
« At Any Event, The « Russian Phase » In The History Of Armenia Is Over »

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The renowned political scientist and analyst Igor Muradyan comments on the results and consequences of the Armenian visit of the Russian president for the Iravunk de facto newspaper.

Mr. Muradyan, what was special about the visit of the Russian president to Armenia, and, what are the expectations regarding the Armenian and Russian relations in the context of future political situation in the South Caucasus?

New circumstances of Dmitry Medvedev's visit in October are being revealed, as well as the regional intentions of Russia and other countries.

Now there is no doubt that Russia determines the relations with Armenia by the setup of new relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The intentions of Russia regarding the Karabakh issue are becoming more obvious, which include the following: complete withdrawal of the Armenian armed force from Karabakh, return of first five then all the seven "territories" to Azerbaijan, return of the so-called Azeri refugees to those territories, deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the area of the conflict, and actually complete overlooking of the issue of the status of Karabakh, since it will be protracted for ten and more years. This is but the recurrent division of Armenia between the same partners. And in the 1920s and even 1940s Russia has tried to attract Turkey, tempted by the anti-imperialistic moods in Anatolia. But instead of better conditions for getting to the Black Sea straights it got a punch. The same will be now. Not at once, of course, therefore there is a lot of time for the abovementioned experience to destroy Armenia once again. Amazingly, like in the previous times, the Armenians are happy that the Russians are going to make a decision on their fate. During the visit of Dmitry Medvedev to Yerevan tens of thousands of Armenians holding Russian flags and posters pleaded their loyalty to the leader of Russia at the so-called Square of Russia, who is likely to suffocate their homeland, turning it into an object of mockery for the world.

You mentioned earlier about the unfavorable approach of Russia toward Karabakh and Armenia. It is also clear that all this is one way or another determined by the recent events in Georgia and the aspiration of the United States to settle in the Black Sea basin. But how does the political approach of the Russian president foster the fulfillment of those plans?

The political approach of the leader of Russia has nothing to do with that.

Russia has long anticipated instrumentalizing the Karabakh resource for its policy. The leading Russian political scientists who are most integrated in the public administration say Russia has not benefited from the cooperation with Armenia in any way, and further unilateral relations are meaningless.

They tell this plainly to their Armenian colleagues, whom they have

known for years. The leading experts of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, the CIS institute who advise directly the president staff share this opinion. At the same time, Dmitry Medvedev is said to be the leader of the Azerbaijani lobby in Russia. Evidence to this is the considerably close relations and interests of President Medvedev. In Russia, very many high-ranking officials are first of all identified as Azerbaijani lobbyists and only then as people who occupy one post or another. There are too many gas and oil people in the Russian government. Along with the strategic and tactical interests of Russia in which the plans regarding Karabakh fit, purely commercial interests of large scale certainly have an important role too. It is only partly known who is involved in the fulfillment of those interests, but currently a number of American and British journalists in Moscow are actively working out this version, and some time later it will become known, some time.

But what makes the Russians confident that the given project will be successfully implemented, and Armenia will sign its own death sentence?

It is a most important, perhaps the most important question in all this game. Surprisingly, in fact, the entire Russian political and analytical establishment is convinced that the Armenian people and their government should be grateful to Russia for such a settlement of the Karabakh issue.

For more than once, at different levels, from experts to Duma committees, arguments on the impossibility of such decisions are perceived with great surprise. Obviously, the relevant analytical, information and research services of Russia have done work and arrived at conclusions on complete demoralization of Armenians, who are ready to accept any decision that will ensure a "quiet" life for them. Perhaps this is the main argument in the operational system of making decisions on the Karabakh issue. The foreign ministry is only trying to conduct this policy, which has been worked out by a group of people from the president administration who believe in those evaluations. For instance, as a major argument, it is said that the Dashnaktsutyun party approves the Russian plan, that is the return of the territories and the deployment of peacekeepers, but no determination of the status. By the way Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is not mentioned in the talks as the name of a country in that region. In other words, not only non-determination of the status is concerned but also liquidation of NKR.

