



TOPICAL DIALOGUES

A "Region" Research Center Project

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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 Online press conference with German political scientist ALEXANDER RAHR for the Armenian media

25.07. 2015

Topics: Security issues in post-Soviet countries; integration processes in the Eurasian space - EEU, SCO, BRICS.

On the potential consequences of lifting the sanctions administered against Iran

- Lifting sanctions against Iran, neutralizes US arguments in favor of missile defense. Now the Americans have to state that missile defense is necessary against Russia. I do not think that all Europeans will like it. This is a very interesting question.
- Iran will seek ways out of the current isolation. The road to Europe through the South Caucasus will be long. And without (or in competition with) Russia Iran will face difficulties in operating on energy issues. There is a variant of rapidly turning to the Asian markets. So Tehran will get there through Central Asia.

On the integration aspirations of the countries in the region

- The President of Azerbaijan is right. The EU desperately needs Azerbaijani gas as an alternative to the Russian one. Azerbaijan and Armenia are member countries of the EU Eastern Partnership policy; they have the same goal, to get closer to Europe. Europe adopted the two countries not only in the partnership strategy, but made them members of the Council of Europe. The only question is how to move forward? Here the conflict of values, territorial problems, and other inconsistencies also hinder. In my opinion, the process of rapprochement of the South Caucasus and the EU will long be an issue of discussions. Here the Turkish

factor plays a significant role. Will Turkey under Erdogan and after him continue to seek membership with the EU?

- Azerbaijan may become a member of EEU if its ties with EU is completely interrupted. Azerbaijan may become interested in the new Eurasian energy market, created by Russia and China, which integrates the whole of Central Asia, and perhaps India and Pakistan, too. Turkey is a probable candidate for the status of observer in the SCO. This will happen after Russia and Turkey have agreed on energy issues. Iran has chances to become a full member of the SCO.
- Frankly speaking, we must admit that the CSTO is Russia. Does CSTO have a future? Yes, since the Central Asian countries need such a structure. How else can they ensure their security? NATO will not reach the post-Soviet space, now it will be prevented by Russia (and China).

On the conflict between Russia and the West

- The West and Russia may move separately but then the issues of the Middle East will be more difficult to solve. In Europe the West tried to solve the security issues after the collapse of communism without Russia. Its evidence is the construction of Europe upon the pillars of NATO and the EU without Russia. In the world trade, in one of the most important peace building platforms, Russia acts as an energy superpower. Can you do without Russia? Opinions differ. Today the conflict of values is the main confrontation between the West and Russia. This conflict cannot be solved; the contradiction is ancient and traditional. Just like Rome and Byzantium. Different perceptions of laws of civilization, rights and democracy. At least there should be a yearning for conducting a respectful dialogue with each other.
- Yes, I think that all the conflicting sides with the exception of radicals in the private armed units of Ukraine and militia now have come to an agreement that it is necessary to settle the conflict, or at least to freeze it like in Transnistria. What should be done? Ukraine must recognize the autonomy of Donbass (a special status resembling the treaties once signed by Boris Yeltsin with the Russian regions), thus preventing the collapse of Russia. Russia must stop sending military aid to the self-defense forces and agree on an OSCE monitoring of the entire Russian-Ukrainian border.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/node/1232>



**From the internet press-conference with
Senior Associate at Carnegie Foundation
PAUL STRONSKI (USA)**

13.08. 2015

Topics: The process of lifting the sanctions administered against Iran; the integration processed and the security issues of post-Soviet countries

On the potential consequences of lifting the sanctions administered against Iran

- I think Iran nuclear agreement, if it moves forward and is fully implemented, potentially could be a game changer for the region. It could open up the full potential of trade and transportation links. The Armenian-Iranian border is open, but it is not really a reliable outlet to the outside world for Armenia due to the sanctions regime. But, an open border with an Iran that is integrated into the global economic and trade systems would add to Armenia's economic and political security in the long-term, connecting Armenia more easily to the economically dynamic Gulf and Europe. However, this will not be a quick process.
- All that said, we are still in the early stages of the agreement. Its ultimate fate in the US is still not clear as there is vocal opposition in my country to the agreement in Congress, including an influential Senator from President Obama's own party. Furthermore, the agreement's ability to promote economic integration and growth depends largely on implementation. If Iran is not fully compliant, any rollback of sanctions would be only temporary.
- As far as Russia's interests, I think Moscow is less concerned about the agreement's implications for Armenia and the Caucasus than on Russia's own economic interests in the Iran. If Iran truly opens up to the outside world, Russian companies in Iran will suddenly have to compete with more dynamic and technically advanced European companies, and I am not sure Russian companies can. I think this is why Russia agreed to move forward with the S-300 transfer to Iran a few months ago, as a way to shore up its image in Iran and show that it can be a reliable arms supplier.

