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## EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: GEO-STRATEGIC THREAT TO RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS?

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Relations between EU and Armenia have been intensively developed since the 1991 when Armenia restored its independence from the USSR. EU relations with Armenia are governed by the EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999. In Armenian foreign policy EU takes a special place. In the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia it is stated, “the development and consolidation of Armenia’s relations with the European structures, and with the European Union (EU) above all, is a priority direction for the country’s foreign policy [and] establishment of close relations with the EU serves Armenia’s long-term interests.”<sup>1</sup> Armenia is a member of the European Neighbourhood Policy which was developed in 2004, to avoid the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all<sup>2</sup>. As it is mentioned in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, “Armenia’s inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) is a major step forward toward European integration”<sup>3</sup>.

In 2008-2009 European Union Neighbourhood was divided into two individual EU policies – Union for the Mediterranean, and the Eastern Partnership. Armenia is a part of the last one.

The European Union Eastern Partnership program, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, was inaugurated on 7 May 2009 in Prague. The Eastern Partnership project was presented by the foreign minister of Poland with assistance from Sweden at the EU's General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels on 26 May 2008. Its aim is to enhance EU relationship with six former Soviet countries involved in the program.

After launching the program during the last few years the issue of the Eastern Partnership has been widely discussed and covered not just by different politicians, experts and media both in Europe and in six former Soviet countries involved in this program, but also in Russia, which is the leading political actor of the region of Eastern Europe. Although, after the collapse of the USSR, for-

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<sup>1</sup> **Gevorkyan, A.** National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. January 27, 2007. (accessed February 03, 2013). [http://www.mfa.am/u\\_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf](http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See: European Commission. The Policy: What is the European Neighbourhood Policy? October 30, 2010. [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/policy_en.htm) (accessed February 03, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> **Gevorkyan, A.** Indicated source.

mer Soviet republics have been developing their own independent internal and foreign policy, when it comes to the new integration processes that could weaken Russian influence in the region, those six Eastern Partnership members, mostly Armenia, as the main strategic partner of Russia in the of South Caucasus, cannot ignore Russian interests and Russia's opinion. From the very beginning of establishment of the Eastern Partnership program, Russian officials and political scientists repeatedly stated that the Eastern Partnership was seen as a threat for Russia. In this article I would like to pay attention on the opinions about the Eastern Partnership by Russian officials and academics; and will bring the results of the Content analysis of Russian and Armenian media, to see the main differences in the coverage of the EU Eastern Partnership program from the perspective of those countries. This will give us an opportunity to prove or disprove the hypothesis which is following: *Russian politicians and scientists are very skeptical about the EaP, than for example Armenian or European. They see the Eastern Partnership as a threat for Russian security. Author of the study assumes that the same mood prevails in the Russian media, as there is no media system in the world, which is not affected by the governments, societies, businesses and one cannot separate professional considerations from the domestic/national climate in which the journalist functions.*<sup>4</sup>

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Countries that are involved in this program, to varying degrees, are in the immediate sphere of Russian influence and interest, thus Russia is concerned about the program developing in its neighborhood. Russia is of particular interest of the EU Eastern Partnership program as Russian authorities see it as a threat to its security and interests in the region. It is very interesting to see how Russian authorities react on EaP. Thus, Dmitry Medvedev, as president, first stated, "We would not like to see that Eastern Partnership has turned into partnership against Russia. I would not like this partnership to consolidate some anti-Russian states with other European countries".<sup>5</sup> Afterwards, Medvedev said that Russia would not prevent the implementation of the program, though, he founds the program useless.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov, speaking in Brussels after negotiations with EU representatives, expressed hope that the EU "Eastern Partnership" program was not an attempt to create a new sphere of influence and was not directed against Russia. Russian Foreign Minister said that some of the comments from the EU alarmed Russian authorities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See: **Nossek, Hillel.** Our News and their News : The Role of National Identity in the Coverage of Foreign News. *Journalism*, 2004: 343–368. p. 347.

