



TOPICAL DIALOGUES

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ON THE ONLINE PRESS-CONFERENCES FOR THE ARMENIAN MEDIA

Within the framework of the “International Press-Center “Dialogue”: Diversification of the Sources of International News for Armenian media” project, supported by OSCE Office in Yerevan, “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 topical events and processes in international politics.

The topics of and issues brought up at the press-conferences may be directly or indirectly related to the current foreign policy 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.

ONLINE PRESS-CONFERENCES FOR ARMENIAN MEDIA



**From the internet press-conference with
KAKHA GOGOLISHVILI, Director of EU Studies
in the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and
International Studies - GFSIS (Georgia)**

19.06. 2015

TOPICS: European integration of Georgia and the Russian Factor

- Georgia has opened up large possibilities for functional integration with the EU by signing the Association Agreement. Armenia has closed its European perspective for many years, because of membership to the EEU. In the short run the difference may not be well noticeable, but in the medium run Georgia will enter into a totally new kind of relations with the EU.
- The involvement of the two countries in two different integration processes shall not constitute problems in the relations between Georgia and Armenia. The two countries may stay good partners, unless Russia becomes more aggressive towards those countries who try to join the EU. In this case Russia may try to use Armenia as a matter of pressure on Georgia. Even in such a situation the governments of the countries can avoid the confrontation and continue to cooperate.
- Russia uses its soft power against Georgia by financing some media outlets, like Sputnik and several NGOs pretending to be analytical centers. By this Russia promotes its propaganda in the country. Russia also supports certain political figures, sympathizing with Russia openly and allegedly tries to promote them. Other means of the soft power use is the distribution of Russian passports among the Georgian population.
- When the question of the reopening of the Georgia-Russia railway (passing through Abkhazia, Georgia) actualized Georgia and Russia were in the process of normalization of relations. Indeed this year Russia signed integration agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which practically closed any possibilities for the further normalization and

cooperation between two countries around joint projects, like the railway. I think that the railway will not be reopened quite a long time from now.

- Membership in the EU is a matter of long term strategy for Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova (who are closer to this aim than other three countries of EaP). This will not happen next 10 years, but all three countries most probably will join EU in the time span of two decades. Membership in the NATO depends on the geopolitical realities and the nature of security risks that can accelerate or vice versa hinder the process. It is difficult to predict how the political/security environment will change in the future, so the prospects of membership of Georgia or Ukraine in NATO remains unclear.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Internet-press-conference-with-Kakha-Gogolashvili-Eng-Interviews>



**From the internet press-conference with
ZAAL ANJAPARIDZE, Georgian independent
expert (Georgia)**

TOPICS: The foreign and domestic policies of Georgia

21.06. 2015

Relations with Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia

- There are no explicit manifestations of Russophobia in Georgia, except for individual cases. According to a recent poll the number of those who think that Russia poses a real threat to Georgia has increased, as compared with the rates of a poll from last year. This is probably due both to the events in Ukraine, and increased Russian military presence in the occupied regions of Georgia - Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. 80% of respondents believe that Russia does have some impact on Georgia, but this impact is negative. However, one cannot deny the fact that part of the Georgian society has pro-Russian sentiments. Let me repeat that, if we believe the polls, the number of the supporters of Georgia joining the Eurasian Union has increased since last year from 20% to 31%. Approximately the same number of respondents - 35% - believe that Georgia will benefit more from the normalization of relations with Russia and the refusal from NATO. It is on this social base that Georgia has pro-Russian political forces and social groups. However, here it should be emphasized that they can be called pro-Russian only conditionally, as none of them are ready to sacrifice the sovereignty of Georgia, or to cross the so-called "Red line" for the normalization of relations with Russia. In contrast to the pro-Western parties, they urge to build relations with Russia on the basis of "real-politics", considering the rapidly changing international environment.
- The crisis-related processes in Ukraine naturally impacted on Georgia both economically and politically. For example, because of the crisis and hostilities Georgian exports to this country have significantly been reduced. The appointments of the former ruling party of Georgia, including wanted individuals, to senior positions in the Ukrainian government have caused chiller bilateral relations. Some circles in Georgia believe that the newly appointed head of the Odessa Region, Mikhail Saakashvili and

his United National Movement party are trying to use the "Ukrainian trump card" to return to power. With regard to the foreign policy aspects, the events in Ukraine are projected on the whole of the post-Soviet space to a certain extent, since they are seen as manifestation of the geopolitical confrontation between the West and Russia for influence in this space. Georgia has found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, as a strategic ally of the United States and an entity striving for the Euro-Atlantic structures, it follows the Ukraine-related political mainstream designed by the West. On the other hand, the Georgian leadership is trying not to irritate Moscow's much as possible, and therefore avoids an overly harsh assessment of the Russian actions in Ukraine, often to the detriment of its image in the West. The Georgian leadership has tried to encourage the West to consider the territorial problems of Ukraine and Georgia in one package of negotiations with Russia. But it doesn't seem to have reached any significant progress. In terms of the impact of Ukrainian processes on Georgia in the foreseeable future, I think a lot will depend on the agreements among the United States, the EU and Russia. Whether Russia will manage to get out of the Ukrainian crisis saving its face and with satisfied strategic interests, or it will be defeated, will largely determine its behavior towards Georgia.

