

COMPETING POLITICAL DISCOURSES IN ARMENIA BEFORE EAEU ACCESSION¹

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Almost four years have passed since Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU, initially of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russian Federation), with perspectives of membership in the then still a planned Eurasian Economic Union (hereafter: EAEU - realized as a union of the named countries and Kyrgyzstan). In these years the changes in Armenian internal and external affairs have neither ceased being multi-vector, nor have become less controversial. On one hand the political elite and especially the ruling Armenian Republican Party (ARP) continue their efforts to justify the initial thesis about economic advantages the accession to EAEU provides to the country. And albeit the promised economic rates are still pending, the authorities assure that the stability/stagnation in economy would be impossible if not the course towards EAEU. On the other hand, the issues of national security remain on top of the local agenda, which in addition to concerns with the unsettled Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has accommodated wider regional policies and plans of Armenia's main strategic partner – the Russian Federation, as well as appears linked to the policies of other EAEU member states: Kazakhstan, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan.

The President of Armenia S. Sargsyan announced decision of Armenia about three months prior to EU summit in Vilnius at November 28-29, 2013, where the initialing of Association Agreement (AA) was expected. S. Sargsyan's declaration, made in Moscow after meeting and negotiations with Russian President V. Putin at evening September 3, 2013, caught the majority of actors in Armenian political scene by “surprise”. The event and its certain features immediately inspired polarization of public opinion in Armenia and started a lasting

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ambiguity in relations with EU. In opinion of many critics of this decision, it has directed Armenia towards continuation of its doomed and disaster-prone pro-Russian course and defection in this sake of an exclusive historical chance, provided by process of rapprochement with Europe through negotiations of 2009-2013.

In this article we have concentrated around the debates inside Armenian society on the issue of making a decisive, in some opinions - “fatal”, “historical”, “civilizational” - choice between two possible directions of macro-regional integration: “Eurasian” *and/or* “European”. Given that the whole theme is too complex and far-reaching, and touches both internal and external decision making and policies of Armenia, we have restricted our research and analysis to such concrete issues as the political narratives in circulation inside Armenian society in period immediately ensuing the decision to join EAEU, arguments, evaluations and forecasts exchanged between various groups and parties, active on the Armenian political scene. The question “Why the Eurasian Economic Union?” in this context requires detailed representation and understanding of the actual political texts and narratives, their dialogical nature, evolved arguments and forecasts, including the frame of opposition to this choice. Thus the structure of this article has followed the division of the main research question to lesser issues.

First of the latter issues addresses the decision of Accession into EAEU proper: how it was reasoned publicly by Serge Sargsyan, how it recruited the support of other political forces, many of which months earlier were actively trying to convince the society in the opposite choice.

The second issue suggests an observation of either a political maneuver or true convincement of the Armenian officialdom about possibility of gaining more or minimization of risks, suggesting special “lenses” to overlook the obvious contradictions between two prospective integration projects.

The third issue is concerned with the role of national security in arguments of the debating sides, and why most of these arguments have been concentrated around the strategic alliance with Russia.

And the last issue is over the well-known narrative of statehood, independence and sovereignty in Armenian society, over the challenges it faces decades after the fall of the USSR.

In terms of promoting macro-regional dimension of our research, we also need to clarify certain features, which, albeit detected in Armenian context, may find parallels in the larger world area between Brussels and Moscow. In opinion of many experts the assignment of Association Agreements by ex-soviet countries

would signify final decay of Russia's position in Eurasia and its latest integration projects. Hence, the counter-efforts of Russia in several directions, including Armenia and Ukraine, were quite expected. At about the time of Armenia's notorious turnaround, Ukraine – another ex-soviet country of much higher importance for both European and Eurasian extension projects – stepped over its no less ambiguous course in opposite direction. The “Euro-Maidan”, “Revolution of Dignity”, internal strives to the edge and even beyond the civil war and secessionism, and most importantly – through fierce counteractions of Putin's Russia – have projected intense heat to domestic discussions of the new political course of Armenian leadership. The same events, but especially the emerged (or: re-emerged, see Haukkala 2015) discourse of the “*conflict of two integrations*”(term is coined by Vinokurov et al. 2015) have quite expectedly affected the policy of Armenian authorities and the tone and arguments of domestic debates.

We must also notice that the ongoing upheavals in ex-soviet space, accompanied with the lasting unrest in the Near East, have affected even the academic discourse, and have substantially narrowed it to side-taking (tentatively: pro-European and pro-Eurasian) treatises, opinions and forecasts. This feature may be observed in positions of both optimists and skeptics on either side of the “*conflict of two integrations*”. Unwilling to join any of the sides, this paper prioritizes the interests and possible heuristic value of such unwilling and admittedly secondary partisans of the evolving crises as Armenia, other small and peripheral nations and communities. Its authors admit, for example, the opinion of Hiski Haukkala (2015) that many recent crises may be largely explained as malfunctions of old and new post-sovereignty (*supranational?*) institutions, while the majority of peripheral nations are still in “catching up” race towards those same institutions. Our position echoes with, and hopefully adds something to the opinion of Delcour and Wolczuk that “**together with an examination of EU mechanisms, closer scrutiny of the domestic context is a sine qua non for making sense of the baffling discrepancies in neighboring states' responses to EU policies**” (2015, 492). It also addresses the not calmed down yet debate in Armenian expert community and society, rejoining certain haphazard and poorly informed “geo-political” or “geo-economic” considerations of both pro-government and opposition actors.

We must also reflect briefly to our selection of the time period of research and methodological principles of collection and use of our primary sources for discourse analysis. September 3, 2013 is the date after which the topic materials became available in rapidly increasing numbers. The final day, after which we have not looked in media sources for materials directly referring to the object of

our research is January 2, 2015, when Armenia signed the EAEU membership agreement in Alma-Ata summit and, in certain sense, when the game was over. However, the events of April 2016 forced us to review this approach in parts, which come close to certain features demonstrated by Armenian society in the period of resumed warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh, especially in responses to behavior of Russia and other EAEU member states, interpreted as either pro, or anti-Armenian.