On the global perceptions of Russia

- Russia is trying to increase its use of soft-power, but I am not sure it is as successful as many people in my country believe. Russian language skills have atrophied in many parts of the former Soviet Union, particularly in Central Asia. This slightly erodes Russia's ability to use "soft power" in the traditional sense (media, education, etc).

Globally, Russia also spends millions on its propaganda machine, but a recent PEW poll that global attitudes to Russia are tremendously negative with Russia only having favorability ratings above 50% in Vietnam, Ghana, and China. Russia's favorability is much worse than the US' in every region of the world. I think that Russian aggression in Ukraine explains some of that.

On Russia's role in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict

- Russia is trying to play both sides of the Karabakh conflict. It is Armenia's main security provider, but it also is the largest arms supplier to Azerbaijan. There are reasons why Russia might not want to see any change in the status quo, but I am not sure we can attribute the recent escalation of violence on the line of contact to Russia. This is ultimately a conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and these two states, along with Karabakh, are ultimately responsible what takes place along the line of contact.

On the prospects of interrelations of the US and the EU with Armenia

- Armenia is an ally of Russia, but the U.S. continues its efforts to engage Armenia on security and economic issues. Our two countries recently signed a Trade and Investment Treaty (TIFA) and Contour Global Hydro Cascade just became the largest U.S. investor in Armenia. This is positive – it occurred after Armenia's accession to the EEU, and shows the U.S. continues to want to have a pragmatic and productive relationship with Armenia.
- I also believe that the European Union wants the same thing. In its policies towards Armenia in the aftermath of Armenia's decision to join the EEU and the war in Ukraine. It is now trying to find an alternative to the formal association agreement, which I believe is an admission that its initial policies adjusted of two years ago was not realistic.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/node/1229>



**From the Internet conference with the political scientist and expert on Central Asia countries
ARKADY DUBNOV (Russia) for the Armenian media**

27.08.2015

Topics: Integration processes and security issues of the countries in Central Asia; devaluation of the national currencies of EEU countries and the prospects of the EEU; Central Asia and the ISIS.

On the devaluation of national currencies in the EEU and safety airbags

- Yes, it's a ringing bell, but it is not very alarming for Armenia, it is not a raw material exporting country, in contrast to Russia and Kazakhstan, for whom the cheaper national currency is beneficial to maintain the competitiveness of exports. However, some devaluation will likely have to be arranged also for those CIS countries which do not export raw materials and in countries that do not even affiliate with the EEU, but who have a relatively substantial levels of trade with Russia, for example, Tajikistan.
- No, the introduction of a common currency in the EEU is not on the agenda of its activities. This was spoken about also by high-ranking officials of the Eurasian Commission, Russia and Kazakhstan before the onset of the active phase of the economic crisis. Even more so now, and all the talk about the introduction of a reserve currency in the coming years is a projection to satisfy the ambitions of some leaders.
- The Union member states are in this way or other part of the global economy and cannot be completely insulated from the disasters that shake it. To avoid this, they will all have to come back to the Soviet Union with its planned economy, the dollar invariably equal to 62 kopecks and the rare instances of happiness when they manage to get a couple of rolls of toilet paper. Remember what happened to the Soviet Union, when in the 1980s the oil prices began to fall. No, it will take autarky, total isolation from the world. It would be more reliable to build a system like the one in North Korea, in that case there will be dependence on China only.
- There is no such thing as absolute vulnerability. Every country has its own "safety cushion". Kazakhstan has its own natural resources, a National Fund established

for dire years, Kyrgyzstan has not fully lost the preferences in trade with China which it received as a result of joining the EEU; Armenia, in the end, has the huge diaspora, who never abandoned in the times of trouble, and a long-term experience of life in the conditions of economic blockade.