- Turkey and Azerbaijan, which are also geographically the neighbors of Georgia, are its important, if not strategic partners in economy. Suffice it to mention, such international projects as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Shah Deniz oil-pipes, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project. Georgia receives a greater share of energy from Azerbaijan. It is connected with Turkey by the Kars Treaty. We could mention other areas of cooperation, too, which promote the growth of the influence of these countries. But I think that the extent of this influence is not as high as it is often described in the Armenian media. Tbilisi assesses the situation quite pragmatically, and I do not think that, given the increase of cooperation with Baku and Ankara, the current level of our country's relations with Armenia will drop. They will remain stable, and I assume that it is in the interests of both countries due to the well-known circumstances.
- Armenia is, perhaps, the only strategic partner to Russia in the region, a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, while Georgia is a strategic partner to the United States, and this was established by the Charter on Strategic Partnership. Georgia aspires to Euro-Atlantic structures, while Armenia is joining the Eurasian Union. Based on the foregoing, it is difficult to predict how probable it is for Armenia to become a strategic partner of Georgia in the classical sense of the term in the foreseeable future. However, the mutually beneficial cooperation on strategic issues is quite possible and in fact, it is happening at the moment.

European Prospects for Georgia

- I think the main thing is to build realistic expectations and to look at the European prospects, not only from our own bell towers, but from the perspective of the EU. As it has been repeatedly pointed out by the senior representatives of the EU prior to, during and after the Riga Summit, the issue of promoting the European integration of the Eastern Partnership member states is highly dependent on the "political dimension". I'd like to add that when finding solutions the so-called "Real politics" is the determining factor. It largely influenced the content and the pathos of the final declaration of the Riga summit, which dominantly contained cautious and streamline wording about the European prospect, even for the most advanced countries of the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia). Due to the well-known reasons, Armenia is not very active regarding its integration with the EU and within the Eastern Partnership. However, despite that the EU's doors are not closed before it in the case of a reorientation of foreign policy priorities, the existing asymmetry in the European prospects can be quickly overcome.
- Yes, NATO has not fixed the time for the official start to the process of Georgia's integration into the alliance. An indicator of the start should be the provision of the Georgia Membership Action Plan (MAP). However, the international environment is not yet conducive to this. Russia's tough stance on the issue, the protracted crisis in Ukraine, the two unresolved ethnic and regional conflicts in the territory of Georgia, the economic situation in the country, lack of standards and quality of institutional and policy reforms, internal contradictions within NATO regarding the timing of the next phase of expansion and the inclusion of post-Soviet countries: all of these make up the non-exhaustive list of reasons that hinder Georgia's integration into NATO. However, the provision in the final declaration of the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 is still valid that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the Alliance.

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



**From the interne press-conference with
DIMITRIOS TRIANTAPHYLLOU, Director of the
Center for International and European Studies
(CIES) at Kadir Has University (Turkey)**

04.07. 2015

TOPICS: Internal situation in Turkey after parliamentary elections; The events in the Near and Middle East as impacting on the security of Turkey

The Turkish society

- Turkey is a conservative society that is getting to be more conservative. The demand for greater rights and freedoms is one from a dynamic small minority. It could impact on the quality of Turkey's conservative and religious bend but it cannot do much should the dominant political forces manage to mainstream their message further and should the economy continue on its path of growth.
- Turkey is not a perfect democracy, it is rather a polarized one.

The internal political developments after parliamentary elections

- It is still too early to say whether Gulen's influence will increase but it is probable. Gulen does not necessarily represent US interests; rather his vision is that of a strong conservative Turkey. As political parties seek to augment their power, Turkish political dynamics have shown how easy it is for political parties to form alliances with each other, with the military, and even with the Gulen movement....so yes, I do not discount a comeback by Gulen. As for NATO, Turkey has no choice but ot stay within NATO given the fluidity of the conflicts along its borders.
- It is too early to tell as Demirtas' rise fundamentally challenges the authority of other Kurdish leaders that seek a role in the process of reconciliation between Turkey and the Kurds. We still have a lot to see as to whether the Kurds will have a common leadership and vision regarding their future.
- Erdogan is still the smartest political operative in Turkey. He knows where to push and where to pull back. He knows with whom to work and with whom not to work and when. It would not surprise me if the AKP under Erdogan's control finds a modus vivendi with the Gulen movement. I am not sure that society seems the AKP

as a loser...it still won the vote with over 40% of the vote...and could still come back in the next polls.

