



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 the
Director of the Center for European transformation
ANDREI YAHORAU (Belarus)
for the Armenian media

19.10. 2015

Topics: Presidential elections in Belarus (October 11), the relationship between Belarus and the European Union, Russia and Belarus

Presidential elections in Belarus

- According to estimates of the OSCE Mission, these elections differ due to a freer atmosphere during the election campaign, in particular due to the more liberal conditions for candidate registration and campaigning. Unlike the previous elections, the authorities have refrained from the use of brutal forms of violence and repression against the alternative candidates and protesters. At the same time, the elections were not recognized as either free or democratic.
- No, there were no chances for the alternative candidates to win, and it was clear even a year and a half before the start of the electoral campaign. The democratic opposition has not been able to consolidate before the elections and present itself with a unified strategy of action that has actually deprived it the ability to not only win, but even to play a meaningful part in these elections. .. If the point of the participation of the pro-governmental candidates is clear, i.e. to act as an alternative to Lukashenko, there was little point in the participation of the democratic opposition. None of them could not attract enough attention, even that of the democratically oriented electorate. .. That is to say, all the alternative candidates either played for Lukashenko (consciously or not), or pursued their own interests as well as the private interests of their own structures.

On the Geopolitical Maneuvering by Belarus

- There are several reasons: 1) the geopolitical context has changed. The relative neutrality of Belarus during the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is positively perceived by the EU. The EU does not want a complete withdrawal of Belarus from under the Russian protectorate and wants to keep Belarus within the scope of its own relative influence. 2) For two years, the EU has done diplomatic work to resume relations with Belarus, in which the basic conditions were the release of the political prisoners and the liberalization of the electoral process. These conditions have been met to a greater or lesser extent: the political prisoners have been set free, the elections were held without the use of brutal violence. I.e. In general, the EU got what it wanted. However, the situation in Belarus has remained principally unchanged, but that is already another matter.
- The demarches by Minsk in relation with Moscow are a traditional and inevitable development in the logic of the history of their relationship. The official Minsk sells peculiar shares of "geopolitical loyalty", exchanging them for Russian economic preferences. But the resources of these shares are not infinite, so from time to time it is required to recover the amount of the country's symbolic independence of Belarus and to behave contrary to the interests of Moscow. The same thing happens in the issue of military bases, when Lukashenko acts contrary to the logic of integration and tries to trade for at least more resources. It is difficult to say how long this game may continue, but it is obvious that with the escalation of Russia's conflict with the West, Russia may attempt to complete or partially eliminate the independence of Belarus.

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



**From the Internet press conference with the analyst at
the Polish Institute of International Affairs
KONRAD ZASZTOWT (Poland)
for the Armenian media**

26.10. 2015

Topics: Iran, Turkey's policy towards Armenia after the November elections, the Karabakh conflict, the integration processes in the South Caucasus

- I don't expect any significant changes in Ankara's policies towards the South Caucasus after the elections. However, if the coalition with nationalist Milli Hareket Partisi (MHP) would be formed and with Islamist Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP), one can expect stronger Pan-Turkist approach, tough stance towards Armenia, and even deeper cooperation with Azerbaijan. The strong presence of pro-Kurdish Halk Demokratik Partisi (HDP) in the parliament may help, however, to restart someday talks with Yerevan on establishment of diplomatic relations. HDP is more liberal and open towards the ethnic minorities in Turkey. It will probably be also less hawkish in foreign policies.
- There are no scenarios for quick solution of the Karabakh conflict, but in the current circumstances any progress is highly unlikely. At the moment Russia is the most influential external power having impact on the Karabakh issue. However, Moscow is not interested in any solution of this issue. The conflict is a useful tool for Kremlin to play political games both with Yerevan and with Baku.
- Actually Russia is not provoking directly any clashes on the Armenian Azerbaijani border, but the fact its sells weapons to both sides of the conflict makes Kremlin responsible for possible future war.
- There many important politicians in Azerbaijani elite interested in restitution of the Soviet-type of state, which is of course the main goal of Putin too. On the other hand, Azerbaijan's vital interest is to sell its oil and gas to Europe, not to Russia, which is not that good customer. That's why no matter how much Aliyev criticize Europe; he will continue business as usual with the European partners.