- Why does Azerbaijan need the EEU? Baku feels good, being quite independent from Moscow with strong trumps in its hands – oil, access to the sea, a beneficial strategic location ... I would even add the following: Moscow seeks Baku's disposition no less than Baku is interested in Moscow.

On the influence of ISIS in Central Asia

- It (the influence - ed.) is increasing, and primarily, it is propaganda, it is of ideological character. The more the authorities oppress the promises to establish justice in the Islamic caliphate in the "province of Khorasan," in which the strategists of ISIS include the entire region of Central Asia and Afghanistan, the more popular among the population of the region they become. Tajikistan is a vivid example, where the regime pursues Rakhmon and seeks to ban the activities of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), whose members are usually supporters of the traditional Islam; this leads to the radicalization of mainly young Muslims. The appeal of the ISIS in such an atmosphere cannot help to grow.

On the effect of the agreement on Iran's nuclear program in the region

- I think that significant shifts in the balance of power in the region are lying ahead; these will be handy for Armenia if Armenians do not get very hot-headed, pulling the arms of the partners. I cannot vouch for Moscow's position, it will first take its clearly articulated interests in the region, whether they will primarily be determined by the desire to start from scratch with Washington here again (the worse it is for them, the better it is for us) or whether the interests of the allies will be taken into account.

On the ideas of pan-Turkism in Central Asia

- The ideas of Pan-Turkism ideas are perceived with greater or lesser success in all Central Asian countries, except Tajikistan, a Persian-speaking country, a circumstance that brings it closer to Iran and partly to Afghanistan. However, I think you should not exaggerate the importance of the pan-Turkic ideology in the region, it is used by the authorities or by specific groups when there is a need to show some opposition to the imposed orientation towards Euro-Atlantic values

and proximity to the so-called "Russian world", and sometimes also to show loyalty to Turkey hoping to get some financial or other kind of assistance from it. In the recent years, such demarches have been used by the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For example, it is estimated that the business interests of the Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev have long been concentrated in Turkey.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/node/1233>



From the Internet press conference with the researcher at Gaydar Institute and the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Service KONSTANTIN KAZYONIN (Russia) for the Armenian media

29.08.2015

Topic: North Caucasus in the Russian security system

On North Caucasus against the background of Moscow's foreign policy trends

- Since the beginning of the Ukrainian events, North Caucasus has ceased to be the subject of the primary attention of the media, permanent and largely meaningless debates on TV, and alarmist statements of various public figures. Not that it has completely stopped, but it has become less, and in any case this is a good trend, although, of course, less noise around the problems does not mean that these problems are solved.
- With regard to the situation with the outside influence in North Caucasus, I have spent many years, conducting field research in the North Caucasus republics and I think the attention to this connection is disproportionately large. In general, this is, unfortunately, a typical thing in the post-Soviet space: to discuss any country or territory across the globe, within the framework of global political processes, freeing oneself from the need for professionally studying what is happening "out there, domestically." Such discussions often remind me personally of "pique vests."
- "Non-traditional" Islam, as this term is commonly understood as Islamic groups that are not loyal to the regional Muslim spiritual dominion - has a significant

impact on the lives of several Muslim regions in Russia, especially in Dagestan, although its active followers constitute a small percentage of the population. The supporters of the terroristic ISIS, of course, do not form a majority, even among non-traditional Muslims, however, many indirect signs show that ISIS is struggling for influence among these groups, too. At least for this reason it is impossible not to consider ISIS a real threat.

Chechnya is a special region

- With regard to Chechnya, it is very different not only from the central regions of Russia, but also from the neighboring republics in North Caucasus. The main difference consists in one circumstance: Chechnya fought for almost 15 years. The other republics in North Caucasus, thank God, did not have, such experience. So, what was the result? First of all, the issue of “whatever it is, as long as there is no war” is today the main demand of a significant part of the Chechen population. And it is ready to accept any regional power, any "rules of the game" at the local level if only they guarantee peace.

The situation in Chechnya will inevitably begin to change, but only when they start to grow and the demands of the Chechen society become more complex. By the way, this does not necessarily take a change of generations.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/node/1235>