<sup>5</sup> "Медведев осудил антироссийские настроения "Восточного партнерства"". May 05, 2009. <http://www.uralweb.ru/news/policy/341944.html> (accessed: February 04, 2013 г. (in Russian)

<sup>6</sup> See: "Дмитрий Медведев назвал программу "Восточное партнерство" бесполезной". November 24, 2009. <http://news.am/rus/news/9265.html> (accessed February 04, 2013). (in Russian)

<sup>7</sup> See: Лавров боится, что "Восточное партнерство" создаст новую сферу влияния против России. April 04, 2009. [http://www.armtoday.info/default.asp?Lang=\\_Ru&NewsID=10847&SectionID=0&RegionID=0&Date=09/16/2009&PagePosition=54](http://www.armtoday.info/default.asp?Lang=_Ru&NewsID=10847&SectionID=0&RegionID=0&Date=09/16/2009&PagePosition=54) (accessed February 04, 2013). (in Russian)

As Sergey Zhiltsov, Doctor of Political Sciences, head of the Center of the CIS Institute of Contemporary International Studies, in his publication in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* mentions, Russia pays insufficient attention to this initiative by Europeans; meanwhile, the goal of the "Eastern Partnership" has far-reaching plans, which neither more nor less require dissection of post-Soviet space and the final separation of the former republics from Russia.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Russian expert A. Sergunin states: "the Eastern Partnership program that was officially initiated by the EU in May 2009 created a new challenge to Russia's diplomacy in Eastern Europe. The skeptical and negative assessments stemming from the fear of the rise of new dividing lines in Europe and potential decline of Russia's geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet space currently prevail in the Russian politico-academic community"<sup>9</sup>.

According to Sergunin a recent initiative of EU and a number of post-Soviet states to establish Eastern Partnership, has caused a lot of questions in Moscow about its objectives, contents and consequences for Russia itself and its relations with the EU and CIS countries. In his piece, Sergunin also mentions that Russian experts believe that the EaP's real priorities are quite different from the officially declared. Russian analysts believe that the most important component of the EaP is its energy component, and the creation of alternative ways of energy supply to Europe, in particular. In this case, motives of the EU are the desire to avoid energy dependence on Russia (uncertainty in the reliability of Ukraine as a transit country) and the fear that Russia may use energy diplomacy to pressure on EU countries.

Sergunin says that there are substantial differences between EU and Russian estimates of the EaP. The first are mostly positive. Their essence is to ensure that with proper use of the program capacity EU can get significant benefits in both economic and socio-political terms. In Russian political and expert-analytical environment, positive assessments of the EaP are almost entirely absent. At best, there is skepticism about the prospects for effective implementation of this project, and the Partnership itself is presented as the next EU bureaucracy product.

Another Researcher at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) Andrei Zagorski mentions that "Although Russia is not an addressee of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), neither the Russian government nor the political classes expect to see any direct benefits flow from this policy framework of the European Union"<sup>10</sup>. According to him, the EU, by offering an *association* to its eastern neighbours, aims to lead those countries towards progressive *disassociation* from the Russia; and developing a new trade

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<sup>8</sup> See: **Жильцов. С. С.** СНГ под натиском "Восточного партнерства" // "Независимая газета". April 29, 2009. [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-04-30/3\\_kartblansh.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-04-30/3_kartblansh.html) (accessed February 04, 2013). (in Russian)

<sup>9</sup> **Сергунин А. А.** «Восточное партнерство»: вызов российской дипломатии в восточной Европе // "Вестник ВГУ". Серия: лингвистика и межкультурная коммуникация. 2010, № 1: с. 205. (in Russian)

<sup>10</sup> **Zagorski, Andrei.** Eastern Partnership from the Russian Perspective. 2011. p. 41, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/05zagorski.pdf>

agreement and visa liberalization with six EaP countries EU establishes *new obstacles* for commerce and could *complicate the free movement* of people between the Russian Federation and those countries<sup>11</sup>.

It is worth noting that even experts in EU sometimes agree with their Russian colleagues and suggest to be accurate with Russia while entering its traditional area of interests.

For instance, Polish expert on international security Marcin Lapczynski suggests that Poland and Sweden should promote and implement EaP by cooperating with other EU members, especially with Germany. Finally, what is very interesting for the main subject of the thesis, he encourages EU to stress that Eastern Partnership is not directed against Russia etc.<sup>12</sup>

Senior Lecturer in European Politics at Aberystwyth University Elena Korosteleva in her article ‘The Eastern Partnership Initiative: A New Opportunity for Neighbours?’ supplements aforesaid by Lapczynski by saying that EU has entered to the traditional Russian sphere of interests. But, while Lapczynski calls Brussels to stress that EaP is not against Russia, Korosteleva states that Eastern neighbours of EU, “sandwiched between the EU and Russia, sooner or later will have to make a choice, which of necessity is totally unacknowledged by the Brussels officials”.<sup>13</sup> She adds that this choice, whichever way it goes will cause serious problems for all Eastern neighbours. She opposes EU and Russia and mentions that EaP countries, being neighbours of Russia, “struggle to balance their relations with these two competitive powers”.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is worth-noting that before the summit in Prague in 2009, a Czech diplomat anonymously commented on the Russia’s attitude to the Eastern Partnership initiative by saying, “Moscow is very negative about the "Eastern Partnership". But to be honest, this is Russia’s problem. They see the world through the glasses with zero sum. And we are not”<sup>15</sup>.