Thus, we have selected a milestone for our search of materials in three Armenian language media resources available online: one pro-governmental (www.hh.press.am), one oppositional (www.lragir.am) and a neutral (www.hetq.am), which have regularly published information about the new political course of Armenia and comments on it. This decision yielded hundreds of pages of quite variegated contents. It has allowed tracing the most controversial, publicly sound aspects of the topic political decision, fluctuations in public attention to the topic, regular coverage of the steps taken by actors and the coverage of both European and Eurasian integration processes. Our sample was thus quite representative and justified our expectations for reliable and adequate information. In whole, for period of 16 months the three named media resources (except electronic forms they also appear in paper form) have published over two hundred materials of various type: from a half page long brief reports to several pages long analytical digests and interviews.

In addition we have scrutinized with several other *texts, some of them quite special in nature. The seemingly disproportionate size of this primary source, which may be labelled as “Presidential addresses”, can be easily explained by the political system of Republic of Armenia – a presidential, highly authoritarian nation-state. His initial two speeches in Moscow and Vilnius in fall 2013 are substituted by several other reflections on the new course in foreign policy and integration in his addresses to Armenian audience and to several foreign partners. Thus, in five or six more occasions the President has returned to Armenia’s “Eurasian choice” and to perspectives of Armenia – EU relations in the year between fall 2013 and late 2014. These occasional reflections highlight specific details of his main speeches and partial answers to concerns expressed in Armenian scene before completion of EAEU accession process in January 2, 2015. English translations of these addresses are available on presidential website and are referred in due places as: (Sargsyan, 02.10.2013; Sargsyan 21.09.2013; Sargsyan, 03.09.2013, etc.). Admitting unusualness of this type of referring, it has seemed to us a necessary option to highlight the leading role of*

this primary source in initiation and maintenance of the discourse observed below.

Only a Surprise or a Calculated U-Turn?

The “surprise” nature of Armenian President’s decision, as noticed in “Introduction”, is in itself a condition or a necessary media feature of the political process, worth of special analysis. In opinion of some analysts the “surprise” has much to do with domestic affairs. For example, Richard Giragosian (2014) has suggested to link the turn in integration priorities with local political battlegrounds (including the earlier Presidential campaign before February 2013 elections): “In the context of Armenia’s domestic politics, the shift in policy strengthened the Armenian government’s position, because it neutralized attacks from the opposition over Sargsyan’s westward looking strategy. For months, the Armenian opposition, led by former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s Armenian National Congress (ANC), ***criticized the government over the planned Association Agreement with the EU, arguing that it threatened the country’s vital alliance with Russia*** (emphasis added).” The same expert ascribes similar confrontational stance towards the Sargsyan administration to the second largest political party - Prosperous Armenia, then in opposition to its former coalition partners – the ruling ARP. So, “The Armenian president’s successful bid to co-opt the opposition was made even easier by the hypocrisy inherent in the opposition’s policy.”

Some other experts explain the unexpectedness of the September 3 announcement by decision making practices, inherent to Armenian officialdom: “The highly centralized decision-making system in Armenia helps explain this volte-face. The decision to engage in Eurasian integration was taken by the president without any domestic deliberations and took the Armenian elites, society as well as the EU itself by surprise.” (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, 503).

For us the element of “unexpectedness”, rarely fixed so clearly and unanimously, features both political process and political discourse. Explaining it only by the government’s gambling with opposition or by the decision-making traditions is insufficient in terms of critical discourse analysis. Additional explanations are required, together with closer look at details of how the “surprise” was achieved, was it really anticipated or helpful.

The first announcement of the President, constructed as if a systemic, consistent decision, by all means tended to minimise the possible public frustration and to disguise the importance of self-sufficient content of its main message – that same “U-turn”, “volte-face”, or the full-scale adjoining to the Customs Union with easily foreseeable consequences. “Details” or as if the “main

topics” of Armenian-Russian negotiations, such as issues of partnership, Nagorno-Karabakh problem, necessity to deepen the economic cooperation, are briefly narrated before delivering the core message. Closer to the end it appears in the following words: “We discussed in detail issues related to the Eurasian integration and I confirmed Armenia’s decision to join the Customs Union and participate in the processes of formation of the Eurasian economic union.”(Sargsyan 03.09.2013). Two arguments placed after this sentence summarise the whole into a logical conclusion: “Twenty years ago, Armenia in cooperation with Russia and other CIS countries established its military security structure in the format of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Through these decades, the structure proved its viability and efficiency. Currently, our CSTO partners are forming a new platform for economic cooperation. I have said on many occasions that participating in one military security structure makes it unfeasible and inefficient to stay away from the relevant geo-economic area.” (ibid.).

Alongside the cool representation of the integration project with CU member states as *fait accompli*, the President’s speech attempts to emphasise the continuity of Armenian policy regarding strategic alliance with Russia. Naturally, this announcement leaves many questions open, or simply puts them aside. But it clearly promotes “expected”, “logical” nature of the decision through references to the past. It is hard to believe that President of Armenia and his speechwriters were unaware of “ambiguity” created by Armenian officialdom on eve of the pronounced declaration. Delcour and Wolczuk righteously suggest that the greatest incentive for near to ideal performance of Armenian counterparts in Eastern Partnership (EaP) was a type of “happy coincidence” of “Armenia’s authorities growing sense of urgency with regard to reforms, their positive assessment of the EU’s offer for modernisation under the Eastern Partnership and the perceived complementarity of EU templates for reform with the country’s security alliances” (2015, 493). But even agreeing with this, it is impossible to discard sound announcements of senior Armenian officials about negligible perspectives of Armenia’s adjoining the Eurasian integration process before September 3. Thus, then the Prime-minister, later the Ambassador of Armenia to USA and since February 1, 2016 the Chairman of the Eurasian Economic Commission of EAEU Tigran Sargsyan has noticed in one of interviews in 2012 that “Armenia is a small country and cannot afford to play with the diplomacy”. Continuing, he added, “Our strategic partner Russia is kept informed about Armenia’s integration projects and views them with understanding. Having in the view our geostrategic position and the problems with our neighbours, we don’t have many choices in terms of developing partnership cooperation. We hide

nothing from our partners and this is our strength” (Armenia Again Rules Out, 2012; The Customs Union Has No Meaning, 2012).

