

EU Caucasus Trip Opens New Policy Horizon.

By Andrew Rettman
15/2/2006

<http://euobserver.com/9/20904>

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - The EU is stepping up its presence in the South Caucasus due to long-term energy and enlargement policy needs, but remains wary of annoying Russia in its own backyard.

"2006 should be the year that takes our partnership up a gear," external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said ahead of her first official visit to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on Thursday (16 February) and Friday.

The goodwill trip is designed to show that Action Plan talks between the EU and the trio are back on track following political problems last year, when Cyprus stalled the process over Azerbaijani flights to Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus.

The Action Plans could be wrapped up soon after the second round of negotiations on 6 March, committing the three post-Soviet states to faster economic integration with the EU and more political cooperation among themselves.

EU diplomats said the Ferrero-Waldner visit will also dangle the dim prospect of EU accession before the trio. "If she is asked about future enlargement, I'm sure she will not rule it out," one official said.

Brokering peace between Azerbaijan and transit state Armenia would help get Azerbaijan and Kazakhstani oil into the EU, while Georgia is considering a new gas pipeline with Iran after mysterious explosions cut off its Russian gas supply in January.

Better EU dialogue with Armenia could also help open up Armenia's border with EU candidate Turkey, closed since 1991.

"Even leaving aside Iran, this region is very important. The EU needs to be present, to be engaged in these issues," the EU diplomat explained.

Russia a victim of myths Russian officials say it is a "myth" Moscow does not want outside players to interfere in the region.

But Moscow warned Ms Ferrero-Waldner ahead of her meeting with the Russian foreign minister in Vienna on Wednesday that the Action Plans should not compete with existing structures for conflict resolution.

Russia, France and the US are currently trying to get Armenia to withdraw troops from Azerbaijan's breakaway province of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russia is also in talks with Georgia over the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with Moscow accusing Tbilisi of provocations against its "peacekeeping troops" in the regions and Tbilisi accusing Moscow of supporting the separatist regimes.

The meeting between Ms Ferrero-Waldner and Russia's Sergei Lavrov focused on getting a common position on Hamas and Iran while mentioning the Caucasian conflicts in passing.

But with 40 percent of Azerbaijan's population in support of military action against Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh and with potshots regularly exchanged on the Abkhazia-Georgian border, the frozen conflicts pose a clear risk to EU neighbourhood policy goals in the region.

Energy eye-opener Ms Ferrero-Waldner told Mr Lavrov in Vienna that the Russian-Ukrainian gas crunch in January was an "eye-opener" for the EU in terms of its energy security, pushing energy up Brussels' foreign policy agenda.

The analysis was echoed by Azerbaijan's envoy to the EU, Aris Mamedov, who told EUobserver that "There is a lot of European interest in trans-Caspian oil pipelines. This is something for the European agenda in the future."

EU diplomats said that keeping oil and gas-rich Russia happy is a key factor in the EU's effort to build up its presence in Armenia and Azerbaijan, both strong Russian allies.

The softly-softly approach can be seen in the EU's lack of strong criticism for Russia's gas price hikes to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya and the ongoing clampdown on foreign NGOs in the former communist superpower.

Speaking the day after the explosions that cut off Russian gas to Georgia on 22 January, energy commissioner Andris Piebalgs attributed the bombs to unnamed "terrorists" in line with Moscow's analysis, rather than to Russian special forces in line with Tbilisi's account.

Meanwhile, Armenia is taking a pragmatic approach to its role in EU-Russia relations.

"We are so small we cannot afford to have enemies," an Armenian diplomat told EUobserver. "We just want to open our road and rail route with Turkey. It is our main link to the outside world and it is blocked."
