

Armenia – Between the Wider Black Sea Region and the Greater Middle East

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What is Armenia's position on a new Euro Atlantic strategy for the wider Black Sea region? All too often Western observers view Yerevan as a country whose close ties to Moscow make it uninterested in Euro Atlantic integration and, therefore, also less interested in this kind of strategy. Yet a closer reading of the Armenian political debates reveals a much more complicated story.

Straddling the Wider Black Sea region and the Greater Middle East, Yerevan has its own interests in supporting such a strategy and upgrading its ties with the West. While Armenia does not officially aspire to NATO membership, its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with the Alliance is perceived by many as a key that is going to open the Euro Atlantic door for the country. Within Armenia there is a growing debate over the country's geopolitical orientation and future ties with Moscow as well as the West.

In summer of 2006 Armenian President Robert Kocharian took part in the Summit of the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership in Bucharest. The content of his speech was commensurate with the ideas of U.S. experts and who back the idea of accepting a new common Euro-Atlantic approach to this part of the world.

Armenian president raised 2 questions in Bucharest: how possible is the common direction of development of the region and will this lead to the formation of a new regional identity based on common interests and inherited cultural interactions?

The question of regional identity is, indeed, one of the key issues. This issue is twice as difficult for Armenia, with its hard history and difficult relations with some of its neighbors. The prospects for harmonization of a shared regional identity between Armenia and Turkey for Ukraine and Romania, for that

matter, would look more promising if countries in the region had more or less identical political approaches.

In Bucharest, Kocharian urged participants to “evaluate the level of motivation in each country of the region” and to “work out approaches increasing our mutual will for partnership”.

According to the position of the officials Yerevan, the factors uniting the countries of the Wider Black Sea Region are:

Commitment to a common system of values and readiness to play along the same rules;

Obvious, tangible economic benefit of regional integration processes;

Common challenges and threats to the stability and security caused by the increasing transnational crime and terrorism.

At the same time, decision makers in Yerevan stress that regional players are divided by unresolved ethnic conflicts and certain deficit of trust caused by negative experiences of the history of the region.

At first glance, the Armenian side clearly classifies the “positive” and the “negative”. On the other hand, the question of what must be considered as a “commitment to a common system of values” and “readiness to play along the same rules” in the Black Sea region remains unresolved. If the commonly accepted values underpinning Euro-Atlantic cooperation are meant, then the countries of the region (in any case, the post-Soviet republics) will obviously be unable to fully meet the conditions implied for a long time. If integration processes are meant, then this remains a desire rather than a reality for Armenia. The United States, the primary promoter of the Wider Black Sea region concept, has once failed to persuade Armenia’s neighbors to involve it in regional projects, having created an atmosphere and conditions that would

have significantly facilitated the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. By way of example, Armenia was the only South Caucasian country that remained without any alternative energy sources after the explosion on the Russian North Caucasus gas pipeline in January 2006. If Yerevan had not had underground gas storage (built during Soviet times) Armenia, isolated from large regional energy projects, would have faced a real catastrophe.

In Bucharest, Kocharian urged the countries of the Black Sea region to focus on the elements that unite them. He said that there is a clear need for joint investment projects in the infrastructure of the region, first of all, for energy and transportation projects, covering the entire Black Sea basin and increasing its economic attractiveness. According to him, through cooperation to the settlement, through communication to towards greater trust – that is the best formula for overcoming controversies, based on a search for common interests.

From the other hand Kocharian's policy has not changed in his 10 years since taking office. He is guided by pragmatic approaches and is not going to participate in the process of turning the Black Sea region into a conditional zone of "new democracy".

It is not a secret that the idea of the Wider Black Sea region is not popular with Russia and Turkey. For good reason, this obviously affects Armenia's position. The unprecedented Russian-Turkish rapprochement of recent years forces Armenia to be more careful as regards regional initiatives.

Against this backdrop, what are the "real challenges" for Armenia?

Undoubtedly, the active development of the cooperation within the European Union's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO. In fact, the very idea of the Wider Black Sea region means full integration into the EU and NATO.

In the last five years, Armenia-NATO relations have undergone dramatic and revolutionary changes. Although Armenia is still perceived as “Moscow’s satellite”, analysis of the quality of Armenia’s relations with NATO bears witness to the fact that Yerevan has managed to achieve notable results. But, rapprochement with NATO was not an “easy trip” for Yerevan. The very fact that Armenia has engaged in IPAP makes its long-term strategic choices harder.

