

Armenia, Caucasus, Eastern Europe & Russia, Minorities, Politics, Society

A Distorted European Perspective

by **Transitions**

30 Apr 2009



Many Armenians insist they are European, but they have a lot of work to do to make it a reality.

A tiny chapel sits in far southwestern Armenia, on the border with Turkey. Built in the seventh century and rebuilt many times since, it is so plain that, aside from its antiquity, it would hardly merit attention. But it is notable for what lies beneath it: a pit where, according to legend, the founder of Christianity in Armenia was condemned to live for 13 years. Grigor Lusavorich, St. Gregory the Illuminator, was persecuted for being the son of the man who had killed the king's father. He languished in his underground cell until being called upon to cure the desperate king's madness, which he did. As a result, the story goes, the grateful king adopted Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century, and Armenia became the first country to make it the state religion.

It is this long history with Christianity that some Armenians first cite when they argue that in their outlook they are European – not eastern, not post-Soviet. But just as it took 13 terrible years for Gregory to emerge from his dungeon, this sense of Europeanness has been slow to make itself felt in the Caucasian country. “Everybody understands very well that in civilizational terms, the model closer to the Armenian value system is Europe,” Karen Bekaryan, director of a private group that advocates greater Armenian integration into Europe, recently told a group of visiting journalists

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from EU countries. “And at the same time everybody understands that this is the main way for development, and not being Russia’s little brother.”



View of the Khor Virap monastery, site of the chapel commemorating St. Gregory the Illuminator. Photo by Tamara Areshian/Creative Commons.

Likewise, Alexander Iskandaryan, director of the Caucasus Institute think tank and a university professor, said of the many young people who seek to leave Armenia, “I am absolutely sure that they want to emigrate to Europe.” He estimated that half of his students speak English better than Russian. And while one or two have been to Russia, about one-third have visited some part of Europe.

European countries far exceed Russia in their level of trade with Armenia. And yet, Armenian diplomats talk frequently about a policy of “balance” between Russia and the European Union. Armenia has welcomed Russian troops stationed in Gyumri, a city on the Turkish border, as a hedge against expansion by or attacks from its hostile neighbor to the west. Russian companies have bought up Armenian businesses in strategic industries such as energy and aluminum manufacturing. Further, some officials here acknowledge that in some ways, the Armenian mind still lives in a Soviet-era time warp. An older generation hangs on to its Cold War-era distrust of the West and largely associates NATO with the hated Turks. By one estimate, corruption taints about half the country’s economic activity. Some 70 people arrested in March 2008 demonstrations against flawed presidential elections languish in jail, their cases still not adjudicated. No members of the police or security forces have been prosecuted in connection with the clashes, which left 10 people dead.

The list goes on. Jacqueline Hale, an analyst with the Open Society Institute in Brussels, said she has seen hotels in Armenia back away from agreements to host meetings of human rights or other groups critical of the government, and she decried the establishment of a council to oversee such groups. Both moves are echoes of Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian Russia. “It’s not a question of Armenia being close to Russia,” Hale said. “It couldn’t get any closer, to the point of being smothered.”

MORE CARROT THAN STICK

In some quarters, then, the release last week of an EU report on Armenia’s progress toward certain goals was anxiously awaited. The country is part of the European Neighborhood Policy, which seeks to strengthen ties to countries on the periphery of the EU. Yerevan received 25 million euros from Brussels last year, in addition to a share of regional aid. That sum is to set to double in 2010. In

anodyne language, the report cites legislation not yet adopted or implemented, and further steps to be taken in many areas.

Those looking for strong language, or even forceful urging, after Armenia's troubling year, will be disappointed. EU officials stress that their relationship with Armenia is a partnership, existing only with the consent of both sides. They are not in a position to force things, they say. "The EU is afraid that if they push too hard, Armenia will move closer to Russia, and that's just not true," said Stepan Safaryan, a member of parliament from the opposition Heritage Party. Instead the EU relies on the powerful attraction of its way of life. In speaking of the role of Russian and European influences in the country, one EU official said, "We have a model of civilization to sell. They have tanks." The same official said the essential questions for Armenians now are, "How do they see themselves? Where is their place? Moscow? Washington? Brussels? Iran?"

Which is to say that Armenians must decide what it means when they say they are European. And they must go beyond the notion of Christian kinship, a backward-looking idea as Europe tries to better integrate its large Muslim communities. Is it a desire to have rules and live by them? To encourage opportunities for the poor and minorities? To enjoy the freedom to dissent? Or simply to have lively cafes and splendid public squares? Deputy Economy Minister Mushegh Tumasyan, reflecting on his country's pervasive corruption, lamented, "There is no understanding of public benefits and the public interest," ideas at the core of the European project. So go to Europe, young Armenians – as soon as Yerevan and Brussels can agree on looser visa regulations, that is. Soak up the culture, and the values. Then come back. Your country needs you.

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