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**ARMENIAN OFFICIALS REMAIN OVERLY CAUTIOUS DESPITE CITIZENS BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST IN RUSSIA**

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Armen Grigoryan

On July 14, Russias State Duma (the parliaments lower chamber) adopted a law, which allows citizens of countries where the Russian language has a constitutionally accepted official status [Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan] work in Russia as drivers without having to exchange their national drivers license. Leonid Kalashnikov, head of the Dumas standing committee on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasian integration, noted that Russia encourages the countries that pay respect to the Russian language. The law, therefore, grants the citizens of the mentioned countries an exemption from the demands set by another law adopted in 2013, which only allows those with a Russian drivers license to work as drivers, although its implementation had been postponed till June 1, 2017 (TASS, July 14).

As noted by an Armenian watchdog organization, the Union of Informed Citizens, the new Russian law contradicts the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) agreement, which guarantees free movement of the labor force. However, Russian lawmakers did not take into consideration that the new law violates the principle that international agreements take priority over national legislation (UICArmenia.org, July 20). As the new Russian law would cause discrimination against the Armenians working in Russia, an Armenian parliamentary delegation brought the issue up during a visit to Moscow. Russian Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin responded with a suggestion to have the Russian language granted an official status in Armenia (TASS, July 17). According to some Armenian sources, Volodin also complained of being asked about an issue that was not agreed in advance, and he pointed out the insufficient language knowledge of some guest workers. An opposition member of the Armenian delegation noted that he could not grasp the logic of how the status of the Russian language in Armenia would help guest workers to learn Russian, and Volodin reprimanded his Armenian counterpart, Ara Babloyan, for allowing an opposition representative to speak out, but ultimately agreed to review the issue later (Armlur.am, July 17).

Armenian officials reaction to the dispute was restricted. The Chair of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Relations, Armen Ashotyan, noted that the language issue was not on the agenda and the negotiations about the driving licenses should continue (Lenta.ru, July 18). However, a few days later, Ashotyan spoke about an issue that Armenian officials usually avoid or tend to agree with the Russian argument: he admitted that Moscows explanation that Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan are only an economic issue does not withstand criticism and undermines trust in the bilateral relations (News.am, July 22). Ashotyans statement in a certain way

contradicted President Serzh Sargsyans televised interview on July 13, in which Sargsyan had said: Nothing serious has happened so far [because of the Russian military supplies to Azerbaijan]. If any grave consequences occur, we may blame them; if not, we should consider those supplies as Russias policy towards stabilization of the regional situation (168.am, July 17). Although, in the few weeks preceding Sargsyans interview, Russia had delivered large shipments of offensive weapons to Baku, his approach remained quite in line with the Russian argument about the need to keep a balance that might allegedly deteriorate in case arms supplies are imported from other countries. Particularly, immediately after the four-day war in April 2016, Russias Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev justified arms sales to Azerbaijan with the need to keep the balance (see EDM, April 14, 2016). Earlier, Armenias foreign minister, Eduard Nalbandyan, had even spoken about Russias arms deals with Azerbaijan as our allys business, worth mentioning only from an economic point of view (Azatutyun.am, July 14).

Russian political scientist Sergei Markedonov criticized the official approach concerning the language issue. In his opinion, initiatives suggesting a violation of state status of the Armenian language are harmful for the bilateral relations and bound to backfire, especially considering Russias cooperation with Azerbaijan and the regular violations of cease-fire on the line of contact in Karabakh. Markedonov also ridiculed the current Russian soft power approach, limited to the language issue and Soviet nostalgia (Ponarseurasia.org, July 18).

Besides the language and guest workers problem, another widely discussed matter in the Russo-Armenian relations has been the supposed establishment of trade corridors between Russia and Armenia via Georgia and its occupied territories        and South Ossetia. While the Russo-Georgian negotiations did not reach an agreement (see EDM, July 10), Armenian officials and state-controlled media referred to the more optimistic Russian news reports, such as the one in Kommersant, which alleged that Russian and Georgian representatives had agreed to start the implementation of the 2011 agreement on trade corridors (Kommersant, July 10). While the state-controlled media, especially television, have habitually been relying on Russian sources coverage of most of the international issues, the officials excitement sometimes may cause a question about whether they receive any analytical notes besides the news reports, which are largely biased. At the same time, some think tanks and independent analysts are not optimistic about the possibility of trade corridors, noting that Russia has simply been using the issue to increase the pressure on Georgia and to persuade Tbilisi to accept Abkhazia and South Ossetia as negotiating sides (Aravot.am, July 18).

Armenian officials have also been continuing to avoid a meaningful discussion about energy diversification (see EDM, June 27). While frustration with the dependence on Russia and its derogatory approach may have been growing, very little is done to adjust and diversify the current policies. One of the probable reasons was recently mentioned at the Georgias European Way conference in Batumi by David Shahnazaryan, senior analyst at the Yerevan Regional Studies Center. In his opinion, there is so far no alternative to the strategic partnership with Russia, even though it is not quite satisfying, as none of the Armenian politicians would take a risk of military defeat in Karabakh (1in.am, July 18). However, Armenian officials concerns about the possible threat to the regimes stability and their group economic interests in case of being disloyal to Russia may be playing an equally important role.