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Armenia Rules Out Abkhazia, South Ossetia Recognition

By Emil Danielyan

President Serzh Sarkisian has made clear that Armenia will not formally recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states any time soon, while reiterating his support for their residents' right to self-determination.

In a wide-ranging foreign policy speech made public late Wednesday, he also indicated that Armenia will continue to seek simultaneously good relations with Russia, the West and other major regional players after the devastating war in neighboring Georgia. He said the Russian-Georgian conflict underlined the need for his landlocked country to have 'alternative transit routes' for external commerce running through Iran and Turkey.

'Today one is wondring from time to time why Armenia is not recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,' Sarkisian said, speaking at an annual meeting of Armenian ambassadors abroad. 'The answer is simple: for the same reason that it did not recognize Kosovo's independence. Having the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia can not recognize another entity in the same situation as long as it has not recognized the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.'

The realization of a nation's right to self-determination 'takes times' and requires the understanding of 'all interested parties,' explained Sarkisian. That is why Armenia will keep trying to 'convince' Azerbaijan to come to terms with the loss of Karabakh, he said.

Russia unilaterally recognized the two breakaway regions after crushing Georgian in a brief war over South Ossetia and seems to be pressing Armenia and its other allies to follow suit. The issue will be on the agenda of Friday's meeting in Moscow of presidents of Russia, Armenia and four other ex-Soviet states aligned in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). President Dmitry Medvedev already discussed it with Sarkisian at his summer retreat in the Black Sea city of Sochi on Tuesday.

With more than 70 percent of Armenia's foreign trade carried out through Georgian territory, antagonizing Georgia would prove disastrous for a country already blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Armenian economy has already been affected by major disruptions in rail and ferry traffic caused by the Russian-Georgian war. The war has also called into question continued vital supplies of Russian natural gas to Armenia through a pipeline passing via Georgia.

'Naturally, we are interested in a rapid and peaceful resolution of Georgia's problems and the establishment of lasting peace there,' Sarkisian said. He at the same time again criticized Tbilisi for attempting settle the South Ossetian conflict by force and said the de facto secession of this and other territories does set a precedent for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict.

'Let them repeat that Kosovo is not a precedent, and some may say that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not precedents either,' he said. 'But the fact

is that exceptions not considered precedents are beginning to set a pattern for the resolution of such conflicts.'

Sarkisian further announced that Armenia is poised to end its heavy dependence on Russia for natural gas with the impending launch of a gas pipeline from Iran. 'Thank God, the gas pipeline has already been built, and we can receive gas from the Islamic Republic of Iran as early as tomorrow,' he said. 'Work on enhancing the capacity of that pipeline will likely end in late October or early November, and we will be able to import from 2 to 2.5 billion cubic meters of [Iranian] gas each year. That is, as much as we import now [from Russia.]'

Sarkisian went on to speak of his 'political expectations' from Turkish President Abdullah Gul's upcoming visit to Yerevan and the broader thaw in Turkish-Armenian relations. 'Without forgetting the past, we should look to the future, form an agenda of mutual interest and start contacts without preconditions,' he said.

The Armenian leader specifically stressed the importance of reopening the Turkish-Armenian border, telling his top diplomats to help generate greater international pressure for the relaunch of the Gyumri-Kars rail link. 'Arm yourselves with maps, statistical data and arguments: we must make sure everyone realizes that these several kilometers of railway can radically change the whole picture of regional partnership.'

Sarkisian further stated that he intends to 'deepen and strengthen' Armenia's 'friendly partnership' with the United States as well as other Western powers and structures. He said he will be personally overseeing his government's implementation of a plan of actions stemming from Armenia's inclusion in the European Union's European Neighborhood Policy program.

And he confirmed that a planned NATO-led military exercise in Armenia will go ahead later this month despite the latest upsurge in Russia-West tensions over Georgia. Yerevan will 'consistently' take other actions stemming from its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), he said. Those include Armenian participation in the NATO-led peace-keeping missions in Kosovo and possibly Afghanistan.

Sarkisian and his predecessor Robert Kocharian have repeatedly stated that despite growing security ties with the West, Armenia will not seek membership in NATO in the foreseeable future and that the military alliance with Russia remains the bedrock of its defense doctrine. Sarkisian reaffirmed this 'complementary' policy in his speech.

'We will by all means develop and expand our strategic allied relations with Russia, which are based on the centuries-old friendship of our peoples,' he said.

Russia Rejects Parallels Between South Ossetia, Karabakh

By Aza Babayan in Moscow

Russia on Thursday firmly rejected parallels between the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia and Abkhazia that have been drawn since its controversial decision to recognize the independence of the two breakaway regions.

The move has left observers in Armenia and elsewhere in the region wondering whether Moscow would be prepared to similarly recognize Karabakh's de facto secession from Azerbaijan.

