



TOPICAL DIALOGUES

A "Region" Research Center Project

ON ARMENIA'S NEW INTEGRATION AGENDA

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ON THE ONLINE PRESS CONFERENCES FOR THE ARMENIAN MEDIA

Within the framework of the "Topical Dialogues on Armenia's New Integration Agenda" project, supported by the Office of Public Relations of the US Embassy in Armenia, Region Research Center organizes a series of online press conferences for the media in Armenia, in which experts from different countries provide commentary to journalists' questions on the integration processes and events in post-Soviet countries.

The topics of and issues brought up at the press conferences may be directly or indirectly related to the current integration agenda of Armenia, but they all make up an overall picture of the current situation.

These "first-hand" commentaries get published by the Armenian journalists in the editions of the media outlets they work for.

In this issue of the newsletter you can find excerpts from the materials of online press conferences that were held in April 2015.

ONLINE PRESS-CONFERENCES FOR ARMENIAN MEDIA



From the internet press-conference with **STEVEN BLOCKMANS**, the senior research fellow of Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS, Belgium)

16.04. 2015

TOPICS: Current processes of the Eastern Partnership Program, as well associated with Armenia, despite the fact of integration into the Eurasian Economic Union; Relations between Russia and the European institutions.

Armenia-EU on the eve of the Summit of the "Eastern Partnership" in Riga (21-22 May, 2015)

- Ever since President's Sargsyan's astonishing volte-face, the EU and Armenia have been in a process of trying to rework the failed Association Agreement. At this stage, it is difficult to predict how much of this agreement can be salvaged in order to replace the outdated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. For now, the visa liberalization process and Armenia's signing up to the European Common Aviation Agreement and the European Commission's 'Horizon 2020' research programme are the sole deliverables expected from the Riga Summit on 21-22 May 2015.
- I expect this bilateral political dialogue and future Action Plan to be far less ambitious than those with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.
- In principle, the EU's strategic and economic interests in the South Caucasus remain the same, irrespective of the dispute with Russia over the latter's destabilizing role in Ukraine. However, the position of the EU towards Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

is liable to change negatively as a result of Russia's actions on the ground (see the association and integration agreements with Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and in the Black Sea (i.e. de facto extension of territorial waters by Russia) or as a consequence of a different political outlook espoused by the leaderships of the countries concerned (see Armenia's decision to pull the plug on the Association Agreement). On the other hand, after the debacle in Ukraine and the failure of the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, the EU is keen to reaffirm its commitment to all Eastern Partnership countries and to prelaunch a positive agenda at the summit in Riga in May.

About the attitude in EU countries on internationally warmer relations with Iran

- The JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program) agreed to at the beginning of this month is a first step towards the conclusion of a final deal by June. It is, however, not certain whether the P5+1 and Iran will be able to agree such a final deal, especially if one considers the differences in how the JCPOA has been received between different constituencies in the US and Iran. If cool heads prevail and a solution is found on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear file, then this may lead a normalization of relations of sorts. Sanctions will be lifted, Iran will come out of the cold internationally, play a bigger political role regionally, and strike up new commercial ties with neighboring and EU states alike. EU member states will, without exception, welcome such developments and try to benefit from them.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Internet-press-conference-with-Steven-Blockmans-eng-Interviews>



**From the interne press-conference with Research Associate, Centre of Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, School of Oriental and African Studies
LAURENCE BROERS (Britain)**

20.04. 2015

TOPICS: Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement possibilities and conditions of today.

About the impact of the agreement on Iran on the situation with the Karabakh conflict

- If it happens the opening up of Iranian-Western relations could be a positive development, but the impacts on the Caucasus will be secondary. In theory both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have much in common with Iran, and it is seen locally in the South Caucasus in a less ideological way compared to Russia or Turkey. At the same time, Iran's marginal role in the region to date is also due to complications inherited from the age of empire, and the different roles attributed to religion in the character of the state. Particularly for Iran and Azerbaijan, there is a complicated legacy that makes each party view the other side of the border between them with some degree of mistrust. The last thing the South Caucasus needs is another set of regional power rivalries, so I hope that there would be a gradual and pragmatic inclusion of Iran across a wide range of policy spheres. This could reduce the sense of geopolitical enclosure for the South Caucasus as a whole, and be the primary positive impact for the NK conflict.

