police custody.' The European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also expressed concern over police violence.

'Freedom of speech and assembly are fundamental rights in any democracy, and we were pleased to see both sides work in a manner that respected these rights and did not escalate tensions,' the U.S. Embassy added.

Why are the hikes so important?

The 40% price rise initially requested by the Armenian energy monopoly, the Electric Works of Armenia, would make Armenia's electricity the most expensive among all the post-Soviet states. Even a 16% hike eventually approved by the government is a significant burden for a big part of the country's population. Moreover, this is the third hike in recent years.

Some Armenian bloggers and activists also brought corruption allegations against the Electric Works of Armenia and its CEO Evgeny Bibyn, who failed to show up to a special meeting of the Armenian Parliament that was organized to discuss the hikes. Even though there are various real reasons for raising the prices, many believe that the executives of the Electric Works of Armenia spend money on expensive cars and luxury real estate. These allegations contributed to the protesters' outrage.

How is the Armenian government reacting?

Reluctantly. On Tuesday, the Armenian President Serge Sargsyan announced that he is willing to

meet with three or four representatives of the protesters. However, his offer was declined. Instead, the protesters demanded that Sargsyan should just cancel the decision to raise the electricity rates live on television.

Thursday, the country's prime minister, Ovik Abramyan, stated firmly that the decision won't be reversed. He noted that, according to his calculations, the impact of the hikes on an average Armenian family won't be that harsh, and also announced the government's decision to raise subsidies for poor families to help them pay their electricity bills.

Is Russia involved?

To a certain extent. The company that asked the Armenian government to raise the electricity prices, the Electric Works of Armenia, is fully owned by a Russian company Inter RAO. Inter RAO's CEO is Igor Sechin, a former deputy prime minister in Vladimir Putin's government and, allegedly, one of the closest friends and allies of the current Russian president. On Tuesday, a spokesperson for the company said to an Armenian reporter that the events in Yerevan 'now have become politicized, and Inter RAO is into business, not politics.'

Russian officials and state media seem to be concerned about the events in Yerevan. The possibility of the protests in Armenia becoming another 'color revolution' (a reference to revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia) is frequently mentioned in reports by the Russian state media. Konstantin Kosachev, a head of the international committee of the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, said on Thursday that 'every color revolution began with something like that.'

'I wouldn't rule out a possibility that some foreign NGOs are behind this,' he added.

Another member of the same committee, Igor Morozov, was even blunter. 'Armenia is close to a coup d'etat, and it's going to happen if the Armenian President Serge Sargsyan doesn't draw any lessons from the Ukrainian Maidan,' he said. 'The American embassy is actively involved in the events in Yerevan.'

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, however, has been less candid. On Tuesday, he said that Russia is 'closely monitoring' the events in Armenia and hopes that the situation will be resolved soon.

Is it really similar to Maidan?

So far, only in a way that all the street protests are similar. No political demands have been made so far except for the rates reduction and, despite all the support from Ukrainian bloggers and being labeled 'Electric Maidan' by some media outlets, some of the Armenian activists have openly stated that to compare what's happening in Armenia to Maidan is wrong. 'It is against price hike, not ANY foreign state,' one of the Armenian bloggers wrote on Twitter.

How can it be resolved?

Attempts to hold talks between Sargsyan and protesters fell through on Wednesday for a second time, The Guardian reports. Armenian news site Panorama reported that an unnamed Russian-Armenian oligarch has been urged to purchase Electric Networks of Armenia in order to possibly push back prices. On Friday, talks on the energy sector were held between Russia and Armenia, and Armenian media is also reporting that Sargsyan and Russia are in talks to conduct audits on Armenia's electricity network. Besides the talks, no substantial plans have been agreed upon to resolve the situation.

