
Armenia's Decision To Join The CU Will Improve Russia's Position In The South Caucasus

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Three weeks ago Armenia expressed its desire to join the Customs Union. However, an official agreement of member-states is needed - not only Russia, which stands for extension of the alliance, but also Belarus and Kazakhstan. Astana and Minsk took the appearance of a new member of the CU kindly, but some Belarusian experts doubted the sincerity of the statements.

Nevertheless, Moscow says that Serge Sargsyan's statement on readiness to join the CU and take part in the EU will be beneficial for everyone.

According to the former Russian ambassador to Armenia, Vyacheslav Kovalenko, "from the beginning of the year when the work on the association agreement between the EU and Armenia and the free trade area agreement stepped into a final stage, Western experts promised that the point is in unification of standards of Armenian products and its laws. And only in late August did European commissionaires and diplomats in Yerevan and abroad make it clear that economic integration and political association should go hand by hand, and that they were an indispensable part of the association agreement. Stefan Fule stated that the EU cannot divide these two important agreements.

Thus, it is clear that it is not only about a system of values, a civilized development course, a struggle against corruption, and elimination of monopolies, but also a geopolitical choice which is imposed on Armenia."

Local elites, the government, some members of the president's team wanted to follow the European development course, which would make Armenia a part of the European family in the future. According to Kovalenko, "it didn't answer the question: if geopolitical orientation is changing, it is necessary to solve the problem of security; but no alternative to Russian security support was found. The temptations and doubts of the ruling elite were great. A principal talk with Yerevan at the top level was needed; and it took place on September 3rd. The result of the global competition between integration entities was Armenia's decision to join the CU."

Kovalenko thinks that "Armenia's decision to join the CU will improve Russia's position in the South Caucasus and in case of deeper integration can influence the whole South Caucasus. From the point of view of a geopolitical and geoeconomic worldview, Armenia's accession can have an integrating effect in the post-Soviet state, which is much greater than the size and economic potential of the country. Armenia's accession to the CU within the Eurasian Economic Union will maintain the internal balance between the Asian-Muslim factor, which will be improved after Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan join the Eurasian Union and the European Christian factor."

At the same time, Kovalenko believes that "along with rather successful steps on holding Armenia within partnership with Russia, it is important to extend the dialogue of nomenclatures. It is important to work on promotion of the Eurasian project, explain to Armenian citizens what they can gain from participation in Eurasian integration projects. The ideological paradigm of relations should be corrected.

Along with improvement of friendship and brotherhood of people, our glorious historic past, it is necessary to explain to Armenian society why they need to integrate and what could happen if Armenia separates from Russia."

Experts: Armenia May Become Customs Union's Gates Into Middle East And South Asia

By Gayane Isahakyan
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Russia is interested in Armenia as a transit corridor to the Middle East and South Asia, Director of the Center for Integration Studies at the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) Yevgeny Vinokurov said on Wednesday during a Moscow-Yerevan video conference on the economic advantages of the Eurasian project for Armenia.

"All the members of the Customs Union are interested in the building of the North-South transport corridor and the reopening of the Abkhazian railway. This project will be financed by the EDB-controlled Eurasec Anti-Crisis Fund," Vinokurov said.

He said that one of the issues of the joint agenda may also be the Georgian problem. "According to surveys, 59% of the Georgians are interested in normal relations with Russia and are well disposed towards the Customs Union. This is a good chance for Armenia and all the member states," Vinokurov said.

Deputy Director of the Noravank Scientific Education Foundation Sevak Sarukhanyan stressed the importance of railway projects in the territory of Armenia. "Armenia may become the Customs Union's gates into the Middle East and South Asia," he said.

The expert believes that the reopening of the Abkhazian railway will foster integration in the South Caucasus. "All the transport and energy corridors built in the region so far run from east to west rather from north to south," Sarukhanyan said.

He welcomes Armenia's wish to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as China may also be interested in the Iran-Armenia railway project.

The 556 km long North-South transport corridor will give access to the Black Sea and Europe through the territory of Armenia (Meghri-Kapan- Goris-Yerevan-Ashtarak-Gyumri-Bavra) and Georgia.

While visiting Yerevan in Jan 2013, Georgian Prime Minister Birdzina Ivanishvili mentioned the possibility of restarting the Abkhazian railway stopped as a result of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1992- 1993.