About the impact of the repressions in Azerbaijan on the process of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Settlement

- Yes, the deterioration in state-society relations in Azerbaijan has been the focus of international attention and there has been a real and significant change over the last 12 months, the full implications of which we are far from understanding. In this context there are ever fewer interlocutors in Azerbaijan outside of the state with

whom to engage on peace and conflict transformation issues. The capacity of the Azerbaijani state to make peace, to make credible commitments in this direction, is also unfortunately weakened. But I think that the issue of governance needs to be seen more broadly as well. The last 20 years have seen a progressive dilution and weakening of the democratic impulses across all of the societies involved in this conflict. And the conflict itself has played a key role in this process: it provides the ultimate reason, with which no one can argue, as to why change and reform cannot happen. It justifies the militarization of state budgets, stability in elites and the absence of development. This is ironic, because of course the Karabakh movement was originally precisely about change and reform.

- The last 20 years have seen a progressive dilution and weakening of the democratic impulses across all of the societies involved in this conflict. And the conflict itself has played a key role in this process: it provides the ultimate reason, with which no one can argue, as to why change and reform cannot happen. It justifies the militarization of state budgets, stability in elites and the absence of development. This is ironic, because of course the Karabakh movement was originally precisely about change and reform.
- The shut-down of independent civil society carries two main risks, however, which bring us back to the Karabakh conflict. First, there are very few independent societal actors in Azerbaijan who can be accepted as legitimate interlocutors for dialogue by their Armenian counterparts. A wider spectrum of interactions has been narrowed down to a state-managed process, which therefore ties the peace process in an even more direct way to the identity and continuity of current state leadership. Secondly, and this remains to be seen, it raises the question of whether the closing off of liberal-constitutional forms of resistance will result in growth of other forms of resistance. Either way, the potential for the Azerbaijani state to find in its own society an ally and partner in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict remains elusive.

"Oil factor" and the participation of the UK in the Karabakh process

- First of all, Britain has no significant role in the Karabakh peace process, not being a permanent member of the Minsk Group. Britain's main contribution to the peace process has been through the support of civil society initiatives working towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict, which it has done consistently since 2003. But the «oil factor» of course has played a huge and ambiguous role. I would split it into two factors: the importance of oil for Azerbaijani state building, and its importance as a

factor shaping attitudes among different actors to a resumption of large-scale hostilities. Oil was a critical state building tool in the mid-1990s around which to rebuild the shattered Azerbaijani state. The «contract of the century» internationalized the idea and the legitimacy of Azerbaijani statehood at a critical moment. Since then oil revenues have allowed the consolidation of the incumbent elite while allowing rearmament and some development, giving Azerbaijan a new sense of confidence. In this sense oil might be seen as a key factor driving Azerbaijan's refusal to accept the status quo.

- But while the oil industry allowed for an internationalized affirmation of Azerbaijani statehood in the 1990s, since then it also means an internationalized consensus on stability and reluctance to see the oil industry threatened by renewed hostilities. In this sense, then, oil is an integral element to the status quo, disincentivizing a new war. But overall, I would underline that oil is not the main issue, which is about territory and security. Oil will eventually disappear, but the Karabakh conflict will remain.

About Russia's armaments policy in its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan

- First, surely there are simple market forces at work here: Russia has arms for sale, Azerbaijan has money for arms. Secondly, for as long as neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan cross Moscow's ideological red lines – integration with Euro-Atlantic structures – Russia remains a rational actor. From the perspective of Russia's interests, it is rational to: 1) retain strategic influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan, which the arms race between the two countries does; 2) benefit commercially from the capacity of either party to purchase weapons; 3) benefit symbolically from simultaneously playing the role of mediator on the world stage. From Russia's perspective this is win-win, and in this sense I think the Karabakh conflict works effectively to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan under the control of their former metropole.

About the intensification of frontline clashes

- The rise in intensity and variety of Line of Contact skirmishes and incidents may have various explanations. It might first be noted that there have always been ceasefire violations but they have become much more widely reported than they were. They have taken centre stage in reporting, so while I am not saying that there hasn't been an increase, there is an information tactic at work here as well as a military one. Second, LOC activity may be the necessary corollary of rearmament. In a context

where intensive rearmament has taken place, some practical manifestation of the resources spent needs to be seen, in order to balance public expectations that military investment will pay off. Third, LOC activity has important shaping effects on internal politics, and it may be seen also as part of a reaction to wider regional developments in which seemingly secure governments have toppled. Casualties and heightened insecurity shift attention away from political stagnation across the conflict, governance problems and social justice issues, and have a silencing effect on any kind of opposition.

