
Lengthy Endurance Partnership

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The third international At the Foot of Mount Ararat media forum has been held in Yerevan.

Approximately 40 chief editors and senior journalists from Germany, France, Spain, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia, including Rossiyskaya Gazeta's political correspondent, took part. The main topics of the debate, in which Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisyan was given the floor, were "Armenia: Partnership for the Future" and "Role of the News Media in the Modern World". The group of participants in the forum was received by President Serzh Sargsyan. He conversed with the guests about Armenia's relations with neighbouring states and its prospects following membership of the Customs Union and also about whether it is not losing the respect of the world community owing to its close cooperation with Iran.

In their dialogues with the journalists the president and premier particularly underscored Russia's role in the life of Armenia and expressed hope for the continued consolidation of strategic partnership.

Why is Armenia so attached to Russia? And is this a long-term attachment?

Armenia is being kept from a reorientation towards the West by the allied relations with Russia and geopolitical requirements.

"Where would it go" -this the first thing Russian experts say when they are asked whether Armenia will turn its back on Russia in the example of Georgia or Moldavia, say. Truly, the coincidence of geopolitical interests in a changed world brought Russia and Armenia to the level of strategic partnership. Armenia in the Transcaucasus region is the sole country whose relations with Russia leave nothing to be desired. Moreover, Armenia is the sole country connected to Russia by relations of a defence alliance. And the sole country which expresses no desire for the removal of the Russian military bases from its territory, on the contrary, it is insisting on a reinforcement of the Russian military force contingent.

What is compelling Armenia today to be a loyal Russian partner needs no lengthy explanation. It has strained relations with Turkey, which is unwilling to acknowledge its historical blame for the genocide of Armenians. It has a chronic conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagornyy Karabakh. This is why it not only does not object to the Russian military and border presence but considers it an important factor of its national security. In turn, Russia also, whose positions in the Transcaucasus have weakened noticeably, needs a dependable outpost here. The legal structure of Russo-Armenian relations amounts to more than 160 documents, including a friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance treaty. But for full satisfaction with the partnership Armenia lacks not new political documents and not additional pieces of military equipment at Russia's military bases. It lacks more fundamental economic ties. For example, the trade balance constantly skews in favour of Russia. Fuel, uncut natural diamonds, products of aluminium industry, machinery, and equipment are invariably preponderant in the structure of Russian exports. Armenian exports also are traditional -foodstuffs and wine and cognac. The number of enterprises and detached subdivisions with Russian capital in Armenia is approximately 1,300. Their proportion in the total number of enterprises with the participation of foreign capital is 27.6 per cent.

Without mutual economic interest, military-technical cooperation between Russia and Armenia could weaken. If there's no interaction in business, little will eventuate in the military sphere either. Thus far it is doing. But it should not be thought that this will go on forever. Turkey is eager to become a part of Europe, Armenia also.

Sooner or later, their European interests will coincide, and relations between them will be repaired. It is not inconceivable that Turkey will set as a condition of normalization the withdrawal of the Russian troops.

Nor should we consider Armenia an eternal transport dead end and for this reason exaggerate its dependence on Russian energy resources.

Gazprom spokesmen maintain that Armenia cannot be a transit country.

"Why not? There is the Iranian sector," Armen Darbinyan, principal of the Russo-Armenian (Slav) State University, says. "In addition, we will one day secure the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border. With the help of the United States or Europe. But if we do so without Russia's participation, this will be for it a serious failure and will result in a loss of influence in the region. Let's give thought to genuine integration. It is lacking at this time. There is not even a distinct ideology of cooperation. We need to forswear cliches and understand that there is to Russo-Armenian relations in their present format an alternative."

Such assertions may be disputed. But they have to be heeded. Because there are things that are obvious. For example. Although Armenia remains in the sphere of Russian influence, this is not preventing it cooperating with NATO within the Partnership for Peace programme.

Armenia has thus far been held back from a total reorientation towards the West -and there undoubtedly is such a desire -by the two centuries of allied relations with Russia and geopolitical requirements of the moment. It is only this that is preventing it taking decisive steps in accommodation of the North Atlantic alliance.

The American presence in Armenia is not yet dominant. But it could become such unless Russia responds to the new world challenges in a region of strategic importance to it.

[Translated from Russian]
