



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.

ONLINE PRESS-CONFERENCES FOR ARMENIAN MEDIA



From the internet press-conference with International columnist of the Russian service of the RFE/RL JAROSLAV SHIMOV.

15.07.2015

TOPICS: Integration projects of Russia and the EU; The internal problems of the EU.

About the integration projects of Russia and the EU for the post -Soviet countries

- I'm not an economist, so the economic details of the project are difficult for me to address. Naturally, there is a variety of relations among the participants of the EEU: the main thing is to ensure that politics does not dominate over the economy. And I think that for now this has been the case at least for the Russian leadership. The EEU is regarded as primarily a geopolitical rival to the EU, although from the technological and socio-economic point of view the backlog of the post-Soviet countries from the European Union is obvious. I think the main problem of the EEU is the lack of clear priorities: to integrate for what, at what price and with what forces?
- I think that the "Eastern Partnership" project has lacked the so-called "drive" in the recent years. At the same time, this initiative may be beneficial to the participating post-Soviet countries – at the moment and above all in regard to the approximation of their legislation with the European standards: in this regard, the EU is able to provide solid support. But I would not consider the "EP" as a kind of "a waiting room to the EU", from which there is a direct path to EU membership. The project does not have such tasks to solve. At least for now.

- I would not hurry to talk about the "open door" as of yet. The EU assures all the "Eastern Partnership" members of the opportunities and prospects of cooperation with them, but, based on my own experience of dialogues with European officials of different levels, as well as judging by their statements in the media, it is difficult to expect that in the coming years, the European Union will be interested in enlarging the number its members. In the end, the EU now has, so to speak, two heavy weights on its feet: one is called Greece, the other is Ukraine. As long as these situations are not resolved in one way or another, I think that the rest of the post-Soviet countries can count on cooperation in the legal field (expertise, help in the upgrading legal practices to align with European standards, etc.), in the field of education (for example, Belarus has recently reached by agreement with the EU to join the so-called Bologna process), partly in the sphere of economy. You are right, those countries who are already members of the Eurasian Economic Union, will have to face the problem of combining these two integration schemes. I think that without a total normalization of relations between Russia as the leading country of the EEU, on the one hand, and the European Union, on the other, it will be difficult to achieve a major breakthrough in this area.
- I would like to clarify: the Greek referendum of July 5 did not concern the issue of whether or not the country should remain within the EU. No one has put the question like that at all yet. The idea was whether or not the majority of Greek citizens agreed to the continuation of the financial policy led in the country within which their country has fallen into an acute debt crisis, and is to receive financial assistance from the EU and IM Funder strict conditions. I do not quite understand why the referendum was held now, because although 61% of Greeks voted against further cooperation with creditors, after a couple of days, Prime Minister Tsipras went to Brussels and did conclude an agreement that allows Greece to remain in the Euro zone (not the EU, as these are two different things! There are 19 countries in the Euro zone, while there are 28 in the EU), to obtain new loans, but in exchange for a pledge of many businesses and severe financial cuts. In my view, the Greek referendum would make sense only if the will of the electorate was carried out - although this would lead to the withdrawal of Greece from the Eurozone and the acute crisis in the country. As for Britain, here they will address (if you do go for the referendum, the final decision on holding a referendum is still pending) the issue of whether the country should remain within the EU. The fact that in the past Britain excused itself with some exceptions related to its payments to the European budget and some political issues. London now wants to expand the number of these exceptions and actually make British law a priority in relation to the European one, which is contrary to the EU rules. From an economic point of view, I understand the arguments against leaving the EU more than the pros. Yet so far, according to polls,

the number of supporters and opponents of the withdrawal is roughly equal. It is another matter that in case the United Kingdom withdraws the UK may crack: pro-European sentiments unambiguously dominate in Scotland, and if Britain decides to leave the EU, Scotland, in its turn, may repeat the referendum on secession from Britain - this time with a different result from the one held last year.