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As we noticed, Russian politicians and experts have some kind of negative and skeptical attitude toward the EaP. Based on aforementioned we have conducted a Quantitative Content analysis of 144 news items in two Armenian and two Russian online media within the period of one year, to explore the main tendencies of coverage of the EU Eastern Partnership program in Armenia and Russia. I assume that the same negative mood towards the Eastern Partnership program prevails in Russian media. Armenian media was chosen as a media of a country that is involved in the EaP, to compare the results of the analysis, to see whether there are any positive articles about the EaP from the Russian perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 41-43.

<sup>12</sup> See: **Lapczynski, Marcin**. The European Union’s Eastern Partnership: Chances And Perspectives. The Caucasian Review of International Affairs (CRIA), 2009: 143-155.

<sup>13</sup> **Korosteleva, Elena**. The Eastern Partnership Initiative: A New Opportunity for Neighbours? Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, 2011: 1-21., p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> “ЕС не считает членом “Восточного партнерства” европейскими странами и не уважает территориальную целостность Грузии и Азербайджана”. 07 May. 2009. [www. regnum. ru/news/1160636.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/1160636.html) (accessed February 05, 2013).

As the results of the content analysis showed the majority of the articles in both Armenian and Russian media do not express their attitude towards the EaP. However, if in the articles there were any opinions about the Eastern Partnership, they were mostly positive. The exception was the Russian case. Thus, while EaP was seen as something positive for Armenia, EU and other EaP countries, there was no positive attitude towards the program in context of the Russian interests. Moreover, just 25% of all articles where negativism is presented, were published in Russian media. However, as I already mentioned, the main tendency for negative coverage is seen from the Russian perspective.

Thus, the following conclusion should be done. There is difference in coverage from the different angles. For instance, while in one article EaP can be presented in a positive way for Armenia, from Russian perspective it could be negative or contradictory.

Within the number of articles that were analyzed in this study, it was found that many sources from different countries were used for covering the Eastern Partnership issue. But how do they relate to the tendencies of coverage?

As it was seen from the results of the content analysis, the European Union officials and politicians are the ones that appeared in the articles more than others did. I believe that this influenced the way of coverage as Eastern Partnership is initiated by the EU and EU officials in their speeches and comments praise the program and present it as very important issue for the EU and its Eastern Partners. And, as the majority of the articles are either hard<sup>16</sup> or soft<sup>17</sup> news items, in many cases the words of sources were not analyzed but were just quoted. Nevertheless, many times I found the same sources to be used in those media. Moreover, in many cases those media were just copying the story from other media and presenting it with the reference to the original article. Thus, from my point of view, this left its mark in the tendencies of the coverage of Eastern Partnership program.

On the other hand, when we were sampling the material for the analysis, we were expecting to find more articles related to the Eastern Partnership. Perhaps, after the EU will solve its internal problems connected to the financial crisis, it would pay more attention to the program and thus, the EaP itself will become more popular issue for media.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that Eastern Partnership does not take the significant position in the media both in Armenia and Russia, but as we saw from the results, when something important, like summit in Warsaw, is happening, Eastern Partnership becomes more popular issue for the coverage and analysis.

Summing up, it should be mentioned that the hypothesis put forward at the beginning of the study was partly proved. Thus, after doing some research on the relevant literature for the Eastern Partnership, I came to conclusion that Rus-

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<sup>16</sup> If the article does not contain any additional information but just some facts – I considered it as Hard news.

<sup>17</sup> If the article contains additional information like background but not just facts – I considered it as Soft news.

sian authorities and political scientists were seeing the Eastern Partnership as a threat to Russian national security. Furthermore, Russians see the territory of former Soviet Union, as a place for their traditional interests and they are not ready to let any other political actors take the leading position in the region. Thus, from the aforementioned conclusions we were assuming that the same mood of skepticism and negativism towards the Eastern Partnership was prevailing in the Russian media.

As the results of the analysis showed, the Eastern Partnership is not presented as a negative program or threat for Russia in general. However, if we look at the results in all four media from the position of How the Eastern Partnership is presented for Russia particularly, we will not find any positive opinions neither in Russian media nor in Armenian media. Moreover, as my observations showed, one of the reasons for this tendency is that the majority of the articles are either hard or soft news, where there are not presented opinions of the author or the experts.