The deputy foreign minister Shavarsh Kocharyan goes even further in an announcement which appeared 20 days prior to September 3: “Armenia is working towards an association agreement with the EU, and last month almost concluded negotiations toward a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). These will be initialed in Vilnius later this year.” (Russia is our, 2013). In opinion of the same person the absence of common border was the main argument of the ruling elite, because it really impeded developing relations, especially in the fields of development of common customs legislation, procedures, regulations.

Here we must notice that such expressions, either downplaying Armenia’s perspectives, or masquerading its real intentions about integration into EACU and EAEU way well be as conscious bogging of senior Armenian officials, so a reflection of certain negotiations between Armenia and Russia – both highly authoritarian states in strategic alliance, who might afford negotiations without any leaks and commentaries in media.

The latter possibility is clearly implied in the post-factum “declaration” of the only parliamentarian oppositional party – “Free Democrats”, represented in the National Assembly in only two persons, unlike the majority of Armenian opposition were not engaged in previous criticism of Armenia – EU “rapprochement”. This small group was especially uncompromising with the fact that such important national issue was decided by S. Sargsyan solely, in an authoritarian way which in their opinion was an obvious abuse of the Article 2 of Constitution, stating that “In the Republic of Armenia the power belongs to the people”. The declaration of “Free Democrats” states that “Nobody is authorized to make personal decisions which endanger the future of our state and citizens of the RA, citizens must exercise their full rights given in Constitution (Article 2), and decide the future development of their state themselves.” (Free Democrats condemn, 2013).

This reaction of the only “honest” oppositional party suggests us a hint to pass to the next step of our discourse analysis. When in few days after the announcement in Moscow some senior European officials commented on Armenia’s decision, they appeared too hard-headed about Russian interests in detaching Armenia from “European process”. The interests of Armenia were neither mentioned, nor commented or reflected on, and this was again predictable in view of increasing Russian-European tensions around Ukraine’s pending side-taking decision. The stakes of Ukraine in signing the AA and DCFTA, which EU

has negotiated with Armenia as well, were much greater. Hence, leaving Armenia to go without reaction, without mentioning the “*Russian pressure*”, was unrealistic. At the same time, the ill-mannered withdrawal of Armenia from the full-scale “Europeanisation” has received much milder (also predictable) reaction, than over slightly longer term it occurred in the clinch between the primary external partners of Ukraine before and immediately after the Vilnius summit at November 28-29, 2013.

Restoring the domestic discourse in correct chronological order, Sargsyan’s “surprise” announcement triggered seemingly unprovoked radical change in priorities of the foreign policy and overshadowed the earlier unanimous compulsion of the Armenian ruling elite on behalf of the European policy. Now the same elite was faced with reality to argue for the opposite of what it had either sincerely rejected or attempted to disguise months earlier, when supporting the European choice of Armenia and negotiating the Association Agreement with EU.

The absurdity of this situation is hard to explain by what may be found in *a posteriori* explanations. *The President’s announcement was one of rare cases, at least in history of independent Armenia, when the pronounced text itself became a political factor. In other words, the declaration of a political decision appears to be itself a political action which drastically alters the situation of Armenia’s integration with EU to a situation ante quem: Armenia apparently preferring another union – the EAEU. In fact, we deal with a reality called into being literally by public pronouncement of text, by a speech which initiated a new political process. We must notice that political declarations and public addresses usually come up as logical end to negotiations and political processes. In our case the logical chain of events is controversial in regard with three years of negotiations around the Association Agreement with EU, preceding the declaration of Armenian President, now favoring the “Eurasian choice”, which was nearly absent in previous public agenda.*

The announcement of September 3, 2013 has no obvious background. In other words, the Eurasian perspective was deliberately distanced from European perspectives long before the decision. Construction of that background began after the fact, and this raises bulk of questions to political agents of this process, not limited to Armenian government and pro-governmental circles. Without attempting to answer these questions directly, we only emphasize how the obviously contentious political decision has appeared, and that it has triggered a no less significant and “unpredictable” political process. This instability, “U-shape” decision-making practice was one of main accusations raised by opposition and civic activists against the incumbent President and the ruling elite.

Some experts, including Delcour and Wolczuk (2015), analyzing Armenia's behavior in negotiations with EU and its later abrupt turn to EAEU, and admitting the surprise nature of this turn, also speak about its predictability. Our approach assesses it more adequate to the moment. We are inclined to explain these post-September 3 assessments of Armenia's "unwillingness" to move westward as affected by interlocutors mostly from pro-governmental circles who may have misguided the non-local authors, whence our own discussions with local experts have highlighted at least the fact that the ongoing "European" process was public, decorated with elements of propaganda, while, if there has been any serious rapprochement in Eurasia and particularly with Russia, it has been much less advertised and rarely publicized.

Interestingly, in terms of discourse analysis, both agreement and disagreement with postulations in President's public speech were leading any participant of the public debate into political process triggered by the same announcement. In this regard, the production of ensuing political narratives and their authoritarian use or anti-authoritarian critique became constant features of the political process.

