
On the Caucasus Russia and Turkey.

Interview with Ruben Safrastyan, Ph.D.
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Q: The statement of Matthew Bryza, OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair for settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, caused numerous comments. What do you think on the occasion?

A: Matthew Bryza's statement is not a result of lack of experience, as some Armenian politicians think, but an attempt of the U.S. Administration to speed up political processes in the region. This is a sign that the geopolitical situation in the region started changing and the status quo, which has been sustained for 12 years tends to change. I mean two processes: the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Georgia and the completion of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline building.

The U.S. Administration takes certain steps and the future will show how the new line will be put into operation. There are attempts to increase pressure upon Armenia not only as regards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The attempts to engage Armenia into the NATO sphere of influence are obvious. It's known that Georgia is aspired to the Alliance and it seems to be accepted just to spite Russia.

Armenia's counteraction should be adequate what can be proved by the RAMFA's statement on the possible demand to hold talks immediately between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan. As for the possibility of resumption of hostilities, Azerbaijan does not possess sufficient advantage to start war. the military balance is still being preserved what cannot be said of the geopolitical situation.

Q: How important is the role of Turkey in the region and can this be bound with the weakening of Russia's presence?

A: The role of Turkey is growing. It assumes an active role and in case with Iran it has a good chance. The strengthening of Turkey's influence upon Georgia is also one of the tasks of Turkish diplomacy.

They call it "strategic cooperation" and since Georgia seeks to join the NATO, Turkey can be a serious support. From the geopolitical standpoint, the U.S. is interested in normalization of relations between the two states. The same refers to the Armenia-Turkey relations. This is one of the fundamental issues of the American-Turkish consultations. I think normalization of relations is more profitable for Armenia rather than for Turkey.

As for the Russian-Turkish relations, they can be characterized as geo-strategic armistice which may result in signing of an agreement.

Presently the situation in the South Caucasus is like that of December 1917. History proves that when Russia leaves the South Caucasus Turkey occupies its place immediately. Now the U.S. joined the process. Using the Iranian factor Turkey will increase influence with the U.S. assistance. Who will replace Putin? Much depends on this fact. If a man like him comes to power the priorities will be preserved. If others come everything will become unclear. I do not rule out return of oligarchs.

Q: The EU opened talks with Turkey. Unpredictable Greece and Cyprus have raised their veto. But is there any guarantee that everything will proceed smoothly?

A: Greece and Turkey have really raised the veto in exchange for some concessions including Cyprus's accession to the NATO. It's obvious Turkey will not allow this step since it will have to withdraw its contingent numbering 35-40 thousand military from Northern Cyprus. I should say that changes take place in Turkey. How much paradoxical it may sound but the Islamist line pursued by Recep Tayyip leads the country towards democratization. Islamists wish to limit the role of the General Staff in the home and foreign policy. The period launched by the young Turks and Kemal Ataturk comes to an end. The incumbent government stands for Islam which promotes the process of European integration. Erdogan can become Turkey's new president and this will mean the final end of Kemalists represented by President Ahmed Necet Sezer. Of course there is a risk. If the positions of the military weaken we will have to deal with unpredictable Turkey. But it's premature to speak of it yet.

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