

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	281
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Armenia: The Prosperous Armenia Party (Bargavach Hayastan kusaksut'yun, BHK), including leadership, structure, objectives and activities; requirements and procedures to become a member of the party; treatment by the ruling party and state authorities (2015-December 2018)
Udgivet:	08. januar 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	03. september 2019

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8 January 2019

ARM106213.E

Armenia: The Prosperous Armenia Party (Bargavach Hayastan kusaktsut'yun, BHK), including leadership, structure, objectives and activities; requirements and procedures to become a member of the party; treatment by the ruling party and state authorities (2015-December 2018)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Leadership and Structure

According to sources, the BHK was founded by Gagik Tsarukyan [Tsarukian] (BHK n.d.a; *Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78; European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 6). On its website, the BHK indicates that the party was founded in 2004 (BHK n.d.a). Other sources report that it was created in 2006 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78; European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 6). Sources report that Tsarukyan stepped down as the party's leader in March 2015 (BHK n.d.a; European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 7; *Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78), after which Naira Zohrabyan [Zurabyan]

became its leader [1] (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 7; BHK n.d.b; *Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78). According to the *Political Handbook of the World*, Samvel Balasanyan, mayor of Gyumri, is a BHK leader (*Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2018 sources refer to Tsarukyan as a leader of the BHK (RFE/RL 9 Oct. 2018; News.am 18 Oct. 2018; BBC 12 Dec. 2018). The European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity [2], explains that "[a] few months before the elections in April 2017, Tsarukyan returned to the political arena as leader of the Tsarukyan alliance, which includes his own former party Prosperous Armenia [BHK] and several smaller parties" (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 10). Similarly, in a January 2017 statement published on his website, Tsarukyan announced his return to politics by stating that he would "take part in the 2017 parliamentary elections[,] forming a broad alliance" (Tsarukyan 17 Jan. 2017). The website of Armenia's National Assembly lists Tsarukyan as a deputy representing the BHK (Armenia n.d.b).

On its website, the BHK indicates that the Party Congress "is the supreme governing body" of the party, and that it "has the right to make the final decision on any matter relating to the activities of the [p]arty" (BHK n.d.c). The same source indicates that the Party Congress is held once every two years and that "extraordinary" sessions may also be held (BHK n.d.c). The BHK also has a Political Council (BHK n.d.d). A copy of the BHK Political Council's list of members, including their titles, as approved on 15 February 2014, is attached to this Response (Attachment 1). The BHK's website indicates that the party has regional, municipal and local subdivisions (BHK n.d.e). According to the same source, the party also has a Youth Union with 63 regional structures, including 12 in Yerevan and 51 in the regions (BHK n.d.f). The president of the BHK Youth Union is Vahe Enfiayyan, a deputy at the National Assembly (BHK n.d.f). An English translation of the BHK's charter, including information on its governing bodies, regional and structural subdivisions as provided on the website of the BHK, is attached to this Response (Attachment 2).

2. Objectives and Activities

The European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity describes the BHK as a "liberal conservative party" (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 27 June 2018, 7). On its website, the BHK states that it is a "center-right political party" that promotes democracy and liberalism, and that it supports "the preservation of national and traditional values," with the family, church and state being the most important (BHK n.d.g). The same source indicates that the BHK "promotes the development of pluralist, multi-party democracy and the rule of law in its international work," and that it supports "democratic reform in the Caucasus, Russia, Central Asia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus" (BHK n.d.g). The BHK "believes in maintaining strong ties with Armenia's European neighbours in a way that respects the sovereignty of nation states and improves trading relationships" (BHK n.d.g).

An English translation of the BHK's program, as provided on the website of the BHK, is attached to this Response (Attachment 3). According to a November 2018 article by Tert.am, an Armenian news website, Mikayel Melkumyan, a member of the BHK, presented the BHK pre-election program during a press conference, which addresses "key priorities," including:

- not "setting economic development programs against social well-being";
- upgrading the economy by considering the "importance of a technological revolution";
- "promoting the population's welfare" by increasing salaries and pensions;
- exempting small and medium-sized enterprises from taxes;
- lowering consumer bills for electricity and natural gas (Tert.am 26 Nov. 2018).

2.1 In Parliament

Source report that the BHK is the largest opposition party (IWPR 25 Feb. 2015; Denmark Sept. 2016, 26).

According to the Armenian National Assembly's website, the "'Prosperous Armenia' Faction" was founded on 31 May 2012 (Armenia n.d.a). The same source provides a list of 33 deputies, including 20 BHK deputies, 10 non-party deputies, 1 deputy of the United Labour Party (ULP), 1 deputy of the Powerful Homeland Party and 1 deputy of the Progressive Centrist Party Alliance (Armenia n.d.a). The list of deputies identifies Naira Zohrabyan as the "head" of the faction

(Armenia n.d.a). A copy of the "'Prosperous Armenia' Faction's" list of deputies, as provided on the Armenian National Assembly's website, is attached to this Response (Attachment 4).

