

UNBEARABLE BEAR HUG

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The ink on President Serge Sarkissian's signature to join Russia-led Customs Union (CU), had hardly dried before President Vladimir Putin's political-cultural apostles came galloping from the Russian steppes to Armenia. Hardly a month had passed since Armenia's inevitable acceptance of Putin's "invitation" to join the CU that Armenia suddenly seemed top-of-mind among Russian cultural apparatchiks. In quick succession, there were the following developments in Russian/Armenian cultural relations.

It was announced that the National Philharmonic of Russia would give two concerts (Yerevan and Gyumri) on Nov. 10 on the occasion of composer Aram Khachaturian's 110th birthday. Earlier (Oct. 10) on "prominent members of Armenian music" came together at the State Kremlin Palace to participate in a "great concert" dedicated to the 300th anniversary of "outstanding Armenian bard and poet" Sayat Nova.

Tourism industry executives from Russia and Armenia held a roundtable to boost tourism in St. Petersburg and Yerevan.

It was announced that a Russian lyceum—a branch of Moscow State University—would open in Yerevan, in line with Putin's campaign to launch Russian cultural initiatives in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Victor Krivopuskov, head of the Russian Federal Agency, Rossotrudnichestvo, stated that Russia would take steps to strengthen the Russian language in Armenia.

Any number of Russian and Customs Union operatives stated that since Russian is the lingua franca of the Customs Union, the population of member states should be fluent in Russian.

The CIS intensified the opening of "cultural centers" in Armenia where Russian is taught free of charge. There are now about 100 such centers. A few weeks ago they boasted that they had sold 100,000 Russian books in the past two years.

Andranik Nikogosyan of the Youth Union of the CIS opined that the Russian language is integral part of Armenian culture. He added: "We have a common history, a common past, and I'm sure we have a great future." Common history? Perhaps Nikogosyan was referring to the fact that during the Second World War, of all the Soviet republics Armenia had the highest per capita combat casualties. Perhaps Nikogosyan was referring to Russian Foreign Minister Lebanon-Rostovsky who, in 1895, said Russia wanted Armenia without Armenians. Perhaps the jumped-up politico is referring to Generalissimo Alexandre Suvorov, the greatest "Russian" military leader, whose Armenian descent is covered up by the Russians.

Poet Mariné Petrossian and Armen Hovhanissian, members of a civil group opposing the use of foreign language as a threat to Armenia's identity, say the popularization of Russian would be at the

expense of not only Armenian, but also English, French, and Persian. Last year their group campaigned against the opening of foreign language schools.

Hovhanissian said that the Russian cultural invasion means that to be successful an Armenian citizen will have to be educated in Russian. "The most dangerous thing that can happen is the formation of an elite that will not speak Armenian and will not think in categories favoring Armenia's statehood," he said.

President Putin has said that Eurasian integration is a chance for the post-Soviet space to become an independent center of global development. He also said that the CU is "aimed at keeping the identity of peoples populating the historical Eurasian space in the new century and the new world." Does by "peoples" Putin mean solely Russian?

Should and can Armenia resist the Russian bear hug?

It should because if it doesn't the fears of Petrossian and Hovhanissian could be realised. More and more Armenians will begin to communicate in Russian, read Russian books, sing Russian songs, and watch Russian TV. Parents will believe their children should attend Russian schools so as to have a bright future. Armenians would become strangers in their country. There will be an "Armenian Diaspora" in Armenia.

Already Russian is becoming the preferred language of Armenia's elite. During conferences at Yerevan's Marriott Hotel the language most heard is Russian. And when attendees continue their talk in the corridors, outside the conference rooms, again Russian dominates.

How to halt the Russian invasion? The government should set laws to defend our "Mayr Lezoo" against the Russian onslaught. Parents should instill among their children a sense of linguistic pride. As the civil groups, who fought the establishment of foreign schools, shouted in their posters: "Keep your gene; keep your language" and "No to colonization". Western Armenian is already endangered, according to the United Nations. If the Russians are not pushed back, Eastern Armenian could also get on the UN list.

In the bad old days of Soviet rule, Russians preached internationalism but practiced Russo-centrism.

Being an ally shouldn't mean that independent Armenia must become a Russian satellite. Somebody should tell Moscow that the Beatles are long gone; nobody wants to sing "Back in the USSR..."

