
Is Armenia Turning East?

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When on September 3rd 2013 Serzh Sargsyan, after meeting Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow, announced that Armenia has asked to join the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, this came as a surprise. It came as a surprise for both for Armenian public, and for Armenia's partners in the West, most of all for EU officials responsible for the block's eastern policy. The reason: Armenia had already completed the negotiations regarding the Association Agreement with EU (including DCFTA) and was supposed to pre-sign the agreement in November. It has been made clear to Armenian authorities that membership in the Customs Union would be incompatible with the association process and especially with the DCFTA provisions.

Armenian authorities seemed to understand that point and continued to claim their willingness to advance relations with Europe. As for the Customs Union, Armenian officials of various levels repeated numerous times that the country had no intention of joining, and moreover, that this was impossible given absence of a common border between Armenia and the countries of the Customs Union.

Thus, in spring 2012 Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan gave a well-publicized interview to Russian daily 'Kommersant', in which he stated unequivocally that Armenia is not interested in the Customs Union since it does not have a common border with the members of the block, though he conceded that Armenia might be interested in some kind of a special partnership with that organization. This March in a press conference televised by all major channels President Serzh Sargsyan said that no one was expecting Armenia in the Customs Union and dismissed any talk of the Russian pressure as unfounded. Finally, only several days before Sargsyan's visit to Moscow, in an interview to the ArmNews channel the Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister ruled out Armenia's joining the Customs Union, adding that there is no precedent of a country joining a customs union with countries that do not share a common border. Moreover, many pro-government media outlets and commentators had been engaged during recent months in a media campaign praising Armenia's rapprochement with the European Union.

However, all these statements seem to have been forgotten as after Sargsyan's return from Moscow as senior government figures started to praise Armenia's potential benefits from joining the Customs Union. To make matters worse, some Armenian government figures attempted to spin Sargsyan's announcement by saying that Armenia will continue to aim for the Association agreement, thus prompting unequivocal denial from the EU side. After a series of statements of varying degrees of clarity from several EU sources, came unusually direct statements, which left little room for doubt. Thus, in apparent response to Armenian officials' statements, Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said on September 9th that European Union has no plans to finalize an Association Agreement with Armenia at an upcoming EU summit in Lithuania, adding that 'we work with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia'.

EU officials also talked of the Russian pressure on Armenian authorities. Many commentators tend to believe that the security argument was used by Russia, who is Armenia's main security partner and the leading force in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Armenia is a member. Armenia is locked in a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, so it is particularly vulnerable to such pressures. However, given the internal political situation in Armenia, there might

have been other leverages, which could have been used by Russia to influence Armenian government.

The current government is still struggling with the lack of democratic legitimacy, which came as a result of the long history of disputed elections and heavy-handed treatment of protesters. Particularly, the events of March 1st 2008, when 10 people were killed as the government cracked down on post-election protests in Yerevan, are still haunting Armenia's internal politics. The latest presidential election in 2013 did not help to mitigate the lack of legitimacy, and probably even made the matters worse: though Serzh Sargsyan was announced the winner, opposition leader Raffi Hovannisian refused to accept the official results, and started a campaign of protests, which however were smaller in scale than those in 2008 and gradually died out after Sargsyan's inauguration.

Sargsyan's announcement probably also came as a surprise for Armenian civil society. Numerous Armenian NGOs have been involved in various projects connected with the European integration and the reforms that were expected within its framework. The announcement made in Moscow became a cause for worry since Armenian government commitment to the Association Agreement was perceived as a certain guarantee that the authoritarian tendencies, which already exist in the country would be kept in check. Now, some NGO figures argue, the Armenian government will be judged against the standards that exist in the countries of the Customs Union (Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan) which can be described as anything but democratic. In the days preceding the announcement and immediately after it several attacks took place, aimed at civic activists, who had participated in anti-government protests. These attacks, carried out by unidentified men, still remain unsolved and the victims claim that state authorities are to blame.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, many in the civil society perceived these attacks as a sign that the Armenian government's authoritarian tendencies are getting stronger within the new geopolitical context.

Against this background, fears that by joining the Customs Union may mean creation of "a new USSR" and will lead to ceding a part of Armenia's sovereignty became quite visible in Armenia. Some even feared that Armenia, which had acquired independence from Russia only around 22 years ago, might be reduced to a status of a client-state of Russia. Over a hundred activists protested Sargsyan's announcement September 4th in front of the President's residence and on September 5th outside of the ruling party headquarters. The scale of the protests however remains relatively small, mostly confined to politically active youth and civil society representatives. As for the main political forces, they seem to be reluctant to spoil relations with Russian authorities by opposing the union too harshly. Thus the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC/HAK) criticized the government for squandering Armenia's international credibility as a result of its U-turn, but refrained from commenting on whether Customs Union membership would be beneficial for Armenia or not. Moreover, ANC leader Ter-Petrosyan warned his party members against 'resorting to anti-Russianism' in the criticism of the government. This careful stance is shared by most other political forces represented in the parliament. As for the larger public, the 'Russian' option still remains quite popular among many Armenians, especially among the middle aged and older citizens, who tend to have a nostalgia for the Soviet times, and who do not seem to understand the intricacies of European integration.

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