

EU Signals More Attention To Political Reform In Armenia.

By Anna Saghalian

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The European Union signaled its intention to press harder for political reform in Armenia on Friday, with EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner raising the issue during an official visit to Yerevan.

'Our main emphasis today was on the issues of democracy, human rights, rule of law, poverty reduction as well as Armenia's energy policy,' Foreign Minister Oskanian told reporters after talks with Ferrero-Waldner.

Oskanian said they also discussed concrete actions stemming from Armenia's inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) framework that entitles it to privileged ties with the bloc. Armenian and EU officials opened discussions on the ENP action plan in Yerevan last November. The second round of the negotiations is scheduled to take place in Brussels next month.

The plan is expected to reflect a report that was released by the EU's executive European Commission in March last year. The 30-page report called for democratic elections, the rule of law, respect for human rights, anti-corruption measures as well as further economic reforms in Armenia.

The EU criticized the Armenian authorities' handling of last November's constitutional referendum, casting doubt on their 'commitment to democracy.' However, its involvement in democracy-building in Armenia has so far been minimal. Human Rights Watch, a respected international watchdog, urged the bloc last December to do much more to promote political reform in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The fact that the issue featured large during Ferrero-Waldner's talks with Oskanian, President Robert Kocharian and parliament speaker Artur Baghdasarian suggests a shift in EU policy. 'For us, the rule of law, democracy and human rights are very important,' said the former Austrian foreign minister.

'Armenia is prepared for serious reforms and regards the [ENP] action as a quite serious means of deepening reforms,' Kocharian was quoted by his press service as assuring the visiting official.

Ferrero-Waldner, who arrived in Yerevan on the second leg of a tour of the South Caucasus, stressed that the EU is equally concerned with the impoverished region's economic development and diversification of its sources of energy that are now largely confined to Russia. She said in that regard that the EU supports Armenia's decision to build a gas pipeline from neighboring Iran.

Also on the agenda of the talks was facilitation of Armenian exporters' access to the EU's big and affluent market, something which is envisaged by ENP. The EU solidified last year its status as Armenia's number one trading partner. Official Armenian figures for the first ten months of 2005 showed the volume of Armenia-EU trade jumping by 55 percent to \$756.5 million.

Ferrero-Waldner further made a case for economic integration in the South Caucasus, saying that it is a necessary condition for regional stability. She confirmed the EU's opposition to plans by Azerbaijan,

Georgia and Turkey to build a regional railway bypassing Armenia. 'A railway project that is not including Armenia will not get our financial support,' she said.

Ferrero-Waldner went on to reiterate EU support for the long-running efforts by the OSCE Minsk Group to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But she did not comment on the failure of last week's crucial Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks in France.

Kocharian Adviser Elected Ombudsman
By Astghik Bedevian and Ruzanna Khachatrian

The National Assembly elected a longtime aide to President Robert Kocharian as Armenia's new human rights ombudsman on Friday in a second vote in just over a week that reaffirmed its loyalty to the head of state.

Armen Harutiunian, who has advised Kocharian on constitutional law, was backed by 87 of the 131 members of the assembly. His opposition challenger, Hrant Khachatrian, got only 28 votes, slightly more than the number of parliament seats controlled by the Armenian opposition.

'As human rights defender, I will be cooperating with all factions and deputies of the National Assembly,' Harutiunian told lawmakers after the announcements of the vote results. 'I will try to live up to your expectations.'

Harutiunian unexpectedly failed to garner the required minimum of 79 votes in the first vote that took place last week. Its surprise outcome reportedly irked Kocharian who discussed the issue with leaders of this three-party governing coalition at an emergency meeting on Wednesday. According to some newspaper reports, he suspects them of secretly undercutting his candidate.

Speaking at the debate that preceded Friday's vote, opposition deputies accused the pro-government majority of bowing to pressure from Kocharian. 'Armen Harutiunian represents Robert Kocharian. Why do you want to impose Kocharian's candidate on the people?' said Grigor Harutiunian of the Artarutyun alliance.

'Nobody has intimidated anyone,' responded parliament speaker Artur Baghdasarian.

One of Baghdasarian's two deputies, Tigran Torosian, dismissed opposition claims that the parliament majority is effectively nullifying one of the recently enacted amendments to the Armenian constitution that transferred the authority to appoint the human rights official from the president to the parliament. 'Whether or not the coalition parties consulted with the president of the republic does not violate any article of the constitution,' he said.

For his part, Harutiunian assured reporters after his election for a six-year term that he will seek to be independent of the executive branch. 'I am ready to go against both the government and the opposition if human rights are violated,' he said.

Still, the 42-year-old lawyer made it clear last week that he will be far less confrontational in his dealings with government and law-enforcement bodies than his predecessor Larisa Alaverdian, who earned acclaim from Armenian civic groups during her two-year tenure. The authorities' decision not to re-appoint Alaverdian as ombudsperson under the amended constitution is widely attributed to her high-profile criticism of their human rights record.