- Russian interference in Syrian civil war is risky in many aspects. It's a risky game for the Kremlin as the current propaganda effect may quickly diminished by Russian casualties in the conflict. Then, the Russian public will start to perceive Syria as a new Afghanistan. However, Russians are acting totally irresponsibly provoking also tensions with Turkey and the US. The EU is also skeptical about positive results of Russian intervention. Actually, bombings of Sunni areas lead to even bigger flow of refugees escaping from Syria to Europe.
- In case of declaration of independence by Iraqi Kurdistan, this state will have still good relations with Turkey, which is the main investor in the country. Obviously, the relations with Baghdad will remain tense. In case of Rojava, Syrian Kurdistan, Turkey will not be that tolerant. We may expect even Turkish military intervention against Syrian Kurds, especially if there will be safe havens for PKK militants operating in Turkey.
- The AA with Armenia is not on the agenda now, but it may come back at some point. The EEU is not functioning well, it's rather harmful for Armenian economy. It's possible that the EU will decide eventually that formal membership of Armenia in the EEU is not an obstacle to deepen cooperation and integration. However, that may happen only in case of Russian leadership's decision to end propaganda war with the West and aggressive actions in Ukraine. Unfortunately, that's not very likely soon as Kremlin always used the image of the West as enemy to consolidate its power in Russia.

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



**From the Online press conference with the
Editor-in-Chief at the journal UA: Ukraine
Analytica HANNA SHELEST (Ukraine)
for the Armenian media**

30.10.2015

Topic: Processes in Ukraine against the background of the Syrian crisis, prospects for resolution of the Ukrainian crisis

- To some extent the Russian operation in Syria and the policy with regard to Ukraine are parts of the same mosaic. Russia has always tried to be at the table of negotiations on key issues and problems in the world in order to underline its status which used to be there for the Soviet Union. Until recently, Iran's nuclear program was such an issue, in the negotiation of which Moscow took part regardless of the Ukrainian crisis. However, the Iranian issue was resolved, and in fact because of its actions in Ukraine Russia was left out of such formats that could emphasize its importance. The Russian interference in the Syrian conflict has multiple causes, but one of them was just to prove that Russia is needed at the table of negotiations, it cannot be excluded, even regardless of all the isolation and sanctions in connection with the Ukrainian issue. Diverting attention from Russia's involvement in Ukraine could have been an objective. However, so far the Western countries have been considering the two issues in parallel. Nobody is going to weaken the sanctions or the criticism only because of Moscow's participation in the talks on Syria.
- Unfortunately, propaganda, information war, rumors and fakes have become a significant weapon in this conflict. It would be very desirable for journalists to always carefully check the sources of information. During these 2 years, we regularly come across photoshopped photographs from Bosnia in 1995 to illustrate the Donbass 2014, where there are additional elements, phrases torn from the context and distorted translation of the statements made by world leaders, staged videos and so on. It is part of the formation of public opinion, including actions against threats. The Russian media, even before the current crisis, have often provided information about the alleged threat from Romania, Poland and Hungary to revise the Ukrainian border that caused only smiles those very countries, as they are interested in the territorial integrity and stability of Ukraine. Such statements today are only unsuccessful attempts to form public opinion

that disintegration still awaits Ukraine, and that western countries also want to own pieces of Ukraine and that Russia is not so unique in terms of the annexation of the Crimea.