The Perspective of Two Goods

The following sentences at the end of Serge Sargsyan's Moscow announcement add certain nuances to understanding of Armenia's foreign policy choice: "This decision does not preclude our dialogue with the European structures. In these years, Armenia through the assistance of our European partners has implemented serious institutional reforms. And in that sense, today's Armenia is a more efficient and competitive state than she was years ago. We are determined to continue the reforms...." (Sargsyan 03.09.2013).

Naturally, this *determination* after the fact has become questionable in many terms, but, as we demonstrate below, at least at *textual* level it has been quite *successive* and *instrumental*. Delcour and Wolczuk, albeit mainly embarking on EU policy guidelines for exporting templates and values to the neighborhood beyond membership ("*Europeanisation*"), directly refer to Armenia as a case of successful pragmatic complementarity: "In contrast to the EU, Russia is not regarded as a credible source of policy templates for modernization. Hence, there was no incongruence between dependence on Russia for security and economic reasons and the interest in the EU, thereby enabling Armenia to seek integration with both, yet along different lines." (2015, 502). However, in the period immediately after the aforementioned announcement, this congruence was still invisible both in Armenia and in Europe.

A day after President's announcement, the head of his administration V. Sargsyan in interview to radio "Free Europe" attempted to clarify approaches of Armenia and to reflect on the already publicised two main concerns, related to possibility of (1) Russian pressure and (2) termination of the European direction: "The initialling of the Association Agreement with the EU within the framework of the summit on the Eastern Partnership to be held in Vilnius in November remains on our political agenda". Not going much into details, V. Sargsyan put it again that the topic decision is not a retreat under pressure, but a free choice of the Republic of Armenia. Besides providing the society with some information, this was an attempt to substitute President's position, quite vulnerable to public suspicions.

In response to the announcement of the Armenian side, the EU representative S. Fule clearly stated impossibility of signing the political component of the Association Agreement apart of the whole: "*The political association and economic integration must go hand in hand and that they are integral parts of the AA. We cannot therefore decouple those two essential building blocks of the Agreement.*" (Stefan Fule, 2013). The other comments also were clear and certain: constructive political cooperation is impossible if economic interests of the sides are entrenched in opposite poles.

We leave aside certain elements of this first EU reaction to Armenia's "U-turn" (labelled as such by Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt: Giragosian 2014), defying, in our opinion, existence of the "EU pressure" besides undoubtedly more substantial "*dependence on Russia for security and economic reasons*", which was spoken out by many as "Russian pressure". The topic is interesting in itself, but lies beyond our discourse analysis. More important are the appearance of breach in Armenia's EU perspectives alongside the efforts implied by its authorities to recuperate it in desirable direction. It was impossible to realize tacitly, and when the abrupt cut of relations with EU became obvious, but still three months were available before the Summit in Vilnius, the political elite, and first of all Serge Sargsyan in person, skilfully embarked on reworking the wording of their carefully selected public appearances and speeches both in Europe and in Armenia.

First signs of the fact that the Armenian leadership realises the threats to its cherished policy of complementarity, but still demonstrates optimism and calls for unity in society, may be found in the first Independence Day address of the President after the Eurasian turn. But only weeks later the President faced the challenge in full size, speaking to PACE in October 2, and at press-conference after meeting with its Chairman Thorbjørn Jagland. In this communications the

main theses about Armenia's vision of its turn to Eurasia and the ensuing consequences for Armenia-EU relations were developed further in a way to allow conclusions that "notwithstanding the previous announcement, Armenia does not reject its European policy". In the official address, quite expanded and fairly reflecting on major problems faced by Armenia, the President was especially anxious in stressing the European values. Calling attention to those specific difficulties, which Armenia has to overcome because of Azerbaijan and Turkey's policy of isolation, the President at the very beginning suggests several economic and security related arguments as if approving again the necessity of his decision to join EAEU. It points towards lack of an alternative. At the same time it indicates inadequacy or unwillingness of the European institutions to apply pressure to Azerbaijan and Turkey to de-blockade Armenia. However, this speech goes beyond simple excuses and explains additional nuances of the European policy of Armenia as seen by him at the moment. Interestingly, the statement begins with an original count of the number of Europeans to *800 million* (thus including EU and the former USSR populations). The wish of Armenia for guaranteed continuation of neighbourhood with EU was officially stated once more: "The European Union is one of Armenia's most vital partners. Wide-scale reforms in the areas of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law make up the core of the Armenia-EU relationship..." (Sargsyan 02.10.2013). An important statement was made *in passim*, claiming that from the very beginning Armenia has not viewed its cooperation with Europe in the context of civilizational alternative. Focusing on these realities in his speech and in answers to questions, Serge Sargsyan finally clarified the main principles of Armenia's European policy.

More formal summary of the principles of European policy appeared again in Vilnius, at summit of Eastern Partnership in November 28-29, 2013. An announcement sounded that "Our major objective is to form such mechanisms with the European Union that on the one hand would reflect the deep nature of our social-political and economic relationship, and on the other – would be compatible with other formats of co-operation. The Eastern Partnership should become a natural bridge that promotes integration from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. In this sense we are committed to undertake consistent efforts towards building a more inclusive Europe free of dividing lines." (29.11.2013). Now the President underlines non-alternative nature of dual-vector Armenian foreign policy. In the next year the European direction of Armenian foreign policy has strictly followed these principles.

Assessing these efforts of Armenian President as aimed on maintenance of “a delicate balance between its strategic partnership with Russia and its pro-Western orientation”, R.Giragosian has righteously compared it with “...“*squaring of the circle*”, smoothing out the inherent contradictions between its reliance on Russia and its Western aspirations... Armenia has consistently worked to avoid any direct or open challenge to Moscow. But the policy of complementarity has tended to elevate the country’s strategic significance to the West, while enhancing its value as Russia’s only reliable ally in the region.” (2014).