And this is not accidental. For the Russians, NKR is the reminder of an element of the new political configuration of the former Soviet space. NKR is too vivid a notion for the Russian national consciousness.

To what degree has this plan been worked out, how convinced the Russian politicians and policy shapers are of the success of their "Karabakh project"?

In contacts with the Russian experts, the focus is on that besides the goal of setting up new relations with Turkey, in raising the Karabakh issue the Azerbaijani lobby in Moscow is important, which is closely related with a number of officials, and first of all President Medvedev. The peculiarities of relations between the Azerbaijani lobbyists and Dmitry Medvedev became known, who is related to oil and gas projects in one way or another. During the visit of Dmitry Medvedev to Baku no final decision was made but the intentions and several obligations were outlined. The Russian political scientists integrated with the government agencies who

have advocated the opinion that it is in the interests of Russia to "freeze" the Karabakh conflict are now proposing the following. They think Armenia may reject this plan, and Russia will have no political resource to insist on the realization of this project. At the same time, it is not recommended to automatically turn to the United States for help and adopt a more rigid stance on Russia. We think this is not just a situational recommendation but a worked out and intended technology. It should be noted that considerable confusion and lack of confidence is observed among the Russian analysts and policy shapers dealing with the "Karabakh project". A considerable part of analysts in Russia think this project is not realistic. According to the Russian analysts, the administration of the president of Russia has demanded that the special services express their opinion on the "Karabakh project", what produced inadequate results. The heads of the Russian special services did not complicate their situation and did not make negative evaluations. According to the evaluations of the special services, namely the External Intelligence Service of Russia, this project "contains new interesting proposals and may become a starting point for the implementation of the Russian policy on the South Caucasus." The External Intelligence Service recommends focusing on the phase of agreements on proposals and stances, as well as efforts for reaching consensus between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which will be difficult. Currently, the administration of the Russian president is not trying to involve experts of research institutes and centers. The Russian experts who visited NKR will one way or another continue to think that the "Karabakh project" is actually a political adventure but they do not express their opinion publicly. Judging by the work that has been done, the Karabakh project was initiated to a considerable degree by the Azerbaijan lobby in Moscow, which is closely related to President Medvedev. It should be noted that Prime Minister Putin and his people in the president administration, as well as the foreign minister Lavrov have expressed no enthusiasm and optimism about the given project yet. There is no confidence on how the strategic interests of Russia and the objectives of the lobbyists in Moscow coincide, but both have a role in advocating the "Karabakh project".

In the meantime, there is a lot of hope and definite plans about Medvedev's visit in terms of development of economy and infrastructures in Armenia, including the second nuclear plant. Is this consistent with your warning of a national catastrophe awaiting Armenia?

In the 1920s, Armenia was divided, its historical provinces were annexed, and in the territory that was left the economy was developed because complete destruction of Armenia would have destroyed the Russian strategy.

The Russians have always considered Karabakh as unjustified lavishness for the Armenians. Any positive mentioning of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the armed force of Karabakh, the Christian identity of this region encountered hostility and confusion in any Russian, especially in politicians and experts. As to Dmitry Medvedev's promises, it would be worthwhile to ask the question why so many ambitious proposals are offered especially now. The Russians will hardly build a nuclear plant in Armenia. Why should the Russians build such a serious facility in a dying country? They may start producing uranium, they need it. The Russians would rather build nuclear plants in Turkey and Azerbaijan.

No confirmation has come through the media that Russia links the Karabakh settlement with the relations with Turkey. Are these suppositions, confirmed by information or conclusions based on analyses?