Russian-Turkish relations

- Irrespective of the political situation in Turkey, the Turkish Stream project will either go ahead or not depending on its viability and whether it is in the national interest of both Turkey and Russia. Most political forces support the notion that Turkey by a regional energy hub and it is within this context that the Turkish Stream project should be considered.
- There is no rapprochement between Russia and Turkey...there is simply a correlation of strategic interests. Remember that Turkey is a NATO member country therefore it is across the strategic divide from Russia, not a friend. I do not think Russian-Turkish rapprochement has any impact on Russian-Armenian relations.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Internet-press-conference-with-the-Director-of-the-Center-for-International-and-European-Studies-%28CIES%29-at-Kadir-Has-University-Dimitrios-Triantaphyllou-%28Turkey%29-eng-Interviews>



**From the Internet press-conference with
VARVARA PAKHOMENKO, Analyst of the
Program on Europe and Central Asia by the
International Crisis Group**

06.07.2015

**TOPICS: Russian-Turkish and Russian-Georgian cooperation; North
Caucasus and radical Islam; Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

On the Vectors of the Russian-Turkish Cooperation

- Russia and Turkey have obvious areas for cooperation. In particular, these are the issues of ensuring security in connection with the conflict in Syria and Iraq. To date, the number of Russian citizens in the forces of the "Islamic State" (ISIS) and other organizations that fight against the governments of these countries, estimated by the representatives of the Russian law enforcement agencies, ranges from 2 to 5 thousand. Most of these people are from North Caucasus, especially from its eastern regions - Dagestan, Chechnya. As far as we know, most of them get to Syria via Turkey.
- The economic sanctions applied against Russia over the conflict in Ukraine, and the counter-sanctions on the agricultural products, have set the need for Russia's diversification of the supply of its produce, and Turkey could be one of such suppliers if the volumes are increased. This raises the question of solving the problem of transportation through the South Caucasus. In particular, we cannot exclude the launch of negotiations on the resumption of traffic on the Transcaucasian highway - the shortest route from Central Russia to Turkey and Iran. This road would be more reliable than the Georgian Military route, in order to connect Russia with Armenia, too.
- At the same time, I believe, that the partnership with Armenia is important to Moscow, in particular, in terms of the presence of Russian military bases in a situation when the threat from the Middle East is perceived to be more and more serious.

ISIS as a threat posed to Russia in North Caucasus

- If initially those who supported ISIS, left for Syria and Iraq - the number of those Russian citizens who are fighting on the side of both ISIS and other groups against the official Damascus and Baghdad, are estimated by the Russian security forces as ranging from 1,700 to 5,000 people and most of them are from North Caucasus (mainly Dagestan and Chechnya, but also from Kabardino-Balkaria and other republics), now they have found it possible to fight on behalf of the ISIS already in the Caucasus. Since November, when the first of the leaders of militias from Dagestan swore to al-Baghdadi, an oath was made by the amir (leader) of the underground of all Dagestan Rustam Asilderov, in June 2015 an oath was made by the well-known leader of the Chechen underground Amir Khamzat (Arslan Byutukaev), and on June 21 there was an audio message of the oath of all the militants in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Two days later, the press service of ISIS declared its acceptance of the oath and the formation of a new Wilayat (province) of ISIS in North Caucasus, and appointed Amir Rustam Asilderova to be its governor. This is a new page in the history of the underground in North Caucasus. Having started as a national liberation movement in Chechnya in the early 1990s, it has gradually assimilated the idea of armed jihad. In 2007, with the proclamation of the "Caucasus Emirate" a supra-regional structure with jihadist ideology was created, and now we can see how it has evolved and become a part of the global jihad.
- Even though the idea of national self-determination is still popular in the Chechen Republic, the growing support for the ideas of radical Islamism is also becoming obvious. On the one hand, there is the imposition of the ideas of Sufi Islam at the state level, on the other - an extremely tough persecution of the so-called "non-traditional" Islam, especially Salafis. Ramzan Kadyrov has openly stated that it was necessary to kill the Wahhabis (the so-called Salafis in the country). Regularly mass arrests are organized to detain young men with beards and women wearing the hijab, covering the chin. Guys are taken to police stations, often beaten or forced to shave their beards, after they get beaten by their relatives. All this makes young people terribly angry, sets them against the state and often makes them even more radical in their beliefs. We know of cases when, faced with unlawful, often degrading actions, young people join the underground, and some even leave for Syria.

What issues does the integration with Russia solve for Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

- First of all, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia this is perceived as a guarantee of security. If South Ossetia has stronger fears of a repeat of the war with Georgia – the trauma of 2008 is still there, and even though the risk of a conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia is not excluded, they rather believe that they can become an arena for clashes between Russia and the West since Georgia is perceived as a partner of Western countries in the region. Ordinary people also have a big need to improve the quality of life, social security, wages, and pensions. And they believe that they cannot achieve all that on their own, without Russian assistance. At the same time, and in both republics treaties are criticized as infringing on their sovereignty. Limited control over security forces is a particularly sensitive issue.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/interview>