

ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN TODAY EVENTS AND COMMENTS

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VIDEO

SOCIAL PROTESTS IN ARMENIA: GAS COCKTAILS AND PENSION FUTURE



Right after the New Year, the citizens of Armenia were shocked by the gas and electricity bills for December.

An increase in prices took place in July 2013, but in such a cold winter, not quite typical of Armenia, more energy had to be used for heating, and only now the additional 18% and 27% of gas and electricity bills became tangibly burdensome.

Gas quality also aroused dissatisfaction.

“Gas is so inefficient that by the time my morning coffee gets ready, I already manage to take a shower and shave,” a Facebook user mentioned.

Many people began to talk about the questionable quality of gas fuel. The press even put forward different versions of gas cocktails (gas is mixed with air or water) or gas supply being under insufficient pressure.

The “ArmRosgazmprom” company, which has recently been renamed “Gazprom Armenia”, responded with a statement introducing standards of gas fuel, supplied to Armenia during the cold months, and even offered to hold a special joint expertise.

However, such statements did not seem reliable to Armenians, since laboratory studies had to be conducted at the very same company. This distrust also increased as a result of the events that occurred on the eve of the New Year.

At the end of 2013 the governments of Armenia and Russia signed a gas agreement by which the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Armenia pledged to transfer 20% of shares of “ArmRosgazprom” to “Gazprom” by January 31, 2014. The reason of the deal was said to be the Armenia's national debt, amounting to \$300 million for the Russian gas.

The agreement will be in force until December 31, 2043. Over the next 30 years “Gazprom Armenia” will have exclusive monopoly over gas, supplied to consumers in Armenia.

The gas imported to our country cannot be exported, while the Armenian side should ensure the immutability of the agreement.

The signing of this document caused a political and social discontent mainly because the government has failed to propose a convincing explanation on how, when and why a public debt of 300 million dollars accumulated. And most importantly, why was it announced now and in this very way - fait accompli?

In early December, 2013, the public began to actively hold a protest in front of the National Assembly.

Politicians from the opposition joined the rallies as well. The parliamentary majority of the leading Republican Party approved the agreement. The opposition did not participate in the vote.

During the same period another unpopular governmental decision became well-known causing even more outrage in the society. This time it was about a so-called mandatory funded pension system, which was again adopted by the National Assembly and came into force in January 2014. According to the new system all the citizens, born after 1974, must obligatorily transfer to the state treasury 5 to 10% of their salary, and thus save money for their future retirement. The government, in its turn, guarantees the return of these payments in a couple of decades.

Several government agencies also joined the protests in the streets of Yerevan and in the social People began to appeal on Facebook either not to pay for utilities up to the end (after all, this will be enough to cause damage to monopolists) or to pay by piecemeal.

Another group of Facebook users made a call of disobedience against the new pension system. This movement was given the name “I Am Against”.

More than 50 organizations and young activists appealed to Tigran Sargsyan, the RA Prime Minister, with a letter, emphasizing the risks of the bill that might cause even more emigration from the country.

And this time, when the Parliament adopted the law, the public, not only young people, by the way, protested in a rally.

The most massive protest took place in Yerevan on January 18. The number of protesters exceeded 10 thousand people.

On January 24, the Constitutional Court of Armenia decided to suspend the law on pensions until the end of March, that is, until the completion of the trial. Hopefully, the court might leave out the “mandatory” component from the new pension system. Calls are being made to continue the struggle.

This video material is prepared by Region Research Center (Armenia) in the framework of a project supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Armenia.

Full version of the video material: <http://publicdialogues.info/en/node/736>

VIDEO

CAN THE PRICE INCREASE AND DROP IN THE LIVING STANDARD BE CURBED?

QUESTION: In December 2013 the petrol price grew in Azerbaijan. Do you expect rise in prices for essentials, public utilities and transport in 2014? Can the citizens and the public in general somehow step in deciding on price hike?



MATANAT AZIZOVA
Head of Women's Crisis Center

The petrol prices soared in Azerbaijan. Obviously, this will lead to increase in prices for public utilities, transport and living essentials.

We have already undergone this stage in Azerbaijan. The petrol prices went up, and following that, the prices for various commodities were raised, having a bearing on the standards of living.

The domestic situation evolved to the level when the public opinion is disregarded. Even if the people rally against price rising, they will be dispersed by the police. The authorities will not accept petitions signed by citizens, they will not be even considered. The government, however, does not take into account the problems of the citizens.



ILHAM SHABAN
Director, Center for Oil Studies

In December 2013 the government raised the petrol prices. It did not explain the reason of the rising, but only stated that the fuel prices had not risen during almost six years.

In 2014 the budget gap will make \$ 2 billion sharp. In order to meet the deficit, the government took this unpopular action – increased the fuel prices in the home market. The step will have a knock-on effect, as the raised fuel price will prompt to raise prices for almost everything after a certain period of time. In its turn, taxes will gradually be raised. By doing so, the government will successfully take down the budget gap, although will never admit it.

It is reasonable to expect increase of the prices for public transport; it may happen in the 2nd quarter or in the middle of the current year. The issue is already brought to the agenda – the government is going to introduce

uniform travel cards, but it will never admit that this step is directly related to the increase of fuel prices. In the mid of the current year the national economy will change...inflation, income, expenses, everything will change. We will see a different Azerbaijan, which will not resemble Azerbaijan before December 2013.



LEYLA ALIYEVA
political expert

The increase of the petrol prices will definitely provoke increase of other prices, first of all, for public utilities and essentials.

The public utilities have a big share in the family budget. These expenses will soar much more. There are families with huge debts, because the utility prices do not match the family budget.