- The current Ukrainian crisis is a big and sad proof that the post-Soviet integration has failed. The EU and the US, of course, had their own rather significant errors in regard to the policy led towards the post-Soviet countries, but it is a separate issue. If we talk about Russia, I do not think it can afford a long-term and full-scale confrontation with the Western world: that is the most unbeneficial development for Russia in the first place.
- The current confrontation between Western countries and Russia can be considered, I think, a great misfortune, because it distracts the forces of the parties from the common global threats and deal with them. Nevertheless, the consequences of this confrontation may be more stringent for Russia than for the European Union or the United States, because of the relative weakness of the Russian Federation in comparison with the West. However, I hope that the current situation - a temporary phenomenon, the fact that last year the Kremlin still did not force the situation in Ukraine and, in particular, withdrew from the project "New Russia", said that Moscow still understand the futility of a full-scale confrontation and any semblance of "Cold War".
- It seemed to me very likely last spring, but, fortunately, the worst case scenario has been averted. At this point, I believe, Russia has neither the capacity, primarily economic capacity, to deploy a large-scale aggression against Ukraine, nor, apparently, political will and desire to do it. The situation is at an impasse from the Ukrainian side, too: Ukraine is obviously incapable of restoring its sovereignty over Donbas and the Crimea by military means, the reforms in Ukraine itself are obviously stalled, and the economy is not able to function without major financial injections from the EU. I believe that the conflict in the east of Ukraine will at some point get into the smoldering stage, with sporadic exacerbations. And it will continue as long as there is no developed model for the existence of Donbass within a unified Ukraine acceptable to all interested parties, as well as some solution to the Crimea that will allow both Moscow and Kiev to "save face" (perhaps a new referendum under international control). But it's clearly not going to happen soon.
- Judging by the polls, the majority of the residents in the Baltic States welcomed the strengthening of NATO's military presence in its territory. But, the situation is the

opposite, say, among the Russian-speaking minority in these countries. Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine the alarmist moods towards Russia have significantly increased in Europe, and the Baltic countries are considered to be one of the possible objects of probable aggression from the east. At the same time there is a point of view that seems more realistic to me: that is, Moscow will not go for confrontation with those countries that are already members of NATO and are protected by Article 5 of the Charter of this organization (the Collective Security), but it will by all means try to prevent the rapprochement of its neighbors, not yet NATO members, with the organization – i.e. Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and so on.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Online-press-conference-with-historian-journalist-International-columnist-of-the-Russian-service-of-the-RFE/RL-Jaroslav-Simov-eng-Interviews>



From the Internet press conference with the Associate Professor at the Russian State University for Humanities (RSUH) ALEXANDER GUSHIN (Russia)

22.07. 2015

TOPICS: Integration processes and security issues in the post-Soviet space; Prospects of the SCO and BRICS as projects; the Ukrainian crisis.

On integration projects

- The EEU certainly has a number of promising components, but the fact is that its members also have risky aspects: those involve both the achievement of an increase in the trade between the two countries due to the growth of imports and falling exports: the main export of Kazakhstan is beyond the EEU. This will bring about an increase in the migration flows, from Kyrgyzstan, for example. A serious issue Armenia may face will be the prices in the domestic market and the problem of transit through Georgia. Moreover, in most EEU countries, there is a relatively high level of corruption and a high level of non-economic component constituents which is an absolute brake for integration and raises the issue of modernizing the national economies.
- One of the negative factors was that the project (the Eastern Partnership - Ed.) was treated with the application of the same patterns, not quite realizing, on the one hand, the differences among the participant countries of the Eastern Partnership, and on the other, the resistance from Russia (which was clearly demonstrated by the example of the Ukrainian crisis) ... But talk about a complete failure is impossible. During this time, important steps have been taken in the ideological, if I may say so, area due to financed internships, grants, development projects for individual institutions of culture and science, which is very important in the context of soft power, a direction in which the West may end up with a great head start, as compared with Russia.