In the analysis of political projection, that is the material which has not been announced publicly, such notions as "information", "analysis", "conclusions" are highly relative. Although it is possible to cite one example of an argument supported by information, and no Russian diplomat dealing with the Russian and Turkish relations may reject this. The Turks have proposed the Russians for more than once to stop the project Kars-Akhalkalaki in case the Russians state that the "five territories will be returned to Azerbaijan, sometime in the nearest future if not now". Meanwhile, I again confirm that Turkey is not interested in the Karabakh issue, and this and other identical proposals are offered because Turkey would like to get utmost concessions from Russia to make their relations more significant and binding.

How did the Russian-Georgian war affect the settlement of the Karabakh issue, is there a new situation, a source of policy between Russia and Armenia?

The completion of the action in Chechnya, significant success in reducing the threat of terrorism in the North Caucasus, the tactical military success of the Russian in Georgia had an important role, inspiring the Russian political government to launch another phase of establishment of new positions in the South Caucasus. The given circumstance which had an emotional rather than political importance was nevertheless important in making a decision on the Karabakh issue. At the same time, the possible occurrence of problems relating to Abkhazia and South Ossetia may reduce the confidence of Russia in conducting a policy of pressure in the South Caucasus. So far there is no confidence in Moscow regarding what happened in the conflict with Georgia, first of all, regarding the position and role of the United States. The Russian experts are not ready and would not wish a continuation since the policy of the United States aimed to involve Russia in a large-scale armed conflict with Georgia to support the argumentation for the military presence of the United States in the Black Sea and the Caucasian region. In Moscow, they would like to rule out from public debates everything that may ruin the triumphant propaganda and question not only the military but also the political success in the Caucasus.

Does Russia have claims to Armenia regarding the events in Ossetia, what are those claims?

There are such claims, and they are only political. In reality, Russia would hardly expect more or less significant military assistance from Armenia. Now Russia is manipulating this issue, especially with regard to the "condolence" of Armenia to Georgia rather than to Ossetia, only as a means of pressure on Armenia and for scolding it as an unreliable partner.

The Russians think after the "great victory" they have the right for such manipulations.

What will the attitude of other powers having interests in the South Caucasus toward these intentions of Russia be? Does the West possess levers for the correction of Russia's policy?

First of all, it is necessary to understand the international context of the given adventure. In a wider international context, the Russian-Georgian war is determined by the objectives of the United States to enhance its military and political presence in the basin of the Black Sea rather than local regional conflicts. These

plans of the United States had emerged earlier, in the first half of the 1990s but even by the beginning of the summer 2008 the United States had made no decision on this presence because first of all the leading European powers Germany and France who were not interested in the implementation of these plans did not approve it. Without the approval of NATO and the EU the United States could not implement the plan confidently enough, since the Black Sea basin borders with the European Union. The United States needed sufficient arguments, and the actions of Russia in Georgia fully corresponded with the objectives to persuade Europe. In this situation, Russia and Turkey are opponents to the strengthening of the United States in the Black Sea since they understand that "alone" they cannot stop the U.S. expansion in the region, especially after the decision to set up three American bases in Georgia and thereby turn Georgia into an avant-garde partner of the United States in the region of the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Russia and Turkey demonstrate readiness to act together and make a serious bid for an alliance. For the time being, the United States is taking care of protecting the format of the Minsk Group, preventing a "local", a "regional" decision, in the framework of the Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan relations. This would be the terrible result of their policy, practically a strategic loss of the Americans in the region, and not only in the region. This development, in the opinion of the Americans, would lead to significant weakening of the United States in the region, including undermining of the importance of the Black Sea basin for the American strategy, as well as classifying Georgia among partners which are not relevant any more. In my opinion, the United States will be headed for thwarting this Russian project on the Karabakh issue, in a classic manner. In the beginning, the United States will try to talk Turkey out of accepting the proposals of Russia. Identically, the Americans will engage Azerbaijan, offering a more favorable settlement for it. It should be noted that Turkey hopes for that, and so does Azerbaijan but obviously Turkey has a plan of action. The Turks are hoping for a new situation which may emerge after the U.S. presidential election. The Russians are also hoping for that but the Russians tried to promote a decision, at least a short-term one, together with Turkey, concerning the entire region of the South Caucasus. The Russians have realized that the Turks were more ingenious than them by temporizing, but they continue to offer their proposals. Various political circles in Turkey are still hoping for possible turning points in the U.S.-Turkish relations, the establishment of new relations, i.e. relations on new conditions, when Turkey will implement a more independent foreign policy but again with the assistance of the United States. This is hardly possible, and the United States will hardly go into such minor issues since the Americans realize very well that Turkey fears crossing the line beyond which confrontation with the United States starts. Turkey still needs the support of the United States, the EU and NATO. Otherwise, Turkey will have no chance to overcome its economic and social problems, and will face the prospect of a failure state. In Moscow they certainly take this into consideration and understand that it is impossible to build relations with Turkey on such a strategic basis.

