

VIEW FROM BRUSSELS: ARMENIA - LAND OF THE RISING SUN

Posted on February 24, 2019 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



Sam Morgan, [Engineering & Technology](#), January 24, 2019

On Europe's furthest-flung frontier lies a country that wants to use the power of the sun to drag itself out of poverty and help extinguish a conflict that has been raging for decades.



In Armenia, gas pipes litter the urban landscape, evidence of the former Soviet country's reliance on imported energy, particularly from Russia.

Flanked on both sides by closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, how to keep Armenian lights on is a worry for the new government, especially with US-led pressure to cut trade with Iran across its southern border weighing heavy.

Sam Morgan, [Engineering & Technology](#), January 24, 2019

On Europe's furthest-flung frontier lies a country that wants to use the power of the sun to drag itself out of poverty and help extinguish a conflict that has been raging for decades.



In Armenia, gas pipes litter the urban landscape, evidence of the former Soviet country's reliance on imported energy, particularly from Russia.

Flanked on both sides by closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, how to keep Armenian lights on is a worry for the new government, especially with US-led pressure to cut trade with Iran across its southern border weighing heavy.

Those worries got a little more pronounced this month when Moscow announced that it would be raising the price at which it sells gas to Yerevan. Armenia's politicians were adamant for months that a reduction in price was actually on the cards.

Last May, a botched attempt by the ruling regime to cement its hold over power was the last straw for Armenians, who went en masse to the streets and forced a change of government.

Analysts and political commentators have been wondering ever since whether the Kremlin was completely happy with the seismic changes going on in its old backyard. An increase in gas price for a country where about 30 per cent of people live in poverty is not a good sign.

Although Armenia's landlocked position between hostile powers is the source of many of its woes, it could ultimately end up being its saving grace. Its trump card? The sun.

Even the previous government had massive plans for Armenia's hugely promising solar power industry. One minister told this columnist before leaving office that he wanted people to stop thinking of Armenia "as a Christian country and to start thinking about it as a solar nation".

Indeed, in 2018 the amount of solar power produced in Armenia increased by nearly 50 per cent, while a planned large-scale power plant was given the green light. Over the course of its estimated 20-year operating period, it could offset over a million tonnes of CO₂.

The government also announced that its buildings would all start switching to solar power, while there are even plans afoot that would see every rooftop have at least one panel by 2030.

But what makes Armenia such a promised land for solar worshippers?

Part of the answer lies in its elevation and climate. Almost all of the country is above 650 metres, meaning the intensity of the sun's rays are higher, and the number of cloud-free days help boost the number of kilowatts available.

Government figures show that Armenia's solar power average is 60 per cent better than the European average.

Installation costs remain high, which act as a natural barrier in what is still a poor country, particularly by European standards.

That doesn't mean there is not an appetite for a green revolution though. Big hydropower reserves already mean about a third of power comes from renewables.

Armenian energy experts believe that given the right investment and subsidy schemes, the country's inhabitants could start to benefit from cheap heating and sustainable power. The new prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, is in Davos this week to court business.

One could argue that Western Europe's biggest problem with greening our economy is changing behaviour patterns. It is now accepted fact that we all need to eat less meat, drive less and take fewer flights in order to curb climate change. But very few of us take those steps.

In Armenia, decades of driving gas-powered cars already means that drivers are used to 'recharging' times and to plan journeys accordingly. Renewables advocates therefore believe that a switch to electric vehicles could be easy, if it goes hand-in-hand with green power.

But perhaps more significantly, an energy revolution in Armenia could help solve its long-standing conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is sandwiched between the two nations.

The Karabakh issue has crippled Armenia's economy, while its eastern neighbour has grown wealthy on fossil fuel exports. Armenian politicians have long used the conflict as something around which to build political support.

Political cynics would say that dipping into the well of Karabakh sentiment is easier than trying to solve the deeply ingrained economic woes with which the Caucasus nation still grapples.

The inevitable financial benefits that sustainable energy brings could therefore break the cycle that

the two countries find themselves locked in and, at the very least, help reopen negotiations.

Promising signs from both Pashinyan and long-term Azeri leader Ilham Aliyev suggest that there is now room for a thawing of ties.

There's evidence of renewable energy's power to do more than just help the climate and improve air quality, in Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

People often wonder how a small self-governing region, recognised only by other unrecognised states, can continue to exist basically in a state of war with Azerbaijan.

Well last summer, hydropower-rich Karabakh set a new record: it now generates all of its electricity from renewable energy and even exports to Armenia when needed.

Now that's real power.