In fact, Armenia would have probably become the first South Caucasus country to voice its desire to join NATO if it was not for its dependence on Russia and the unresolved Karabakh conflict. Armenia’s geographic location, however, makes it extremely dependent on Russia for both transportation and energy. This is simply the reality. Armenian officials maintain that if NATO is indeed interested in Armenia’s involvement then the West should force Turkey to resume (even partially) railway connections with Armenia. In that case, Yerevan would have more room for a strategic maneuver.

Unlike the rapprochement with NATO, Armenia openly speaks about the goals of developing relations with the European Union. Moreover, IPAP was the first and the only document in which Armenia officially voiced its desire to become a full EU member. The document reads as follows: “Consistent with its objective to integrate into European structures and institutions, Armenia intends to enhance its cooperation with the European Union and to seek closer institutional compatibility with the ultimate goal of full membership”.

But Euro-Atlantic integration is not the only geo-political challenge facing Armenia.

If one considers that the Wider Black Sea region could act as a bridge between Europe and the Greater Middle East, it becomes obvious that Armenia could definitely play a role. But, the region is fraught with challenges for Armenian foreign policy.

Hundreds of thousands of Armenians live in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and other Arab countries. The Armenian Church owns priceless spiritual treasures on the territory of the Holy Land. On the other hand, Armenian-Israeli relations are contradictory. From the formal point of view Yerevan and Tel Aviv have never had conflicts. But, there are numerous smaller and larger problems that negatively influence Armenia's relations with Israel. From the emotional point of view, the most serious problem is Israel's policy of "monopolization" of the Holocaust. Tel Aviv refuses to recognize the Armenian Genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire that caused the death of 1.5 million people, and harshly cuts short all attempts to "compare" these two great tragedies. After Israeli Ambassador, Rivka Cohen, said that "nothing can be compared to Holocaust" several years ago, the Armenian authorities had difficulty to resist the temptation to heed public urges and declare Ambassador Cohen persona non-grata. During the whole history of Armenian-Israeli relations only one high-level visit was made, with President Robert Kocharian paying an "unofficial-working" visit to Israel in January 2000. One of the main objectives of the visit was to express support to the Armenian community of Jerusalem, which, many thought, was on the verge of collapse and assimilation.

While being a factor of discord in relations between Armenia and Israel, the problem of the Genocide is a corner stone of Armenia's relations with the Arab world. Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq have given shelter to hundreds of thousands of Armenians expelled by Turkish authorities during the Genocide of 1915. The Armenian communities in Arab countries are among the most united and are committed to the preservation of the Armenian language and national identity, handing them down from generation to generation.

In January 2005, 46 Armenian peacekeepers and, several hours later, Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, set off for the Middle East. The peacekeepers' destination was Iraq, while the Minister was leaving for Egypt where he signed a memorandum with the League of Arab Nations on granting Armenia the status of a special invitee to this organization. The almost simultaneous arrival

of the peacekeepers and the Foreign Minister to the region was, of course, a coincidence, but it symbolizes the complexity of the choice facing Armenia in the Middle East. The future of the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, the interests of hundreds of thousands of members of its Diaspora in Lebanon, Iran and Syria, future integration into the European Union and NATO and relations with Iran, which has been a lifeline for Armenia during the Nagorno Karabakh war, all compete for center stage in the development of Armenian foreign policy.

Armenia has drastically changed in last seven to eight years, having taken many hard and consistent steps towards integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. But, how deep Armenia-NATO and Armenia-EU relations will develop depends on two major correlated factors: the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and Armenia-Turkey relations. The resolution of the conflict and the opening of the border will obviously make Armenia's path to the West easier.

Armenia has walked most of that path alone in spite of numerous internal and foreign impediments. It seems that the West would be wise to begin considering Armenia as an independent political entity and to give up seeing it only in "Russia's shadow". After all, NATO officials have also repeatedly stated that Armenia has never betrayed its partners. The most important thing is that each of the sides should do its work. In that case the issue of Armenia's choice and orientation will be resolved.

Still in June 2001, President Robert Kocharian, meeting with Belgian senators in Brussels, said that "being at the junction of civilizations, Armenia is the guard of European values". It looks as if it is high time for the "guard" to begin acting and prove its readiness to defend these values in practice.

Anyhow, it is obvious that Yerevan is not going to forget the 1,5 million of its compatriots killed during the Genocide in 1915 and

nearly 150 thousand Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh today. So, the West needs to come up with an extra-creative approach to address these issues and to incorporate Armenia into the wider Black Sea Region without upsetting its traditional regional allies.