So, what is the purpose of presenting EaP in the negative way for Russia? The reason is political. Russian official and political scientists repeatedly stated that the Eastern Partnership was seen as a threat for the Russia. Countries that are involved in this program are in the immediate sphere of its influence and interest, thus Russia is concerned about the program developing in its neighborhood.

Thus, while Armenian government chose the way of Eurointegration, Russian politicians claim the EU for being ambitious in the traditional area of Russian interests. As it was suggested by Marcin Lapczynski and Elena Korosteleva, European Union should stress that Eastern Partnership is not directed against Russia. Moreover, this should be done not just by EU, but EaP countries as well, as Russian role, as a regional actor, cannot be ignored. However, from our point of view, EU and six EaP countries should not only say that EaP is not anti-Russian program, rather, they need to prove it in action. Furthermore, Armenia, as a country, which has no access to the sea and remains staying in the blockade, should continue keeping its balanced foreign policy, which is based on a complementarity approach that seeks to simultaneously develop relations with all states in the region<sup>18</sup>, as we cannot afford us making any sudden moves in one direction or another, choosing between any of the geopolitical powers. The only right strategy – is to follow national interests.

**ՀԱՅԿ ԹՈՐՈՍՅԱՆ – Արևելյան գործընկերություն. Հարավային Կովկասում Ռուսաստանի շահերին աշխարհառազմավարական սպառնալիք** – Ծրագրի մեկնարկից ի վեր վերջին մի քանի տարիների ընթացքում, Արևելյան գործընկերության խնդիրը լայն քննարկման առարկա է քաղաքական գործիչների, փորձագետների և լրատվամիջոցների համար ինչպես Եվրոպայում և այս ծրագրում ընդգրկված վեց նախկին խորհրդային երկրներում, այնպես էլ Ռուսաստանում, որն առաջատար քաղաքական դերակատար է Արևելյան Եվրոպայում (արևելաեվրոպական տարածա-

<sup>18</sup> See: **Gevorkyan, A.** Indicated source.

շրջանում): Թեև ԽՍՀՄ փլուզումից հետո նախկին խորհրդային հանրապետությունները վարում էին ներքին և արտաքին անկախ քաղաքականություն, սակայն երբ սկսվեցին նոր ինտեգրացիոն գործընթացները, որոնք սպառնում էին թուլացնել Ռուսաստանի ազդեցությունը տարածաշրջանում, Արևելյան գործընկերության վեց անդամները, հատկապես Հայաստանը՝ որպես Հարավային Կովկասում Ռուսաստանի հիմնական ռազմավարական գործընկեր, չէին կարող անտեսել Ռուսաստանի շահերը և կարծիքը: Արևելյան գործընկերության մեկնարկից ի վեր ռուսական պաշտոնյաները և քաղաքագետները բազմիցս նշել են, որ Արևելյան գործընկերությունը սպառնալիք է Ռուսաստանի համար: Սույն հոդվածում ներկայացվում են Արևելյան գործընկերության վերաբերյալ ռուսական պաշտոնյաների և քաղաքագետների կարծիքները և հակազդեցությունը, ինչպես նաև ռուսական և հայկական ՁԼՄ-ների բովանդակային վերլուծության արդյունքները, որոնք թույլ են տվել բացահայտելու երկու երկրների՝ Ռուսաստանի և Հայաստանի կողմից ԵՄ Արևելյան գործընկերության ծրագրի լուսաբանման հիմնական տարբերությունները:

**АЙК ТОРОСЯН – *Восточное партнёрство: угроза геостратегическим интересам России на Южном Кавказе?*** – После запуска программы Восточного партнёрства её активно обсуждали в политических и экспертных кругах и широко освещали в СМИ – как на Западе, так и в бывших советских республиках, участвующих в ней, и России. Хотя после распада СССР бывшие соцстраны разрабатывают свою независимую внутреннюю и внешнюю политику, они не могут игнорировать мнение России и не учитывать её интересы. Это касается всех шести участников Восточного партнёрства, в особенности же Армении – основного стратегического партнёра России на Южном Кавказе. Российские политики и политологи неоднократно заявляли, что Восточное партнёрство представляет угрозу для России. В статье рассматриваются мнения российских экспертов и официальных лиц о Восточном партнёрстве. Кроме того, приведены результаты контент-анализа российских и армянских СМИ, выявляющие основные различия между ними в освещении названной программы.