- There are also specific motives that may be suggested for each side. For Azerbaijan as the status quo challenger, there are the factors of frustration, change in leadership of the Ministry of Defense, and a sense that LOC incidents and the international coverage of them may alter the balance of power in the negotiations process in Azerbaijan's favor. For the Armenian side(s) as the status quo power, there are incentives to project Armenian capacity to maintain the status quo and respond to Azerbaijani probes. This drives practices of military display in the LOC area, creating situations where the risk of incidents increases, as it did in November 2013 with the Azerbaijani shoot-down of an Armenian helicopter. All sides are locked into a dynamic of reciprocal actions which is difficult to control.
- I think the prevention of war has become the priority, and here I think there is more that could be done. Much more robust ceasefire monitoring mechanisms and a real sense of accountability for ceasefire violations are needed. The OSCE ceasefire monitoring mandate was devised in an entirely different era, more than 20 years ago, when Armenians and Azerbaijanis were ravaged and exhausted by war, and when a peace settlement was expected to be reached quickly. The situation today is completely different, with two fully-equipped armies facing off in a tense and belligerent atmosphere. The OSCE's monitoring mandate is in urgent need of updating, but it is difficult to do this without the consent of all conflict parties.

About the non-recognition of the 1915 Armenian Genocide by Great Britain

- Of course I cannot speak for the British government, its policy or its priorities. Genocide recognition has not been a prominent issue domestically in Britain in recent years, although public interest and awareness has grown considerably in the run up to the centennial. It's clear that British relationships elsewhere in the Caucasus and the wider region generate problems conflicting with a policy of recognition. But I would also ask what is the policy value to Armenia of genocide recognition? The US does not

recognize the Armenian Genocide (even if numerous individual US states have done so) but has a good relationship with Armenia and has provided considerable aid, technical support and knowhow to the country. Russia recognizes the Armenian Genocide, but has by all accounts a complicated relationship with Armenia that is a source of concern to many Armenians. Is genocide recognition the ultimate criterion by which Armenia should assess its friends and foes? What matters here is not British recognition, but Turkish recognition. The path to that goal, it seems to me, is through patient and admittedly long-term work with Turkish society. Recognition will become possible when Turkish society demands it. While international encouragement is needed, too much pressure gives Turkish policy makers the excuse that genocide recognition is yet another assault on Turkey by the great powers. Beyond this I would say that there is a tradition of British scholarship documenting the process and politics of the annihilation of the Ottoman Armenians. Professor Donald Bloxham of the University of Edinburgh is one of the world's leading scholars of genocide and has written extensively on the Armenian Genocide. Dr Joanne Laycock of Sheffield Hallam University is also a pioneer of Armenian Studies in the UK, and the Armenian Genocide is amply covered in her course. At the level of scholarship the Armenian Genocide is widely accepted in Britain as a historical fact.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Internet-press-conference-with-Laurence-Broers-eng-Interviews>



From the Internet press-conference with SABINE FREIZER, senior fellow, Atlantic Council

30.04.2015

TOPICS: Security issues in South Caucasus in the context of new integration processes.

About the impact of the situation in Ukraine and Crimea on the Karabakh process

- From the geopolitical perspective security in the wider European region has been seriously undermined during the past 18 months.
- Chances for a further deterioration of the security situation are growing as fighting in 2013-2015 is more frequent, kills more soldiers and civilians, is spread over a growing terrain (including along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border far from Nagorno-Karabakh), involves more sophisticated weaponry and linked to more bold incursions into enemy terrain. As Armenian and Azerbaijani defense sources provide contradictory casualty figures, and the OSCE monitoring group only has some 6 field observers, determining the exact number casualties in 2014 is extremely difficult. Military budgets in both countries continue to increase, as does belligerent rhetoric. Ministries of Defense of Azerbaijan and Armenia no longer have a direct communications line and Baku is resistant to security building measures such as the re-activation of a communications hotline, establishment of a prevention and monitoring mechanism (as exists in South Ossetia) or pull back of snipers until the Armenian side shows that it is serious about withdrawal of occupied territories. But the biggest problem is that trust in finding a compromise solution is at one of its weakest points since 1994. The Basic Principles being negotiated between the sides since 2004-2005 have been undermined by developments in Ukraine and Crimea.
- Yes I believe that the situation around Ukraine and especially Russia's annexation of Crimea has made the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict more difficult.
- According to the on the Basic Principles that were under discussion since 2004-2005 a settlement was supposed to be based on three fundamental elements: the non-use of force, territorial integrity and the right to self-determination. These have all been undermined to different degrees in Crimea. Most importantly for the Armenian side,