`There are no parallels between the situation over South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the one side and the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement on the other,' Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said. `In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili's regime has in recent years consistently sought to undermine all negotiation formats, all settlement mechanisms that had been earlier agreed upon by all parties.'

Moscow claims that it had no choice but to recognize the two regions after Georgia attempted to win back South Ossetia and allegedly wipe out its population last month. Lavrov argued that, by contrast, the parties to the Karabakh dispute have been fully cooperating with a team of American, Russian and French mediators trying to broker a peaceful settlement.

`None of the parties is walking away from the mechanism formed under the auspices of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group,' he said. `That process is going on. Furthermore, within the framework of that process a serious body of agreed elements of the eventual settlement has been worked out. Work on the remaining several problems is continuing.'

Lavrov spoke at a joint news conference with his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandian held after a meeting in Moscow of the foreign ministers of the six former Soviet republics making up the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Nalbandian, who chaired the meeting, presented a joint statement on the Georgian crisis that was adopted by the ministers.

The statement called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and endorsed a Russian-Georgian truce agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The CSTO foreign ministers criticized Georgia's ill-fated military assault on South Ossetia but stopped short of denouncing it as an act of aggression. They also said nothing about the Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia included the word `aggression' in the initial version of the statement. It was not immediately clear if Armenia, which is assuming the CSTO's rotating presidency, demanded its removal from the text.

`We are satisfied with the content of this statement,' said Lavrov. `It places the emphases correctly.'

Dashnaks Give More Details Of Anti-Turkish Protests

By Anna Saghabalian

President Abdullah Gul will face protests the moment he arrives in Yerevan and hear calls for Turkey to recognize the 1915 Armenian genocide during the football match which he is due to attend on Saturday, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun) said on Thursday.

Dashnaktsutyun leaders gave details of their planned demonstrations against the first-ever visit to Armenia by a Turkish president the day after its official confirmation by Ankara.

A statement posted on Gul's website said he has accepted his Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian's invitation travel to Yerevan to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Armenia's and Turkey's national football teams. It expressed hope that the historic trip would provide an opportunity for the two countries to understand each other better and create a new climate of friendship in the region.

Sarkisian likewise hopes that the visit will make it easier for Ankara and Yerevan to build on the recent thaw in Turkish-Armenian relations. But Dashnaktsutyun, an influential party represented in his government and favoring a harder line on Turkey, is less than enthusiastic about Gul's arrival.

`There is so much bizarre enthusiasm surrounding all this at the social level that one might think we are to greet our missing brother,' complained Armen Rustamian, one of the party's top leaders. He said Dashnaktsutyun will press ahead with the planned protests to show the world that Turkish-Armenian reconciliation is impossible without the recognition of the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide.

Giro Manoyan, another Dashnaktsutyun figure, said failure to stage such protests would allow the Turks to claim that genocide recognition has lost its urgency for the people of Armenia. `We will express our political stance in a normal and acceptable way,' he said.

According to Rustamian, the demonstrations will start at Yerevan's Zvartnots international airport where Gul is scheduled to arrive on Saturday morning. He said `thousands' of Dashnaktsutyun supporters will rally there before flocking to the Hrazdan stadium where they will chant genocide recognition slogans during the match. In the meantime, another crowd of activists will march to the genocide memorial on the nearby Tsitsernakaberd hill to light torches in memory of more than one million Ottoman Armenians killed between 1915 and 1918, he told journalists.

Rustamian added that Dashnaktsutyun leaders have discussed the planned actions with Sarkisian and that the president is not unhappy with them. `There is a full understanding on the issue between us and the president,' he said.

`We believe our president will understand and our people will participate,' Manoyan said, for his part.

The Football Federation of Armenia (FFA) has said that local soccer fans will be banned from bringing genocide-related and `political' banners to the 53,000-seat stadium. The FFA also controversially changed the Armenian team's emblem last month. Its new logo no longer depicts the biblical Mount Ararat, which is located in northeastern Turkey but is considered by many Armenians as their main national symbol.

The FFA insists that the emblem change was not politically motivated. But Rustamian cast doubt on the credibility of these assurances, saying that it would be `shameful' if the federation thereby tried to please the Turks.

Gul's upcoming visit has highlighted Dashnaktsutyun's differences with Armenia's long-running policy toward Turkey. Sarkisian and his predecessors have stood for an unconditional normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations and reopening the land border between the two neighboring states.

Manoyan reiterated on Thursday Dashnaktsutyun's belief that an open border with Turkey would not necessarily be good for the Armenian economy. `Unless we are internally prepared, that border may also have negative consequences,' he said.

Manoyan also stressed the importance of genocide recognition in any Turkish-Armenian dialogue. `It's not a precondition for starting relations,' he said. `But relations can not be normalized if Turkey fails to recognize the genocide.'

Gul Criticized Over Planned Armenia Visit

By Burak Akinci, Agence France Presse

President Abdullah Gul on Saturday becomes Turkey's first head of state to visit Armenia, but his bid to ease relations with a historic foe that accuses Turks of genocide has angered nationalists.