- All negotiations have demonstrated that the DPR and LPR are not independent players, as negotiations were primarily with Russia, with its control and coordination of positions. If Moscow did not supply arms to the region, if Ukraine could control its borders, the situation would have long ceased to be so acute. As of today, according to the latest agreements, the Ukrainian army is removing weapons from the contact line, while the other party regularly provokes fire, shooting at the Ukrainian positions in the hope of generating response. The issue of elections in this territory will be very revealing. It is impossible to hold elections at gunpoint and in violation of international laws and norms. Trying to hold elections with primitive methods, blocking the access of the media, observers and equal opportunities for all candidates - will only be a mockery of the Minsk Agreement.
- The EU does not stipulate full control over the territory for a visa-free regime, and they have emphasized it many times. For them, the fight against corruption in Ukraine is much more important. Ukraine cannot, either de facto or de jure, abandon its territories in any way through signing an agreement on visa-free regime, as its international borders in the east have been recognized and are not contested even by Russia. No citizen from the uncontrolled territories has changed their Ukrainian passports, so they remain as citizens as before. With regard to the Crimea, its annexation is recognized by the Russian Federation only, and for example, the Schengen countries do not issue visas to residents of the Crimea with a Crimean registration, but Russian passports in the embassies in Moscow; these people can get a "Schengen" only in Kiev. The issue of the Crimea will not be solved in 2-3 years, the levels of pressure, propaganda and displacement of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian population from the peninsula are very high.

Full version of the material here: <http://regioncenter.info/en/Online-press-conference-with-Hanna-Shelest-eng-Interview>



From the Internet press conference with the Senior Analyst for Turkey/South Caucasus, International Crisis Group NIGAR GOKSEL (Turkey) for the Armenian media

30.10.2015

Topics: Parliamentary elections in Turkey, Turkey's position in the Syrian conflict, Turkey's policy regarding the South Caucasus

On the parliamentary elections in Turkey

- The surveys suggest the results of the November 1 elections will not be fundamentally different from the elections in June. Accordingly, either a coalition government will be formed, or there will be a state of limbo, with no accountable, legitimate government until Spring 2016, and possibly beyond. The security threat posed by IS, and the conflict with PKK (or resumption of peace talks) will definitely be the priorities for any incoming government. This is one factor that will curb Turkey's activism in the South Caucasus. However, there are at least two good reasons for Turkey to step up its involvement in the region: One is that with the passage of 2015, the "space" for Turkey-Armenia engagement will widen. Another is that there is a growing awareness that the state of "looming war" between Armenia and Azerbaijan poses risks for not only the two countries, but also the regional standing of Turkey and the West. This does not mean, however, that Turkey will do anything to alienate Azerbaijan, or stoke more tension with Russia. Turkey already has enough problems with other neighbors and once-allies. Only formulas that are seen to offer win-win dividends will entice Ankara at this juncture.
- Currently the country is being governed by an interim government, largely composed of AKP figures and bureaucrats. While the November 1 elections are not expected to generate a significantly different outcome from the June elections, the pressure to, if necessary, form a coalition towards a legitimate, accountable government will be stronger. It is possible that if again a government cannot be formed, yet another round of elections can be scheduled, however the cost of uncertainty for Turkey's political and economic stability is rising.

- Going back to the main question, whether the Azerbaijani lobby is effective in the parliamentary elections in Turkey: To my knowledge, the issue of Azerbaijan or Armenia has not been raised at all in the election campaigns... The agenda is saturated with many much more pressing problems.

Turkey's foreign policy priorities in 2015

- One effect of the conflict in Syria is that Turkey is significantly distracted by the turmoil in its southern neighborhood and has less attention to spare for the Caucasus. For Ankara to embark on an ambitious initiative regarding normalization with Armenia becomes accordingly less likely. The war in Syria drains Turkey's strategic and political attention, and leaves less for any initiatives related to the Caucasus. Developments in Syria also dominate the discussions between Turkey and the West, pushing Armenia-related agenda items down in the list of importance. European capitals are engaged with Ankara primarily on the IS-threat and migration issue. Armenia-Turkey relations do not make it to the radar.

