"EU OR EU?"—THE PHONY QUESTION

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Editorial, 30 July 2013

A few weeks ago forty-six-year-old Hrachya Harutyunyan was involved in a traffic accident in Russia when his truck and a bus carrying 68 passengers collided. As a result of the crash, 18 passengers were killed and 50 injured. Harutyunyan was beaten by a mob and dragged to the psychiatric ward of the local prison. When he appeared in court, he was dressed in a woman's multicolored flannel gown and sneakers. Unshaven, and with marks of beating on his face, he looked like a gargoyle dressed up for carnival. Throughout the court hearing state-owned Russian TV mocked him and invariably identified him not as Armenian but as a "citizen of Armenia." The degrading treatment of the truck driver and the racial slurs piled upon him inflamed anti-Russian feelings across Armenia. To stifle Armenian anger, the same Russian TV eventually blocked access to Armenia viewers of the scandalous video clip of Harutyunyan in court.

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The friction was the latest between Yerevan and Moscow. It was preceded by the Russian price hike of the gas it sold to Armenia and the sale of $1 billion worth of sophisticated weapons to Azerbaijan, including the offensive C300 and SMERCH (Tornado), a heavy, multiple rocket launcher. The latter is a weapon of mass destruction and can destroy targets within an area of over 67 hectares in a second.

Armenians in Armenia called the weapons' sale "treachery" and a "betrayal of Russia's sole regional ally." Arkady Karapetyan, first commander of the Karapagh Self-Defense Forces (1990-91), accused Russia of preparing a "new genocide of Karapagh Armenians." Artur Aghabekyan, Karapagh's vice-prime minister, said: "…this is a very serious issue for us and this treacherous deal of our strategic partner should have become the number one topic of discussion." A Yerevan columnist advised Armenia to develop ASAP nuclear bomb capacity, while another provided five reasons why Armenia should attack Azerbaijan ASAP. Karen Ghazaryan of Radiolur posed the question most Armenians were thinking: "Why is Russia supplying weapons to the enemy of its strategic partner?"

Why indeed?

Senior Russian officials said that the sale was just business. It sounded like what a B-movie hired killer would say to his victim: "You see it's not personal…it's just business."

Other senior Russian officials said Moscow needed the $1-billion. Yes, Moscow was willing to stab in the back its long-time ally for $1-billion pieces of silver. But why does a country with $2 trillion annual GDP need $1-billion so badly that it would betray a friendly state and people who have done so much for Russia? Why would Russia need the $1-billion so desperately when, so far, it has spent a measly $52-billion for next year's Sochi Winter Olympics?

Why all the heat and acrimony?

The general consensus in Armenia is that Moscow was angry with Yerevan's plans to embrace the European Union rather than accept Russia's invitation to join Moscow's own Eurasian Union. There was lots of talk—in Armenia, in Russia and in Western Europe—about whether Armenia was facing an "either or" scenario or whether Yerevan could be member to both groups. A leading European Union executive said there would be conflict if Armenia joined both groups, meanwhile the president of Poland, presumably speaking on behalf of the European Union, advised President Serge Sarkissian that Armenia should make up its mind on its choice of membership. The contradictory statements and signals about the two options confused observers as to where the truth lies—pun intended. Sarkissian's government has refused to make public the terms of the European Union agreement. Is Sarkissian hiding the rumored report that European Union membership is dependent on Armenia handing Artsakh to Azerbaijan?

But more and more it seems that the root of the Moscow/Yerevan friction is not Armenia's decision to join the European Union. Armenia is a small market; it would have little economic impact in either of the EUs. It is not hard to believe that Russia, which already owns most of Armenia's infrastructure, wants to turn Armenia into a colony and treat Armenian politicians as if they are tsarist mujiks. President Vladimir Putin--judging by his drastic and hostile acts—wants to transform Armenia into a joke state: a state without sovereign powers. A Russian oblast.

Since its armies pushed south and drove out the Persians from Armenia in the 1829s, Russians—tsarist, Communist or post-Soviet—have treated Armenians like second-class citizens. There have been "court Armenians" who have been rewarded, but the majority of Armenians have been treated like inferiors or suspect. Witness the number of Armenians of Russia who have russified their names in the past 250 years. Even during the so-called racially universalist Soviet Union, many Armenians felt wise to add "ski" and "ov" to their last names. Others, like composer Aram Khachaturian inserted "Ilych" (Ivan, etc.) as their middle name.

While providing a shield against traditional Turkbeijan expansionism, Moscow has controlled Armenia's foreign policy since Armenia became independent. Khachatur Kobobelyan, leader of the opposition Free Democrats, said recently: "Armenia's foreign policy has for many years been an

integral part of Russia's foreign policies, but our interests do not always coincide."According to some sources, Armenia's Foreign Minister, Dikran Nalbandyan, uses Russian passport when he travels.

Armenians also haven't forgotten the number of times "Big Brother" Russia has betrayed over the past two centuries.

Unhappy that Armenia is behaving like an independent country should, Putin has decided not only to humiliate Yerevan but also threaten it through the belligerent and armament-laden Azerbaijan. Armenia is useful to Russia, but "troublesome" Armenians perhaps aren't. More than one Russian official, in the past two centuries, has said that Armenia without Armenians would be fine and dandy with Russia.

The current crisis is rampant with punditry. Does Russia want Baku to attack Armenia and then for Moscow come down, like the cavalry, to Armenia's rescue… for the obvious price? Would Russia pull the strings of such a war by controlling the fuel supplies of the Armenian army? Does Russia hope to occupy (or place its forces) in Artsakh at the end of the war? Is this drama the old Russian strategy of divide-and-conquer while Moscow extends its reach further south? Would Karapagh become a Russian bridge to Iran? Is petro-state Russia getting married to petro-state Azerbaijan?

These and scores of political, economic, and military questions, suppositions and theories continue to bubble while the Moscow/Yerevan tension continues. A great deal will take place between now and Armenia's scheduled mid-November signing of the European Union Association Agreement.

But no matter how the crisis is resolved, it's clear that if Moscow wants Armenia as an ally, it has to learn to respect Armenia and Armenians. It's not 1830, 1921, 1992… Armenians will not be taken for granted or be pushed around by Moscow bullies.