Gul will go to Yerevan to attend a football match between the two countries, which do not have diplomatic relations and remain deeply divided over the World War I massacres of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire.

"A visit around this match can create a new climate of friendship in the region," the Turkish presidency said in a statement. "It's with this in mind that the president has accepted the invitation."

The two countries will face off in a qualifying match for the 2010 World Cup finals and Armenia's President Serge Sarkisian invited Gul last month to attend.

While some in the Turkish media have hailed the visit as historic and a potential breakthrough, the trip remains highly controversial. Amid a wave of opposition criticism, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) -- which Gul belonged to before being elected president last year -- adopted a very cautious tone.

"I think it is very positive that the president is going. Rejecting the (Armenian) invitation would have meant sacrificing sports to politics," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in televised remarks.

State Minister Mehmet Aydin appeared to acknowledge the political significance of Gul's move. "The facts that we have do not support the theory that the visit will resolve all the problems, but it is not right to assume that nothing will come of it either," Aydin was quoted by the Anatolia news agency as saying.

Turkey's main opposition party said Gul's decision will send the wrong signal to Armenia over its campaign for the deaths of Armenians in 1915-1917 to be recognised as "genocide".

Armenia says up to 1.5 million people were killed in orchestrated massacres during World War I as the Ottoman Empire fell apart before being dismantled in 1920. Turkey rejects the genocide label and argues that 250,000- 500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks died in civil strife as Armenians fought for independence in eastern Anatolia and sided with invading Russian troops.

"Armenia does not recognise Turkish borders and accuses Turkey of having carried out genocide," said Mustafa Ozyurek of the main opposition Republican People's Party. "This step will only serve to encourage the opposing party," he said, referring to Armenia.

The vice president of the MHP nationalist party, Tunca Toskay, called the visit "totally unjustified while the Turkish people are unjustly accused through lies of having committed genocide and while Armenia shows no sign of renouncing its policy in this respect."

The trip, which comes amid heightened tensions in the Caucasus region following the conflict last month between Georgia and Russia, will only last a few hours, a Turkish diplomatic source said. But some Turkish media said it

could be enough to begin real change in relations between the nations, comparing it to the "ping-pong diplomacy" between the United States and China in the 1970s.

Hasan Cemal of Milliyet newspaper proposed that a minute of silence be observed in the stadium before the match "in memory of the tragic page in our common history and the suffering experienced by the Armenians and Turks in the past".

Turkey has refused to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia since it became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, and the key reason has been Yerevan's genocide recognition campaign. In 1993, Ankara closed its border with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority region in Azerbaijan which proclaimed independence.

PRESS REVIEW

In an interview with '168 Zham,' human rights ombudsman Armen Harutiunian comments on the newly disclosed court ruling that allowed Armenia's National Security Service (NSS) to place opposition leader Aleksandr Arzumian under a 24-hour surveillance during and after the February presidential election. Harutiunian believes that the ruling is 'worrisome' even if it did not violate Armenia's laws. 'Especially if it emerges that not only Arzumian's and but many other oppositionists' phones were tapped,' he says. Harutiunian says he and his employees feel that the NSS also eavesdropped on their phone conversations after the March 1 unrest in Yerevan.

Vahagn Harutiunian, the top law-enforcement official leading the criminal investigation into the clashes, tells 'Hayots Ashkhar' that the investigators have yet to determine who caused the deaths of ten people on March 1. 'We have not yet completed forensic tests,' he says. 'Those are quite large-scale and difficult tests.'

'Aravot' attacks the investigators for claiming for months that security forces moved into Liberty Square in the early hours of March 1 to confiscate weapons, rather than to disperse the people camped there. 'Wouldn't it be more convenient for them to tell the truth?' asks the paper. 'Some would have welcomed that decision by the former president [Robert Kocharian,] while others would not have cared. The majority would have condemned [the authorities,] but nobody would have been able to say that the public is treated like idiots.'

Aram Sargsian, the leader of the pro-government Democratic Party of Armenia, tells 'Golos Armenii' that opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian will fail to turn his Armenian National Congress (HAK) into a single party. 'Not all of the parties that joined the Congress are thrilled by that idea,' he says. 'Very soon HZhK leader Stepan Demirchian will leave the HShSh alliance.' Sargsian hopes to again join forces with Demirchian, citing the 'ideological similarities' between their parties.

'Haykakan Zhamanak' carries an extensive article about Gagik Khachatrian, head of the newly formed State Revenue Committee, branding him 'the most corrupt official in the Republic of Armenia.' The paper alleges that officials at the Armenian customs, which is part of the committee, have again begun extorting bribes from importers after a six-month hiatus enforced by President Serzh Sarkisian. 'The period of a tough fight against corruption is over,' it says. Citing unnamed government sources, the opposition daily gives what it calls details of corrupt scams involving senior customs officials and importers of various goods.

(Karine Kalantarian)

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