Results of this latest attempt of “*squaring the circle*” are still very problematic, even in view of optimistic comments of Armenian officialdom to “*promising decisions*” concerning Armenia and approved in the EU EaP Riga summit in May 2015. Armenia, together with Azerbaijan and Belarus have returned to bilateral relations with EU on the base of *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)* of 1999. However, this development seems to fall in frame of expectations of the government, which also clearly realises that “explanations” are still awaited by Armenian people, at least by its politically active parts and certain opposition circles.

Thus, notwithstanding decisive departure from European association, Armenian leadership has managed to continue relations with EU, to not appear under coercive measures, similar to those restrictions taken by EU earlier against Belarus, and later against Azerbaijan and Russia. The strategy of recalling national interests and European values both in the suspicious domestic and the tolerant European environments (albeit with differentiated argumentation) has been effective. And the last, but not least, these allusions have not appeared intolerable for the strategic partner – Russia. The perspective of two goods, albeit both unrealised, continues to hover in political sky of Armenia, pathetically enveloped as a part of traditional policy of complementarity.

The (In)Security Argument

The overwhelming majority of public messages delivered by government and accentuated further by pro-governmental sides in accompanying public debates, not excluding the majority of local and foreign experts, point on Armenia’s tight and exceedingly deteriorating security conditions *vis a vis* the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Albeit the discourse analysis requires objectification of these arguments in range of others, the complexity of security issue, its dominance among other arguments convinces us that in this case we deal with a dynamic template, affecting not only the behaviour, but also the structure and evolution of Armenian political system, its inner and foreign policy.

At first we must notice the changed perceptions of national security in both expert community and society at large. R. Giragosian's notice seems a relevant introduction to the realities, which, in our opinion have changed far before September 3, 2013: "The security argument seems logical given Armenia's position as the host country of Russia's only military base in the region and its membership of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). But on a deeper level, the decision was driven more by Armenia's insecurity than any striving towards real security (Giragosyan 2014, 3). The same author righteously notices Armenia's overdependence on its huge strategic ally and concludes "that the Armenian president's decision was motivated more by concerns about insecurity than considerations of security."

For over quarter century the inherited from Soviet period Nagorno-Karabakh conflict affects the South Caucasian and larger regional affairs in various ways. It remains in hard core of many economic, social and political problems in Armenia and Azerbaijan which may be traced in tremendous bibliography it has accumulated through decades. Despite such high density of academic presence and other "poured ink", we have not found hints to disagree with opinions about possibility of war resumption in the region, or to assume the (in)security argument wiredrawn. The events of April 2016 have further deepened these concerns.

Naturally, the national security concerns have multiple faces, including some quantifiable. A nationwide telephone survey by one of leading pro-governmental think-tanks of Armenia in early October 2013, immediately after the famous announcement of the President and in midst of the ensuing hot debates in Armenian media, among many other questions has asked two specific questions about the preferable for Armenian populace directions or counterpart states of integration a) against the Azerbaijani-Turkish military threat, b) as an ally of Armenia in support of Nagorno-Karabakh. Answers to these questions – rather expectedly – have simply highlighted the overwhelming preponderance of Russia vs. Europe in the security related concerns among the Armenians (The Attitude of Armenian, 2013).

The method of our own research do not imply quantification of pro- Russian sentiments or intentions in Armenian society. The security issue was naturally present and might be even the heading theme discussed in the sampled media sources. Albeit varying in intensity, arguments and expert opinions in this field were quite frequent in public debates since September 2013 to fall 2014, figuring in almost every second commentary of the ongoing incorporation of Armenia into EAEU. For example, the escalation of ceasefire violations in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in August 2014 revived accusations against Russia and other external arbiters in holding an artificial parity between the sides of the conflict, neglect of Armenian interests by its strategic partner and

ally, whose reaction was expected to vary from positions of other Minsk Group member states.

This was the mildest reaction of anti-Russian circles in Armenia. Given that the earlier pro-Russian rhetoric of main oppositional parties over the basic configuration of Armenian national security, relying on CSTO, then EAEU (all including Russia as a core) has narrowed and fragmented their attempts of speculation on the same issue, the security argument had all chances to become an *argumentum ex silentio*. But, as noticed above, it was the hottest debated subject in public. Some representatives of the ruling elite have become so confident in righteousness of their position, that came up with quite radical statements: “Armenia’s decision to join the Customs Union stemmed from Armenia’s national interests: military cooperation, security, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the need to establish the long-term economic cooperation with our strategic partner Russia. The security issues of Armenia can be considered resolved after the decision was made to join the Customs Union.” (*Sharmazanov, 2014*).

Then how we explain the noticed above notorious overweight of the security related discussions in Armenian media in connection with the Eurasian choice? Our answer here may be brief: the security issue has no direct relation to either eastward or westward orientation of the country’s economic integration. This seemingly illogical situation is correctly explained as in the cited above descriptive notice of R. Giragosian about (in)security, so following the clues to the developing “*security template*”, available in many publications accompanying the changes around the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Unfortunately, these hints, which might allow adequate description of undiminishing feeling of insecurity in Armenian society, are dispersed in many small-size publications. Collecting them in a brief account below suggests the following picture.

The arms race between Armenia and Azerbaijan has never stopped after the cease-fire agreement in 1994. Already in the mid 1990-s the infant nations embarked on arming their new-born armies as a good portion of the inherited from USSR weapons and especially munitions was wasted in the previous war (*Makienko 1997; Armenia: Moscow’s military sanctuary 2000*). The process was in reasonable margins until 08.08.2008 “Five day war” in Georgia, which ended the early post-soviet configuration of conflicts management in the South Caucasus. Stephan Blank (2013) has traced the “Russian hand” mostly in military terms as the heaviest manipulator in the region, including its leverage on the current state of security affairs and its possible changes in the near future.

