

Outrage at Attack on Armenian Oppositionist

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Opposition parties demand swift action to find perpetrators of abduction and assault, and suspect government members of complicity.

The major parliamentary opposition party in Armenia has accused the authorities of complicity in the abduction and beating of one of its leading members. The row has seriously damaged the Prosperous Armenia party's relationship with the government, and this was only aggravated when President Serzh Sargsyan launched a personal attack on its leader.

Artak Khachatryan, who sits on Prosperous Armenia's governing council, was abducted on February 7 by three masked men in the centre of the capital Yerevan. He was found unconscious and badly beaten five hours later, near his home. He said he had no idea where he had been taken.

Party colleagues and relatives believe Khachatryan 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 among those who will be hit by greater regulation. (See **Armenia Delays New Tax Rules Again** on the issues involved.)

"It's true Artak never received threats or warnings during the protests, and we'd never have guessed his actions would lead to this, but I do link this [attack] to his social and political activities," his brother Artyom Khachatryan told IWPR.

Politicians and other concerned citizens gathered outside the government building in Yerevan on February 9 to demand that Khachatryan's assailants be caught and punished.

Prosperous Armenia issued a strongly-worded statement condemning what it called a "cynical" attack.

"It is plain that the entire responsibility for this incident rests with the authorities," it said. "A thuggish atmosphere has been created in this country, and the principal culprits for this lawlessness are the upper echelons of power."

The party is considering asking other political forces in parliament to join it in a boycott of legislative work.

Vardan Oskanyan, a former foreign minister who now holds a Prosperous Armenia seat in parliament, told IWPR of the need for the entire nation to "stand up" to this kind of behaviour.

"Leaving party politics to one side, it needs to be asserted that they've declared war on the people," he said.

The ruling Republic Party roundly condemned the attack on Khachatryan, and insisted the authorities had least to gain from doing something like that.

"We find it unacceptable and we hope the culprits are punished," party spokesman Eduard Sharmazanov said.

Until 2012, Prosperous Armenia was in a governing coalition with the Republican Party, and its leader Gagik Tsarukyan – one of the country's richest businessmen – was seen as an ally of President Sargsyan. Things changed after the party left government and last year it joined forces with the opposition Armenian National Congress and the Heritage Party to form the Nationwide Movement. This was seen as a serious setback for the Sargsyan administration. (See **Political Heavyweight Bolsters Armenian Opposition**.)

On February 12, the president appeared before a Republican Party meeting and declared that Tsarukyan had "become an evil for our country".

He instructed the prime minister to lead a "detailed" investigation of allegations that Tsarukyan owed massive amounts in unpaid taxes, spirited away in "so-called charitable activities".

The same day, the president stripped Tsarukyan of his seat on Armenia's National Security Council, and proposed kicking him out of parliament, too, on the grounds that he rarely turned up for sessions.

Both of Prosperous Armenia's allies, Heritage and the Armenian National Congress, have expressed outrage at the abduction and beating of Khachatryan. A statement from the latter said it was "no coincidence that the initial attacks were on members of NGOs and smaller political groups, and then state terrorism switched to targeting people from the parties in the Nationwide Movement – the Union of Veterans, the Armenian National Congress and now Prosperous Armenia too".

Aram Manukyan, a parliamentarian from the Armenian National Congress party, was assaulted near his home in December after voicing outspoken criticism of the president (reported in **Not-So-Random Violence in Armenia**).

Manukyan said the latest attack on Khachatryan was a direct challenge to political forces and society generally.

“There have already been dozens of attacks. Which of these [crimes] has been solved and punishment imposed?” he asked.

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