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ARMENIA HAS OPTED TO JOIN THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION

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At his official visit to Russia on 3 September, the Armenian president has declared at his meeting with the Russian president, the decision of Armenia to participate in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union and as the initial step, to join the Customs Union established by Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia with a joint statement signed by the two presidents and at the following press conference. The announced decision of Armenia opting to join the Eurasian Economic Union came as a big surprise both in Armenia as well as abroad. Until the announcement, Armenia, expressing the desire to join the EU customs union, was on record to have finalized the text of an associative agreement as well as deep and comprehensive free trade area agreement with the European Union to be initialed in November, in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, current chair country of EU. Just the day before the announcement, on 2 September, the ambassador of the USA to Armenia addressed the press in Yerevan, underlining that the USA welcomes Armenias plans to sign a far reaching Association Agreement with the EU, that it is good for Armenia. The EU authorities received the announcement as unexpected, with disappointment and a feeling of betrayal, unable to make comments until further clarification.

Like a number of times before throughout history, aiming to maximize gains by playing big powers against each other, Armenia this time has brought itself to opt either for Europe or Russia, for the West or Russia, ending up opting for Russia. It is often alleged that Russia has applied pressure or even blackmail on Armenia for this decision. There might be truth in this assertion. However what is worth noting here is the fact that Russia possesses the means to do it. It is no secret that Armenia is dependent on Russia economically, militarily and for security. The two countries, having signed in 1997 the Treaty for Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance and Declaration for Strategic Cooperation in 2006, are known to have a strategic partnership. Adding to this, the membership of Armenia to Community of Independent States, a Russian led group of eleven, as well as to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, also taking into consideration the isolation of Armenia in the region with its aggressive foreign policy with the neighbors, based on hatred and enmity, there is no easy answer to what other choice Armenia could have had. Therefore it is possible to assume that, Armenia conceived a game, the result of which was predictable from the very beginning, with the aim to obtain the maximum concessions from Russia.

The game has caused serious damage to the European Union. First and foremost, its

prestige has suffered as cooperation with the EU is declined. It has also revealed the limits of EUs capabilities, enforcement potential and strength to match Russia. More importantly, the moral values and adherence to principles of the EU have taken a sharp blow, have become questionable. After the case of admission to membership of the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, this time, it is all the more difficult to come over the shame of and to find a reasonable explanation to proposing an associative agreement and comprehensive economic cooperation to a country and its rejection by that country which keeps one fifth of the territories of its neighbor Azerbaijan under military occupation, which has committed massacres and ethnic cleansing in the occupied territories and which continues adamantly with its occupation despite four UN resolutions against it. Another point that the EU authorities and member countries need reconsider following this outcome is the reality that they need Turkey in their midst to play any effective role in the Caucuses and Central Asia.

The choice of Armenia, together with its economic dependence on Russia to which the assistance potential of the EU can hardly be a match, is military and security. The communications of Armenia with the Eurasian Customs Union is bound to be restricted and limited due to the fact that it does not share any borders with Russia or other union members. The same problem would also have been valid had it joined the EU customs union in view of the status of its relations with another neighbor, Turkey, the outlet and connection to the EU. It appears that the concession Armenia was after from Russia focused on security and in that context on the issue of the territories of Azerbaijan that it keeps under military occupation. The official statements from the meeting of the two presidents on this issue say that they confirmed their commitment to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means in the format of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group. They also stated readiness to further strengthening of cooperation and improvement of interaction in political field and defense sector in order to ensure regional stability and security. The wording of the statement does not indicate a deviation from what has been said before. On the other hand, it is a 22 years old fact that this wording perpetuates the occupation of Azerbaijan territories and helps turning it into a frozen conflict. At a period when new and effective steps are expected for the return of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent occupied territories back to Azerbaijan, the concessions Armenia was able to extract remains to be seen.

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