
EU 'Not Abandoning' Armenia

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The European Union is still eager to pursue deeper ties with Armenia even if Yerevan goes ahead with plans to join a Russian-led customs union, according to EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele.

In an interview with RFE/RL's Armenian service (Azatutyun.am), Fuele made clear that while the Association Agreement that was planned by the two sides is 'no longer on the table' Brussels would like to continue supporting political and economic reforms in the South Caucasus country.

'We definitely have not given up on Armenia and the Armenian people. That is not going to happen,' Fuele said late on Friday, speaking after talks held with President Serzh Sarkisian and Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian.

'These meetings today were about reassuring each other that despite this unexpected decision [to join the customs union] there is space for continuing and strengthening cooperation in certain areas,' he said. The EU specifically stands ready to assist in the Armenian government's stated efforts to improve governance, boost the rule of law and combat corruption, he added.

Fuele also vowed continued EU support for Armenian civic groups campaigning for democratization and European integration. 'We will be strongly represented here in Armenia and supporting civil society,' he said.

Fuele's talks in Yerevan came ten days after Sarkisian announced his unexpected decision to seek membership of the Russian-led bloc following a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Armenian officials claim that the policy U-turn was not the result of strong Russian pressure. Armenian opposition politicians and observers dismiss such assurances.

Asked whether Sarkisian's move took the EU by surprise, Fuele said, 'We have been in the same situation as the Armenian people.'

Fuele reiterated that the EU has not accepted an Armenian government proposal to initial a much shorter and watered-down version of the Association Agreement at an EU summit in Vilnius scheduled for November. He said Brussels is only open to discussing a 'new legal framework for our relationship.'

The EU official all but ruled out the signing of such an alternative document at Vilnius, saying that during the summit the EU and Armenia could only 'define what we actually want to achieve' in the years to come. In that context, he stressed the importance of EU trust in the Armenian leadership.

'I said [during the talks in Yerevan] that if there is trust and confidence, you could build a lot of things on it,' he said. 'But if there is no trust and confidence, there is no creativity and hardly any willingness to come forward.'