a popular vote or referendum on Nagorno-Karabakh's future status and strong international security guarantees for the retreating Armenian forces, was supposed to be part of the Basic Principles deal. Now with the violation of the Budapest Memorandum in Ukraine, and the organization of referendum in Crimea that did not follow any modalities agreed to with Kiyv, consensus on what security guarantees and referendums as a way to resolve status questions may look like is no longer so clear.

The security situation in the Eastern Partnership countries

- Most importantly trust between Russia, the US and EU has broken down. The three parties no longer seem to be interpreting international law and the OSCE Final Act in the same way. Hopefully all parties will meet their Minsk 2 commitments and peace can be restored in eastern Ukraine to begin building up a political and economic environment for life to return to normal in the region. Unfortunately these days we are seeing a resumption of heavy weapons use around Mariupol and many reports that Russia is building up its forces on the border with Ukraine so it is unclear what the immediate future will bring. While the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become more difficult in this geopolitical environment, I don't think that the US, Russia or the EU have an interest to undermine the status quo in the South Caucasus while their efforts are focused on Ukraine.
- The situation is probably most unclear in Moldova where public support for the EU and the Eurasia Economic Union is almost equal, Transnistria is increasingly isolated and the population of Gagauzia is very influenced by pro-Russian groups. While I don't want to say that there is a real likelihood for escalation of fighting in any of the post-Soviet conflict areas, clearly the geopolitical conflict between Russia and the EU/US is more acute in Moldova/Transnistria than elsewhere. As mentioned above the situation is also very precarious in and around Nagorno-Karabakh but I see this as much due to local/regional factors as to the geopolitical environment
- The US/EU should maintain a dialogue with Armenia and not discount it totally as a Russian periphery. For example it is positive that talks are ongoing between Brussels and Yerevan on the signature of a document to replace the Association Agreement that Armenia turned down in 2013 in favor of the EEC. The EU should continue to assist Armenia build stable institutions based on the rule of law and accountable to local citizens. At the same time it should make its conditions much clearer and where it sees that Armenia is "faking reforms" it should not shy away from openly critical statements. In Armenia at least, the best way to ensure some room for independent decision making from Russia is to secure strong, respected and legitimate local institutions.

The Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in New Conditions

- The preservation of the current status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict become more and more difficult every year as the sides become more and more resistant to compromise, societies less and less used to co-existence, military arsenals more developed and front lines inch closer and closer. This all makes the chance of a war by accident all the greater.
- Therefore especially if there is an improvement in Russia-US/EU relations it is possible that Moscow will allow the broadening of discussions on resolving the conflict to a wider group of experts and deepening of talks to address technical issues. As I recommend above, I see this as the best way forward in the negotiations today.
- Russia and Turkey are indeed building up their political and economic ties even while they have fundamental disagreements over foreign policy issues like the conflict in Syria. Turkey does not currently play an official role in the OSCE Minsk Group and I don't think that Russia really considers it to be an important conflict resolution actor in the South Caucasus.
- So far when Turkey has tried to contribute to normalization in the South Caucasus, like it did promoting sea access to Abkhazia, it has tended to do so without much public visibility. Take also the example of Crimea where Turkey has natural allies amongst the Tatars but Ankara has employed silent diplomacy with Moscow to express their concerns about their rights' protection. Even though Turkey has a clear interest to see movement towards the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I doubt that Russia has much interest to cooperate with Ankara to achieve any change. Only if there is a real serious resumption of fighting do I imagine that Ankara and Moscow will come together to try to avoid being pulled into a war that would put them on opposite sides.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Internet-press-conference-of-Sabine-Freizer-eng-Interviews>