As these changes have coincided with high oil revenues of Azerbaijan, it found wise to accelerate the arms race “steadily increasing its military budget since President Ilham Aliyev came to power in 2003, from \$175 million at his inauguration to \$3.7 billion in 2013. Purchases from Russia, Ukraine, Israel,

South Korea and Turkey include attack helicopters, fighter planes, multiple launch rockets, armored personnel carriers and unmanned aerial vehicles.” (Freizer, 2014:112, see also: Frolov, 2013; SIPRI Yearbook 2014; Yearbook of CAWWT 2014). Proportionate rise of Armenia’s defence expenditures (\$451 million in 2013) has compensated the lag mainly relying on its privileged strategic partnership with Russia in frame of CSTO and through purchase of weapons and munitions at fair prices. The military landscape would be incomplete without mentioning the Russian base in Gyumri, as well as the air-defence and border guard of Armenia regulated according bilateral agreements with Russia.

Aside from extreme militarization of the region, intending that the future war hardware is at place, the local media has regularly reported human losses along the line of contact. The annual numbers of incidents and casualties have increased from less than 10 cases in mid 2000s to over 30 cases in 2011-2013. The bellicose rhetoric, reminding the events of late soviet period, has restarted and normally features this evolving reality. The long stalemate in diplomacy in 2012-2013 has contributed to the sense of insecurity in Armenia as well.

Returning to our main topic, Russian domination in South Caucasian affairs, in particular – its perception as a force capable to suggest war or peace – has increased in the years between 2008 and 2013. In this development Armenia has been in position of a privileged strategic partner, i.e.: not only as a subject but also as a participant of the equilibrium. In situation, when “[T]welve people in the whole world know what is going on” (The Impact, 2014:6), contentions of the significant part of Armenian expert community and society addressed to Russia as to the greatest supplier of weapons to Azerbaijan are simply retaliated by their obviously more Russophile colleagues by considerations of the business interests of Russian defence industry, which actually supplies the Armenian army as well, and – no less cynically, but more hesitatingly – by the strategic game of Russia to keep the balance of power in South Caucasus below the risk of violation of the existing *status quo*.

The latter argument easily finds links in two directions: 1) to Russia’s obligations as a member of the OSCE Minsk group, interested in peaceful political resolution of the conflicts in the South Caucasus 2) to Russia’s strategy towards revival of the Soviet borders in security field. After the Crimean events, certain experts have noticed that Russia may become even more devoted to the task of finding complex political resolution to post-soviet territorial conflicts between former Soviet republics and their secessionist regions (Minasyan, 2015).

The pre-existing situation in security related affairs has been dynamic, and in view of special activeness of Russia before 03.06.2013 it is easy to conclude that it has certain relatedness to increased dynamism in Eurasian integration processes. Simultaneous, but more the 2014-2015 deterioration of situation in the Near East,

including the appearance of ISIS, suggests other hints to the raised significance of and risks for Armenia in Russia's regional policy and operations in Syria.

Sovereignty Questioned

It took about two weeks after September 3, 2013 before the Armenian authorities realized that President's first announcement has been inattentive to one of still vital issues for Armenians – the sovereignty of their nation-state. In fact, the issue has appeared in Moscow remarks as if *in passim*, indirectly referred only in one of sentences – “It's a rational decision and it is in the interests of Armenia.” – just before speaking about the European perspectives (*Sargsyan, 03.09.2013*). This terseness, quite understandable in the capital of foreign country, has not inspired any critique, but the accompanying acknowledgement of the fact that such an important announcement was made in Moscow, the way Sargsyan was summoned or invited by V. Putin, was rather expectedly identified as humiliation of Armenia's sovereignty (*Araqelyan, 2013*). Similar assessments, mixed with disappointment were heard in opinions of senior EU officials about Russian pressures over President Sargsyan in Moscow (*EPP condemns, 2013*).

Those assessing the decision of the then newly re-elected President and government as abuse to independence and sovereignty of Armenia, have suggested several arguments. One of the most active parties – “Free Democrats”, for example, has stated in its above cited declaration that “Entering into Customs Union will deprive Armenia of such important constituents of sovereignty as are the independent foreign policy and the opportunities to pursue sovereign financial and economic policy.” (*Free Democrats condemn, 2013*). The theme of surrender or endangering of sovereignty and independence became one of the hottest and widely discussed issues in oppositional press, and the critical theses suggested in declaration of “Free Democrats” were in head of argumentations. The theme was further developed by critically minded independent experts, oppositional journalists and analysts.

The latter were pointing how the threat to sovereignty, which, in their opinion was obvious in accession of the country into EAEU, may cause unwanted limitations to Armenian foreign policy. The already narrowed or disappeared road of advancement towards integration with EU was suggested as the brightest example of such possible limits. In opinion of several observers, this was an obvious case of subjugation of Armenia's national interests to Russian interests and a rude cut of sovereignty of the lesser partner. The emphasis on sizes, or on asymmetry of intended partners in EAEU – Armenia and Russia – was especially disturbing together with inevitable transfer of rights of decision making in many economic issues to a supranational structure, meant implying surrender of the sovereignty. Several experts have expressed concerns about impossibility of decision making by consensus, believing that this perished feature of EU cannot be implemented in EAEU because of its rampant inner asymmetry, implying that

the other members would not be able to challenge the Russians or to disagree with them.