Another connection of these two scenes is the effect of Russia's involvement in Syria on Turkey-Russia relations. The tensions between Moscow and Ankara over Syria can make Ankara more wary about Russia's rising leverage in the Caucasus.

Ankara-Tehran relations have also been strained by divergences over the war in and future of Syria. While Turkey-Iran relations have been strained over Syria in particular, this does not really relate to Armenia-Turkey relations, at least yet.

On the Syria theatre, Iran and Russia act together, on behalf of the Assad regime.

Though economically Turkish private sector will benefit from the lifting of sanctions, the strengthening of Iran's strategic hand due to the nuclear deal is a source of concern for Turkey.

In the middle to long term, Iran's empowerment as a result of the nuclear deal can drive more intense competition between Turkey and Iran in the South Caucasus; however this is not an immediate concern, or a short-term prospect. It will likely take time for the effects of the nuclear deal to translate into increased confidence and activism in Iran's policy towards the Caucasus, since sanctions will be lifted only gradually.

- There are also simple economic interests: Turkey is the largest non-energy sector investor in Azerbaijan, SOCAR is the leading foreign direct investor in Turkey, and

Azerbaijan sells natural gas to Turkey at the lowest prices of any other supplier. Again, in light of these dimensions, I feel like the word “lobby” is reductionist. That being said, there is a segment of society, including strategic thinkers and opinion leaders, who think Turkey’s policy should be less hinged on Baku, and that full alignment with Baku has left Turkey devoid of the capacity to be a player... However in the short term it is not likely that this opinion will transform the parameters of Turkish policymaking. Going back to the main question, whether the Azerbaijani lobby is effective in the parliamentary elections in Turkey: To my knowledge, the issue of Azerbaijan or Armenia has not been raised at all in the election campaigns... The agenda is saturated with many much more pressing problems.

Turkey's position in Syrian conflict

- Besides allowing its bases to be used by the anti-IS coalition for airstrikes targeting IS, Ankara has begun to crack down more effectively against IS recruiters and sympathizers in the country. This, however, only began in July – before which Turkey was faulted for its open door policy and turning a blind eye to IS activity on its territory. It was only after the 20 July Suruc attack that Turkey changed its approach, became more serious about confronting IS, and closed certain parts of its border, cutting off the logistical lines that IS was using. After the Ankara bombing on 10 October that killed almost 100 people, Ankara appears to have stepped up its anti-IS activity in the country. According to ICG open source research, 161 IS-related arrests have taken place in Turkey, 128 after the Suruc bombing and 17 since the Ankara bombing. Many more were detained, however they were later either released, or if they are not Turkish citizens, deported to their home country. And around 1100 people have been denied entry into Turkey on the basis of being affiliated with IS. Turkey does have a crucial role to play against IS, and has fallen short of expectations as such, both by domestic constituencies and by Turkey’s allies who are in the forefront of the fight against IS. The Ankara bombing increased the scrutiny of whether Ankara has taken sufficient measures to protect its citizens against IS, and these questions are exacerbated by the fact that it has been pro-Kurdish, government-critical groups that have been targeted by the IS attacks in Turkey.
- Indeed Ankara has prioritized the fight against the PKK insurgency and targeting the regime of President Assad over the threat of IS. The formation of a strip of territory in Turkey’s south controlled by PKK affiliates is seen as a major national security threat. This has certainly caused challenges in the fight against IS, since the Kurdish forces are effecting in battling the IS in Syria. It has also deepened the domestic cleavages in Turkey, exacerbating the sentiment among the Kurdish national movement in Turkey that Ankara cannot or does not ensure their security and wellbeing. It is crucial that the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state be restored in order for the threat

posed by IS to be focused on. Ultimately there cannot be a military solution to the conflict with PKK, therefore the Turkish state and PKK need to return to negotiations so that they can both channel their energies to confront the IS threat.

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