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# The 'Super-Projects' Of Sargsyan, And Energy Dependence On Russia

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Armenian President Sargsyan announces "ambitious economic projects," like a new rail line to Iran, and a nuclear power plant. Debate is growing over whether this means an intention to break free from Russian control, or to solidify it. Experts: Yerevan does not import gas from Iran because Moscow "doesn't want this."

Yerevan (AsiaNews/Agencies) - Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, speaking to parliament on October 2, stated that "the time has come for Armenia to implement ambitious economic projects, super-projects," including a new rail line to Iran and a new nuclear power plant, which will soon be begun by an investment foundation "that will fund large-scale programs." Meanwhile, no details are being provided about these projects, and discussion is growing about whether they represent a desire to break free from Russian hegemony, or to solidify it.

The news agency Eurasianet reports that opposition member of parliament Stepan Safarian, a supporter of closer relations with the West, maintains that "an attempt is being made to strengthen Armenia's foreign policy." Armenia's invitation for a visit from Turkish President Abdullah Gul last September is also interpreted in this light.

But Sevak Sarukhanian, deputy director of Yerevan's Noravank Foundation for Strategic Research, observes that "on the contrary, it will deepen Armenian-Russian strategic cooperation, since Russia will have its share in both construction projects." He notes that the country's railway system is already managed by Russian Railways, and that Armenia depends on Moscow for nuclear fuel and technology for its existing nuclear facilities.

And above all it must be remembered that about 80% of Armenia's electrical grid is under direct Russian control, including the hydroelectric facility in Hrazdan, one of the largest in the southern Caucasus.

Years ago, Yerevan announced the opening of the 140-kilometer gas pipeline from Iran, to bring 1.1 billion cubic meters of gas into Armenia each year, to be increased to 2.3 billion by 2019. The project is strongly supported by Tehran, which is believed to want to create a pathway for its own gas into Europe. On October 7, Rasoul Salmani, director of Iran's national gas company, announced that it would begin working on October 13. For each cubic meter of gas, Armenia must pay 3 kilowatt hours of electricity. But following this, Lusine Harutiunian, a spokeswoman for Armenia's energy ministry, said that the country already has enough energy provided by Russia through Georgia (2 billion cubic meters of gas in 2007), and that "there is no need to import additional gas," adding that she does not know when Iranian gas would begin to be used. In any case, it would be converted to electricity and given back.

Analyst David Petrosian comments that "it is clear that Armenia refused to receive Iranian gas as a result of Russian pressure. Russia controls almost the entire energy system of Armenia through its state corporation. It seeks to keep Armenia in a state of dependence. Armenia will receive gas from Iran only when Russian gas is in short supply."

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