The occasion of September 21 – Independence Day and the ritual of Presidential address to nation – was utilized by authorities again to answer the mentioned above concerns. While the relevant part of the 2013 address was veiled behind general phrases, attempting to avoid direct engagement with unspecified risks to Armenia’s sovereignty, the address at the next Independence Day, in view of the approaching finalization of EAEU accession process at January 2015, was much more straight: “On this occasion, I would like to oppose some our opponents who try to present our membership in the Eurasian Economic Union as a loss of Armenia's independence. I have to say that such speculations have existed in all the 23 years of independence. Today, on Armenia's Independence Day, I declare with utmost responsibility that our membership in the Eurasian Economic Union does not pose a threat to Armenia's political independence anyhow. Such claims are groundless.” (*Sargsyan 21.09.2014*). In continuation S. Sargsyan again returns to pathetic overtones, venerating the Independence: “As far as Armenia's independence is concerned, it is holy and out of discussion” (*ibid.*).

Naturally, this type of “*dialogue*” between supporters of two variants of “*loss of sovereignty*” (EAEU and EU) could not evade comparative perspectives. One of strongest arguments of opposition was built on high rates of migration – again a nationally sound issue, though interpreted twofold: as a demographic catastrophe – jeopardizing the national security, and as a result of downfall in economy to which the accession into EAEU will open up new risky perspectives. The 2013 December two day long visit of V. Putin with “*gifts*” to the new “*conscript*” into the EACU (in gas, energy, military: 12 new bilateral agreements, see: *Armenia’s Economic Dependence 2013*), albeit heated the debate to its highest temperatures, the supporters of Eurasian integration received substantial platform to retaliate the “*sovereignty endangered*” argument. In the following months the situation in Ukraine, the clinch between Russia and the wider West continued to fuel the debate on sovereignty, but the rhetoric of both sides became much more strained and cautious.

After a considerable pause, Serge Sargsyan continued his addresses to inner audience in May, 2014, at the Congress of the ruling ARP. Given that this audience was less inclined to be satisfied with general phrases about sovereignty, the speech of President addressed the accession of Armenia into Customs Union twofold, mainly pointing on economy and security. In relation of economy his statements were promising: “We have already entered the final phase of becoming a member of the Customs Union. We expect the Customs Union’s large market to stimulate our economic growth and are confident that our investment and export growth rates will be considerably higher. In addition, we are also going to take

individual approaches towards our businessmen and foreign investors.” (Sargsyan, 24.05.2014). The opponents of Eurasian integration retaliated with logical question “*what in exchange?*” and with self-suggesting answer with the thesis of “sovereignty loss”.

The participants of this seemingly unending debate about sovereignty were confident of its value mainly in economic terms. The risks and promises of EACU and EAEU have been gradually recognized as less abstract than the issue of “sovereignty” (also: nationhood, statehood) implies. The message quoted above is addressed to those business circles which were not fully sharing the optimism of the rulers about as if expanding economic possibilities. Earlier, in view of the glumness, resulting along the restrictive measures taken against Russia worldwide, and the ensuing deterioration of economic situation in the space awaiting Armenia as its member, public concerns were expressed about ability of Armenian already writhing small and mid-size businesses and industries to compete with much mightier Russian companies. At the same time the message admits possibility of problems in new integration and suggests “*sovereign*” help to individuals in coping with problems.

The political parlance about the priorities and more or less significant changes in Armenian foreign policy usually do not bypass the interests or intentions of Armenian diaspora. And although at first glance the speech of President in “Armenia-Diaspora” Congress at September 20, 2014 is not directly connected to the course changing announcement a year ago and to ensuing developments, the sovereignty issue have appeared in this speech not without links to the ongoing debates in the Armenian public. The approaching centennial of the Armenian Genocide have also played a role in decay of critique of the government in surrendering to a supranational structure.

From the very beginning of this address S. Sargsyan has forwarded the thesis of unity and collectivity: “I cordially welcome you to our motherland. Whatever difficulties they face children eventually return their parents’ home. And this 5th gathering is an event of our domestic reunion as well.” (Sargsyan 20.09.2014). Such specific familyism obviously tends to disarm possible critics. Representing Armenia as a national home, the congress as a family party, President positions himself in a role of a great “household head”, who has secured the “breadwinning” with announcement in Moscow. Moreover, a day after this event he reappeared with direct address at the Independence Day and stated anew that: “In the near future we are going to become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. This decision, as I have already mentioned, is conditioned by new possibilities of Armenia's economic development and, why not, by the existing regional security system. We have to be honest. Nobody is a prophet and we can't predict what result we will achieve in ten or 20 years from now, but one thing is clear: if we work hard we can expect serious economic benefits. We have

managed to sustain economic growth today as well. The fact that we are not satisfied with the existing growth rates is quite another matter. A huge market is going to open up for our products, and penetration into it depends on our working skills” (*Sargsyan 21.09.2014*).

Calling for mobilization of resources in these two consequent speeches, President has by all means taken into account the multifaceted nature of Armenian Diaspora, one part of which has become closer and more privileged at expense of lost chance for approximation of the others. Diaspora in this context demonstrates its at least tri-parted nature with varying, sometimes controversial interests and expectations, including the largest Armenian community in Russia and CIS, those in North America and in European countries constituting the second and the third largest parts. In view of impossibility to compromise varying interests of multi-local transnational communities, Armenian government has simply unfettered itself from necessity to explain its behavior and decisions. But it still matters as a message attempting to bring the diaspora communities into the common field of pan-national responsibility.

No clear hint may be found in these speeches to reasons, which possibly existed on economic grounds behind the fact of official informing the Diaspora Armenians about the changes in Armenia’s integration course. But we must notice that in preceding several years the remittances from Russia, constituting nearly 15 percent of Armenian GDP, were added with direct foreign investments and charity mainly by ethnic Armenian citizens of Russia – mostly recent emigrants – into homeland. The weight of direct foreign investments has sharply increased in 2013-2015, although many of these investors and benefactors: brothers Samvel and Karen Karapetyan, Gennady Stepanian, Sergey Hambartsumyan, Ara Abrahamyan were active for years before (*Hayastan All Armenian Fund 2013*). Another influential Russian Armenian businessman is Ruben Vardanyan: the president of "Troika Dialog", the Chairman of “Sberbank”, the general director of Rosgosstrakh and the Chairman of the largest in Armenia “*AmeriaBank*”. Vardanyan is also the coordinator of the development project “Armenia 2020”, “IDEA” and the coordinator of the council under the President of the Russian Federation for National Priority Projects (*Hayastan All Armenian Fund, 2013, 25-26*). In 2015 with purchase of “Armenian Electric Network” JSC, S. Karapetyan expanded the presence of Russian born capital in Armenia even more and actually made him one of the most influential persons, capable of brokering and employing serious direct and indirect pressures for securing Russian interests and influence in Armenia.