According to the Armenian National Assembly's website, a "'Tsarukyan' Faction" was founded on 18 May 2017 (Armenia n.d.b). The same source provides a list of 31 deputies, including 24 deputies of the BHK, 5 non-party deputies, 1 deputy of the Progressive Centrist Party Alliance, and 1 deputy of the Armenian National Movement (ANM) (Armenia n.d.b). The list of deputies identifies Gagik Tsarukyan as the "head" of the faction (Armenia n.d.b). A copy of the Tsarukyan faction's list of deputies, as provided on the Armenian National Assembly's website, is attached to this Response (Attachment 5).

3. Emblems

The BHK indicates that the party's emblem "is the convex stretching base from Armenian letters 'Բ' and 'Հ', each color of [the] Republic of Armenia flag and the curve, under which is written the motto 'Together, we'll build a prosperous country'" (BHK n.d.g). A copy of the party's emblem, as provided on its website, is attached to this Response (Attachment 6). According to the BHK's website, the party's flag is a white cloth, with the party's emblem and name in the center; it has a ratio of 1:2 (width to length) (BHK n.d.g).

4. Membership

On its website, the BHK indicates the following requirements and procedures to become a party member:

Party members can be:

18 years old Republic of Armenia [RA] citizens, as well as those individuals vested with the right to vote (without right to be elected as party leader and in audit structures) who accep[t] [the] party's platform and statute[s] and are not member of another party.

Party members cannot be:

foreign citizens,

person[s] without citizenship: with the exception of cases provided by the law, those individuals, who, according to the RA law "On political parties", cannot

become members of any political party.

Becoming [a] party member is on [a] voluntary basis, individual, according to personal request:

by the decision of [the] party's regional organization council,

by the decision of [the] party's political council,

to become a party member needed to apply to the municipal or regional organization of [the] party according to the place of residence,

Party member is a member of some regional organization of the party and registered in this organization. (BHK n.d.h)

The *Political Handbook of the World* indicates that, when it was formed, the BHK claimed a membership of more than 200,000 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78). A February 2007 article by Eurasianet, a "news organization that covers news from and about the South Caucasus and Central Asia" (Eurasianet n.d.), indicates that there were 370,000 "alleged" BHK members, which represents "one out of every seven adult inhabitants of Armenia" (Eurasianet 21 Feb. 2007). Further and corroborating information, including more recent membership numbers, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Treatment by the Authorities

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015* indicates that "early" in 2015, "opposition forces," including Tsarukyan, led "antigovernment street protests" to challenge the government's proposed constitutional changes, "including changing from a semipresidential to a parliamentary model of government" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 26-27). Similarly, the Danish Immigration Service indicates that in 2015, "opposition leader" Tsarukyan "disagreed" with the Armenian president "concerning the reform of the constitution" (Denmark Sept. 2016, 29). A February 2015 article by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), as published by *Asbarez*, a daily newspaper that serves the Armenian-American community (*Asbarez* n.d.), reports that during an opposition conference Tsarukyan "warned [former president Serzh] Sarkisian [Sargsyan, Sarkisyan, Sarkissian] to abandon his plans for a sweeping constitutional reform" (RFE/RL 9 Feb. 2015). According to US *Country Reports*

2015, president Sargsyan "publically rebuked Tsarukyan on national television, expelled him from the National Security Council, instructed authorities to look into allegations about his previous crimes and tax history, and implied [that] he might be expelled from the National Assembly" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 27).

A 2016 report on Armenia by Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) [3] indicates that in 2015, President Sargsyan "managed to completely put an end to the second-largest party, Prosperous Armenia, by exerting pressure on its leader" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016, 13). The Danish Immigration Service indicates that, according to two Armenian NGOs, the Civil Society Institute (CSI) Armenia and the Helsinki Committee of Armenia (HCA), "[t]he president directed an attack against Tsarukyan that included a threat of prosecution of tax evasions and other crimes, resulting in a destruction of the opposition party Prosperous Armenia" (Denmark Sept. 2016, 29). Similarly, *US Country Reports 2015* indicates that "a number of" BHK members and local leaders left the party following "various forms of alleged government pressure, including audits and harassment by tax inspectors," which was described by "observers" as a "methodical dismantling of the country's most viable opposition force" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 27). A February 2015 article by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) [4] indicates that "[a]s parliament embarked on the process of depriving Tsarukyan of his seat, five legislators withdrew from Prosperous Armenia's parliamentary faction" (IWPR 25 Feb. 2015).