- The CIS has long died as a full-fledged integration association, there are many other more important and topical projects, economic, military, political, even global ones within its territory, such as the SCO.
- The future is rather vague. Of course, the effective development of the EEU will require lifting the sanctions and removing the political tensions between Russia and the EU in the first place, as well as work to make the EEU an important element of transit between Europe and Asia, which needs serious infrastructure. Otherwise, if we are speaking about a project from Murmansk to Shanghai, the fate of the EEU is to be an attachment of China, not a real bridge between Europe and Asia. In the case of normalizing relations with the West, Russia will be able to implement the concept of balancing between the West and Beijing in the context of the EEU, securing the greatest benefits from the transcontinental trade, including the use of the Northern Sea Route. In this case, the ideas that have been expressed by known political scientists and experts Krastev and Leonard about pairing the EEU and the EU can be implemented. But in many respects, it is a phantom, both because of the differences between the political and economic systems, decision-making mechanisms, and because of the tense relations between Russia and the West.

The Ukrainian Crisis and Its Prospects

- I think that Ukraine should not yet think about a visa-free regime with the EU. It is not going to happen. And the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga clearly showed that the introduction of the visa-free regime is not considered by Europeans, they will slow down this process in every possible way, at the same time providing some single bonuses in order to make the appearance of compliance with previous decisions on the movement of Ukraine towards Europe. I do not exclude the possibility that in the long run such a regime could be introduced, but it is not a matter of the upcoming one to two years. To do this, a settlement in the south-east of Ukraine and reforms all over Ukraine, a more stable situation in the country will be required. The decision of expert committees to assess the possibility of introducing a visa-free regime to be engaged in Ukraine will be an important indicator.

Integration platform and conflicts

- I do not think that today there is an alternative to the Minsk Group. The West, especially the United States are unlikely to let go of the region and leave the solution of the problems, including the Karabakh conflict, to the discretion of the SCO and Russia; it seems to me, it would not be very profitable. Baku would certainly like it, but it seems to me that at this stage it is an element of bargain in the relations between Azerbaijan and the West. The US is unlikely to let Baku be more deeply involved in the SCO, and the organization itself, in the case of the integration of Armenia and Azerbaijan will look even more wobbly now. In my opinion, there is no alternative to the group for the settlement as of today, and such associations as SCO are unlikely to be able to offer radically new plans to address the issue and satisfy the parties.
- I think that in the condition of sanctions Russia will find it difficult to invest in such projects that are even more conditioned by political considerations about Georgia as a transit country. However, Iran's position is also very important. Given the possible warming with the United States, it is possible that Iran will be more active in this direction. However, since the likelihood of this warming is again in the long term, Moscow will resist excessive political activity of Yerevan towards Iran, which could give it greater freedom of action. For Russia it is important to preserve Armenia within its influence. However, at this stage of the project there is hardly anyone apart from Armenia who needs the implementation of the project in economic terms, and it is unrealistic. Although Russia does not hide this project far, and leaves as a possible tool for the future, knowing its political importance.

Is the normalization of relations between Iran and the West profitable to Russia?

- It is not from the economic point of view, no matter how much they speak of the costs, and how much they say that the waiting period has leveled the risk of falling prices. They will fall and most likely it will not allow Russia to increase production, to be actively engaged in the exploration. Thus, this agreement is under sanctions; of

course, this is quite a serious blow to the industry's revenues and the country as a whole.

The prices will not fall immediately, it is unprofitable for Iran, too, but in the long term the Iranian factor will help to keep the oil prices low.

With regard to the political scenarios, in the short term, it is rather a plus in the Syrian context, but it is too early to talk about any strategic advantages at the moment. Much will depend on the situation in the Middle East as a whole, because Iran has serious opponents in the persons of the Saudis and Israel.

There is no need to speak about the warming of relations between Tehran and Washington either. The deal as a whole is profitable for Russia, maybe not to the same extent as for the US, who has had two major successes with Iran and Cuba. Nevertheless, the interests of the US and those of Russia generally match on this issue.

The whole script is available at:<http://regioncenter.info/Internet-press-conference-with-the-Docent-in-the-Russian-State-University-for-the-Humanities-Aleksandr-Gushchin-rus-Interviews>