In other words, in the period covered by this research, the sovereignty issue has appeared in force at the beginning of process of accession of Armenia into still amorphous EAEU and inspired a seemingly unending debate. Not unlike the debilitating debate on national security, the pro-governmental circles in Armenian

society have managed to calm down emotional nationalist reactions to raising and mostly Russia-centered post-sovereignty institutions. In course of the first half year after the September 3 announcement, the questions raised by the opponents of Eurasian integration appeared dissolved into the routine of economic and political affairs. The authorities were successively turning the eyes of both their political competitors and diaspora communities towards the advantages Armenia and Armenians may win with membership in EAEU, interpreting this structure mainly as an entrance door to a vast and united market, suggesting real possibilities of industrial development.

Conclusions

The case of Armenia's turnaround towards Eurasian integration suggests itself as an opportunity to analyze several important contemporary political discourses at domestic, small-size national level. Our textological or narratological approach to the public debates in Armenian society does not confront and is even compatible with other findings and traditional methodological approaches to main contemporary issues of political discourse analysis. At the same time this study has allowed identification of main constituents of Armenian public discourse as it appears in consequence of decisive modification of the country's foreign orientation, which at closer look appears to be a rather difficult balancing between seemingly disparate perspectives of integration and development.

The issues discussed in Armenia in the course of decisive turn were complicated with contemporaneous developments in Europe, Eurasia, Near East, but main drivers of taken decisions and ensuing collision in the public sphere lay in domestic affairs and in failure of previous integration projects in the South Caucasus. Exploring the chronology, contents, main arguments and even fluctuations in tone and tension of heated public debates in Armenia in course of its announced integration into Eurasian Economic Union after escape from both opportunities and risks, suggested by EU Association agreement, we have reconstructed several pivotal public concerns.

Summarizing the analysis of intense public discussions of Armenia's EAEU vs. EU membership or association issue in Armenian media from September 3, 2013 to January 2, 2015, first we may notice inhomogeneity of the supporters of the Eurasian turn, represented by officialdom, pro-governmental parties and actors, as well as by certain circles in traditionally oppositional political and social domain. At the same time, the support to European association was demonstrated mainly by no less inhomogeneous opposition to modern Armenian authorities. In any case, it would be incorrect to conclude that the entire opposition had demonstrated unanimous support to the Association Agreement with EU. For example, the influential Armenian National Congress, an undoubtedly oppositional force, also represented in National Assembly, had frequently expressed support to Armenia's membership in EAEU. Only an

innumerable parliamentary party of Free Democrats was resolute in media expressions of support to EU association. Similar uncompromising support was also expressed by numerous representatives of civil society, including key persons and analysts from NGO sector and many oppositionally minded public persons among intellectuals, civil activists, experts and other liberal actors.

The struggle between these forces has first of all targeted the issue of legitimacy of the President Sargsyan's September 3, 2013 announcement about expediency of the Eurasian turn through accession into CU and EAEU. The pro-governmental forces were attempting to formulate and disseminate through media an official discourse of common sense and practicality of Armenia's membership in EAEU, while the oppositional forces were insisting on illegitimacy and artificial nature of the same discourse. Our materials highlight how the official media was nurturing the named discourse through developing several parallel narratives and how it was attempting the replacement of the "either – or" discourse with the narrative of "and ... and". The latter public narrative implied that the economic integration with EAEU does not reject close collaboration with EU aimed on urgent wide-scale reforms of domestic political institutions.

Another parallel message disseminated through media by representatives and active supporters of official position was the narrative of Armenia's national security. At core of this narrative was concise postulation of necessity of the military support of Russia to Armenia, sheltered under SCTO *vis a vis* possible dangers, expected from strategic alliance of its two neighbours: Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The narratives or the counter arguments of the opposition to EAEU membership were not directly confronting the "and ... and" narrative, but mainly criticizing Armenia's course towards Eurasian integration as a regressive path. This criticism is based on the following arguments. At first, the critics of Eurasian turn have mentioned the perspectives of loss of sovereignty and of reviving Russian neocolonial temptations, as dangers of Armenia's membership in EAEU. Interestingly, here we have recorded the revival of anti-Russian as anti-metropolitan discourse at first time since achievement of independence of Armenia in early 1990s. In addition, while in the earlier anti-colonial discourse the issue of Russian/Soviet colonialism was discussed in terms of harms and crimes committed in the past, its revived version clearly cautions the danger of future colonisation. It appears that the opposition to EAEU membership has only criticised the harms of this membership, talking about abuses to national sovereignty and possible negative perspectives in economic terms. Such criticism was obviously theoretical, unconvincing and even groundless at the moment it was voiced. At the same time it has evaded direct engagement with arguments and forecasts of the officialdom, which were hardly more grounded, but clearly more optimistic for the majority of citizens.

Continuing comparison of pro and contra positions in EAEU-EU public debate, some other analytical issues may be raised and discussed in future. First of these additional questions that comes to fore is about the adequacy of oppositional narratives to the skillfully created official discourse in terms of their confronting capability and impact on the public opinion. The second question to be asked is about how reasonable and convincing these counter narratives are if measured as aimed to change the public opinion?

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