Usually increased food prices, after increased petrol prices, stir a big social instability. This may involve social protests and even unrests, no matter how tightly the government controls.

Definitely, the people can influence decisions touching the vital issues. This will require the active stand of the citizens. They can start writing petitions, having their say in an organized form. There are lots of civilized forms of protest practices used by democratic nations – from appeals to their voted parliamentarian to appeals to the president. The more people express their position, the more chances are for favorable outcome.

This video material is prepared by the Institute for Peace and Democracy (Azerbaijan) in the framework of a project supported by the British Embassy in Azerbaijan.

Full version of the video material: <http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/733>

JOINT INTERNET PRESS CONFERENCES FOR ARMENIAN AND AZERBAIJANI MASS MEDIA

The internet press conferences are organized in the framework of a project supported by the British Embassies in Armenia and Azerbaijan



From the Internet Press Conference of

OLEG RYBACHUK (*Ukraine*),
*Former Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine on European Integration,
Former Head of the Ukrainian Presidential Secretariat*

- The style and ruthlessness of dispersal of peaceful protesters that we first underwent is not typical of Ukrainian security forces. Demonstrative bloody beating and dispersal of the student maidan, application of firearms, bombshells, snipers, targeted first of all at journalists. This kind of scenario isolates Yanukovich from the Europe and USA making him fully dependable on Russia. Many experts claim that transfer of control of the situation in maidan to Russian special services was one of the conditions for providing 15 billion credit to Yanukovich by Kreml.
- Ignorance of many days' peaceful protests of Ukrainians by the government has undoubtedly heated the situation, the government openly triggers such a scenario letting the supporters of the ruling party carry out constant meetings beside Verkhovnaia Rada and Cabinet of Ministers, obstructing the way of opposition. There hasn't been noticed anybody carrying nationalistic symbolics among protesters but there is an indication of activation of the so called "right sector" consisting in football ультрас as well. In many countries football ультрас, as a rule, act from highly nationalistic positions. I would like to emphasize once again that the obstinate unwillingness of the government to respond to the peaceful protests and the unreasonable ruthlessness towards the protesters makes the situation increasingly explosive.
- European choice of Ukraine presupposes impossibility of use of arms against peaceful protesters by the government, impossibility of ignorance of millions of protests for several months, independence of courts, freedom of speech and press and much more that you, Aydin, are well aware of. Setting people against each other, including representatives of different nationalities, creation of zones of constant conflicts, practice of special services of USSR. Have you heard anything about CNS?

Following mass media from Armenia (Hetq online newspaper-www.hetq.am, News Armenia news agency-www.newsarmenia.am, Public Radio of Armenia-www.armradio.am, Arminfo news agency-www.arminfo.am, panorama.am) and from Azerbaijan (Bizim Yol newspaper-www.bizimyol.az, Turan news agency-www.contact.az, Novoye Vremya newspaper-www.novoye-vremya.com) participated in the press conference of Oleg Rybachuk.

Full version of the internet press conference: <http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/732>



From the Internet Press Conference of

ERIKA LERNER (*Czech Republic*),
*Member of the Association of the European Center of Meetings
between East and West*

- Azerbaijan is in such a favorable position that it does not have to prove anything to anyone. No matter how loudly apprehensions that the oil will soon come to its end sound or evaluations are given that there is no democracy in that country... So far, the situation has been in favor of Azerbaijan; it can afford to select the appropriate format for cooperation. Signing the Association Agreement and the DCFTA presumes certain obligations, and Baku thinks that it is not yet beneficial to have any relations with the EU, for at the moment Azerbaijan will owe something to the EU, and the latter will control its economy. So far, the EU has been dependent on the Azerbaijan export, and Baku cannot let anyone control its oil.
- Armenia's willingness to join the Customs Union was not resulted by the pressure, applied by Russia onto Transcaucasia. This is a double-sided medal. Our European experts and even politicians make a serious mistake that is repeated by and within the expert circles in the countries of Transcaucasia: it is too early to speak about that region as a whole, as an entity. This is not a united organism. The unity of Transcaucasia is only formal. That is why it is not correct to speak of the integration of the region, it would be better to focus on integration into the European structures of every country, taken separately. And these countries in the best case will have to face the destiny of being permanent candidates for the integration into the EU, as Turkey has been for a while. We should not forget that the region has recently experienced three wars, and they may not be over yet. Such a situation is a problem even for NATO that usually goes parallel with the EU integration. I can even say it radically that if there were no wars in Transcaucasia in the last 20 – 25 years, this region would have long become a collective member of NATO and the EU. Now time has come for us to look for the real causes that prevented these developments.
- I will repeat myself saying that there is no reason for punishing Armenia for its willingness to join the Customs Union. The EU itself is a major economic partner to Russia and the CU. If the EU needs to show to Yerevan that the latter was wrong in choosing the Eurasian route, the punishment will be in the political, rather than economic realm. But the CU is not currently a political organization and even theoretically the Eurasian Union is not a political organization. Armenia has great potential for developing political relations with the EU, but I will repeat myself, in Yerevan there are no discussions over the content of Armenia's political relations with the EU.
- Brussels has no specially designed policy for Armenia. To Brussels Armenia is one of the Transcaucasia countries, one of the six Eastern Partnership member states. As a separate country Armenia is not of any major interest, so that a special policy needs to be designed for it. And it is right to speak not of the quality of Brussels' policy led towards Armenia, but about the quality of Armenia's policy towards Brussels. This is exactly what I am interested in professionally.

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Full version of the internet press conference: <http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/731>