Currently, Russia's relations with Turkey are based on innumerable tactical interests but highly important interests. The policy of John McCain will indicate real possibilities for the establishment of U.S. and Turkish relations in new historical conditions. Barack Obama will not offer short-term solutions, and the U.S. policy on Turkey will not undergo significant change. Nevertheless, the relations between the United States and Russia will not acquire a new shade in any of the possible cases.

Therefore, Turkey will continue its game with Russia, demonstrating the

realistic nature of the alternative foreign political line. However, it should be taken into account that for the national catastrophe of Armenia the establishment of strategic relations between Russia and Turkey is not necessary, three or four years of flirting between them is enough. In the nearest future, the "triangle" Russia-United States-Turkey in the South Caucasus will not be unambiguous in terms of the pattern of forces, and all the three actors understand this. This means that Turkey will continue to insist on the position of balance. The current global crisis and prices of energy resources should not be ignored. This factor will certainly affect Russia's foreign political ambitions. John McCain would show those "gas and oil" politicians their place better, but it is not ruled out that so would do Barack Obama. Generally, the oil politicians have been unlucky recently, the ground is too shaky. Is it also important that the United States is ready to approve transportation of gas from Iran to Europe via the gas pipeline of Turkey. This may be quite real, since for the United States the supply of the Iranian gas to Europe is more acceptable than to China and even India. By the way, the European analytical centers think that the game with Russia is just an argument in the dialogue with the EU and the United States. All this means that Armenia still has a chance for a foreign political maneuver, although only in the sense of potential.

What should the stance of Armenia be to prevent the destruction of Armenian Karabakh and to avoid a national catastrophe?

I would rather cite the opinion of the leading Russian political scientists insisting on the idea of "freezing" the Karabakh problem instead of expressing my opinion. "It would be unreasonable to demonstrate a nervous reaction and automatic request for help from the United States. In this situation when the issue that Karabakh belongs to the Armenian people is questioned, for Armenia it is enough to say "no", in a determined manner. In that case Russia has no arguments and possibility to continue to push through his plans. Russia will not insist more than it has done."

Long before the revelation of these opinions and evaluations, this approach appeared realistic and possible to me. However, I would like to refer these evaluations to the opinion and stance of the given Russian political scientists. Russia understands that its "great victory" on Georgia is highly ephemeral and would like to demonstrate to the world that it is ready to make and fulfill other decisions, i.e. in the framework of the notorious "international law", and the Karabakh issue, along with the geopolitical aspect, is suitable for these propaganda aims. At the same time, despite the confident appearance of Russia, it fears the Americans, but most of all it fears "recruitment" of countries of the region by the United States. At any event, the "Russian phase" in the Armenian history is over, even if the project fails, Russia will be viewed as a dangerous enemy. I regret to say this.

What if Armenia does not say "no" with determination?

In that case, it is necessary to stop sacrificing the Armenians of Karabakh like lambs on the altar and try to seek money which would enable the people of Karabakh to settle in some regions of Armenia, and better in other countries. Now it is clear that the Armenians fear, they have reason to fear, and therefore they will lose, disgracefully, without a single shot.