According to sources, Artak Khachatryan [Khachatrian], [a member of the BHK's governing council (IWPR 20 Feb. 2015) or a BHK activist (RFE/RL 9 Feb. 2015)], was kidnapped on 7 February 2015 and beaten unconscious by three masked men in Yerevan (IWPR 20 Feb. 2015; RFE/RL 9 Feb. 2015). According to RFE/RL, Khachatryan "was one of the main speakers at recent demonstrations in Yerevan that were staged by small business owners protesting against a controversial tax law" (RFE/RL 9 Feb. 2015). Similarly, IWPR indicates that BHK members believe he was targeted "specifically because of his vocal opposition to the government's decision to change the way small businesses are taxed, an issue that has provoked protests" (IWPR 20 Feb. 2015). RFE/RL reports that the BHK leadership considered the "attack" on Khachatryan "politically motivated" (RFE/RL 9 Feb. 2015). The IWPR similarly reports that although the ruling party "condemned the attack," the BHK issued a statement claiming the incident was "'entire[ly] [the] responsibility'" of the authorities (IWPR 20 Feb. 2015).

The IWPR reports that the police intervened in a "mass protest" in February 2015 and that approximately 30 BHK members were detained (IWPR 25 Feb. 2015). RFE/RL similarly reports that "several" BHK members had been detained on suspicion of illegal weapons possession, including Artur Mamoian, "the leader of the party's branch in Yerevan's Nor-Nork district" (RFE/RL 17 Feb. 2015). According to the same source, an Armenian police spokesperson said that "the BHK members' detentions were not politically motivated and were part of the routine work by the police" (RFE/RL 17 Feb. 2015). However, in a later article, it was reported that the BHK stated that "the detentions were an attempt to impose political pressure on announced plans for a protest ... to demand Sarkisian's resignation" (RFE/RL 23 Feb. 2015). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, in 2015, Tsarukyan resigned from the BHK and the National Assembly (Freedom House 2018) or as the head of the BHK and of the party's faction in the National Assembly (US 13 Apr. 2016, 27). Sources indicate that he left politics after a dispute with president Sargsyan (*Political Handbook of the World* 2017, 78; Freedom House 2018). The Danish Immigration Service reports that in 2015, Tsarukyan quit politics "[i]n order to avoid prosecution for tax evasion and other financial crimes" (Denmark Sept. 2016, 191). According to US *Country Reports 2015*, Tsarukyan resigned "after the crackdown [of government pressure on BHK leaders]" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 27). In the January 2017 statement posted on his website, Tsarukyan explains that he "closed the page [on his] political activity" in 2015 to avoid "bloodshed and irreparable loss" (Tsarukyan 17 Jan. 2017). US *Country Reports 2015* indicates that, according to "[r]eports," the "harassment of businesses and Prosperous Armenia loyalists stopped soon [after] [Tsarukyan's resignation]" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 27). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to a July 2018 article published by RFE/RL, an "adviser of the chairman of the country's Investigative Service" stated that Tsarukyan's security chief "has been detained" (RFE/RL 3 July 2018). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Jamestown Foundation, referencing an Armenian-language article by Azatutyun, RFE/RL's Armenian service, reports that in March 2017, representatives of the ruling Republican Party were involved in "several ... violent

incidents," including the beating of BHK activists during the election campaign (Jamestown Foundation 12 Apr. 2017). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The BHK website indicates that 169 delegates participated in its 8th extraordinary congress that was held on 5 March 2015, during which Tsarukyan resigned as the BHK leader (BHK n.d.c). The same source states that Tsarukyan nominated Zohrabyan as a candidate for the BHK leader position during this extraordinary congress; she was the sole nominee and was elected with 168 votes for and 1 abstention (BHK n.d.c).

[2] The European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity is a platform for cooperation that aims to contribute to the development of democracy, including by providing information "on the political situation in the countries of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the [Middle East and North Africa]-region" (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity n.d.).

[3] Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) "results from an international analytical collaboration of almost 300 experts in top academic institutions around the world and local reporters in most countries" (Bertelsmann Stiftung n.d.). It prepares country reports, among others (Bertelsmann Stiftung n.d.).

[4] The Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) is registered as a charity in the UK and as a not-for-profit organization in the US (IWPR n.d.). It "supports local reporters, citizen journalists and civil society activists" in "countries in conflict, crisis and transition around the world" (IWPR n.d.).

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Oral sources: Civil Society Institute Armenia; Helsinki Committee of Armenia; Prosperous Armenia Party.

Internet sites, including: ecoi.net; Helsinki Committee of Armenia; IRIN; Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; UN – Refworld; YerevanNights.com – News Online.

Attachments

1. Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK). N.d. "Political Council of Party." [Accessed 11 Dec. 2018]
2. Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK). 15 February 2007.  "Prosperous Armenia" Party Charter. [Accessed 17 Dec. 2018]
3. Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK). 15 February 2007.  "Prosperous Armenia" Party Program. [Accessed 17 Dec. 2018]
4. Armenia. N.d. National Assembly. "Members of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, Sixth Convocation: 'Prosperous Armenia' Faction." [Accessed 18 Dec. 2018]
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Date modified:

2018-06-25