2021 IN BRIEF: LESSONS TO LEARN

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Armenians in the Republic of Armenia (RoA), Artsakh and the Diaspora lived through various challenges during 2021 that were charged with successes as well as disappointments. These were unprecedented while the remedies were debatable. Despite failures, criticisms, and the ongoing severe internal discords RoA and Artsakh scored several diplomatic achievements.

The leadership of RoA strengthened its position as an important player in the newly escalated conflict between RoA and Azerbaijan by becoming a major party in the ongoing negotiations. Despite the constant Azerbaijani military provocations, anti-Armenian propaganda, and psychological warfare, RoA broke the vicious cycle and positioned itself as a stubborn negotiator. RoA's response to the military incursions as of May 12, 2021 was through intensified diplomatic efforts during July 2021 mainly in Europe to deter Azerbaijan followed by showing rigor as well on the battlefield. Despite existing hindrances, and structural weaknesses that RoA faced, it received serious political support from the European Union, France and the United States.

In September 2021 RoA filed its first legal case against Azerbaijan at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding violations of the 'International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination'. The verdict announced on 7 December 2021 called upon Azerbaijan to refrain from all forms of discrimination against ethnic Armenians. ICJ confirmed through this verdict that the Azerbaijani acts of hostility against Armenians in Artsakh and Armenia are based on racial discrimination. If this verdict is properly utilized, Armenians (both RoA and Artsakh) can construct serious arguments in demanding the right for self-determination for the people of Artsakh and in deterring Azerbaijan's destructive behaviors towards Armenian cultural sites and territories.

During 2021 the issue of territorial integrity of RoA and Artsakh conflict were much more internationalized compared to past decades. RoA succeeded in placing these issues on the agenda of Western powers as urgent matters that require daily attention and follow up. RoA was the only country in the region besides Georgia that was invited by the US President Biden to the "Summit for Democracy" held on 9 – 10 December 2021. Presence of RoA and Artsakh position during the latest

EU's 6th Eastern Partnership Summit held on December 15 was noticeable in the official announcements and the press releases after each meeting. The most significant two meetings were hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron and the European Council President Charles Michel without the presence or consent of Russia. This new phase of internationalization of the conflict was followed by a tangible gesture when 10 Armenian prisoners of war returned home as an outcome of European Union mediation. Such positive gestures, however, do not negate the urgency and importance of releasing all remaining Armenian prisoners of war unconditionally and immediately.

Republic of Armenia pursued a pro-active balanced foreign policy, particularly in the last quarter of 2021. For many years, such active diplomacy and negotiations have not taken place outside the Russian mediation and auspices. RoA should continue its active diplomacy in Europe, the United

States and elsewhere. RoA internationalized its national causes. It might also be considered that Russia needed the European diplomatic involvement to counterbalance Turkey's and Azerbaijani position in the conflict. It is not yet clear how effective this format will be and which direction it will take. The obvious implication is that it was a successful attempt to break Turkish – Russian hegemony on this regional conflict.

European powers and the United States have shown increased interest in Southern Caucasus. It is true that their motivation is predicated primarily by their national interests, nevertheless Armenians (RoA, Artsakh and Diaspora) should utilize this opportunity to reactivate the OSCE – Minsk Group process as a principal international body to peacefully resolve conflicts in the region. To optimize this historical moment, Armenians should engage in an intense and serious dialogue over their national interests and causes, transcend internal dichotomies, and de-escalate internal hostilities.

One final note, the opinions expressed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on 24 December 2021 regarding the status of Artsakh were criticized by Artsakh leadership as well as by key political authorities in RoA, Artsakh and the Diaspora. Obviously, these opinions are not based on internal consensus. Declaring them during a television interview does not promote internal dialogue to reach a national consensus; such a dialogue should take place within the key national institutions with the participation of stake holders, political activists and intellectuals. The public reactions of several government officials in RoA and Artsakh to Pashinyan's statements were unprecedented. Arguing about serious national interests via open media channels only weakens the position of the Armenian side. Armenians cannot achieve any gains in upcoming negotiations without presenting a unified position that should be the natural outcome of a long and exhausting internal dialogue.

Comments

Tavo – 2022-01-12 16:10:06
Turkey and Azerbaijan are well-known to use international terrorist organizations such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and many others. Where is the international outrage especially by the U.S., EU, and NATO - not to mention Russia? Lack of sufficient criticism with muscle behind it is the same as collusion. Thus, these major powers do collude with terrorists.

Stepan – 2022-01-10 15:02:57
This assessment seems overly optimistic in its opinions. I wish that all were reality but until the “diplomatic gains” become tangible actions of EU and US to balance Russia and counter Azeri criminal behavior, we have empathy only. The diplomatic efforts are important and are “catch up” but take substantial mutual interest to produce results.