

Armenian Unease at Planned Russian University

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Decision to open a branch of Moscow university seen as attempt to strengthen Russia's hand in the country.

Opposition politicians in Armenia have denounced the opening of a branch of Moscow State University in Yerevan. They see it as part of efforts by the Kremlin to further extend its reach in the country.

Government members welcomed the decision to open a local branch of the university, one of the world's leading academic institutions. Education and science minister Armen Ashotyan told a press conference on August 25 how delighted he was that after four years of negotiations, the university would open in Armenia while he was still in office.

Moscow State University already has affiliates in Azerbaijan and Kazakstan. As in those cases, the host government will cover the running costs.

"We believe it's a justified investment," Ashotyan said.

Since 1997, Yerevan has also had the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, which comes under the education ministries of both countries. Armenia has other international academic institutions including American and French universities and the European Regional Academy. In those cases, Armenian state involvement is limited to funding some scholarships.

Armenia has a longstanding and close relationship with Russia. It hosts Russian military bases and has handed over its natural gas distribution network to energy giant Gazprom. (See **Russian Energy Giant Captures Armenian Market**.) Last year, President Serzh Sargsyan abandoned plans to sign an association agreement with the European Union and announced that Armenia wanted instead to be part of the Moscow-led Customs Union. (**Armenia Faces Delay to Joining Moscow-Led Union**.)

Some in Armenia are nervous of the ever-closer embrace of their huge neighbour. Opponents of the new university see it as just another way for the Kremlin to project political power.

The head of the Armenian Institute for International Affairs and Security, political scientist Stepan Safaryan, sees the university project as part of the process of incorporating Armenia into the Customs Union, and beyond that the broader Eurasian Economic Union.

"It's all connected with Russian political aspirations to establish control over Armenian statehood," he said, going on to contrast this with the intentions of other states investing in education. "The United States hasn't set itself the goal of getting its imperialist claws into Armenia. At the American university, all they [students] do is get a Western-standard education, for example so as to work in an international organisation. But with Moscow State University, the context is clear."

Anahit Bakhshyan, deputy director of the National Educational Institute, which comes under the education ministry, does not accept that any initiative of this kind is disinterested, but she says there are still differences.

"Of course, the establishment of any foreign university has to be connected to politics," she told IWPR. "The issue here is that the US and France are stable democracies and are perfectly aware of how far they can involve themselves in Armenia's domestic affairs. In this case, though, the Russians are clearly exerting pressure."

While Safaryan is sure the Russian university will not be short of applicants given its reputation, others are less sure of the academic need for it.

Heghine Bisharyan, who leads the Country of Law party in parliament, believes the decision to open a new institution should have only been taken when the authorities had identified a need for the kind of degree courses it will be offering.

"I'm not fundamentally against it, although I think it's possible it's connected to Armenian accession to the Eurasian Economic Union," she said. "What concerns me most is that student numbers are dropping from year to year because of societal problems and emigration.... There were communes [local government areas] in Armenia where schools didn't produce a single graduate this year - and they are our future students."

Zaruhi Postanjyan, a member of parliament from the opposition Heritage party objects to the government

having to fund the Russian university branch, paying salaries and even covering staff's plane tickets to and from Moscow.

"I'm against this university operating at a cost to our taxpayers," she said. "And what about fair competition? The teaching staff at the American, French and Slavonic universities aren't paid from the government budget. This is no more than the continuation of Russian tsarist policies; it's one more manifestation of aggression. Of course we have friendly ties with the Russian people, and let's not forget the 2.5 million Armenians living in Russia, but this university branch should function in a competitive market, just like the rest."

Margaret Yesayan, member of parliament with the ruling Republican Party, said she personally was more of a Europhile, but the new university should not be seen as an extension of Russian policy.

"Armenian policies are strong in Armenia," she said.

Ashotyan hit back at critics of the new institution, pointing out that had been no outcry when the government decided to support English-language studies at the American University.

"No one wrote, 'What are you doing? Why do we need English-language education?' If it works, and a branch of Moscow State University opens in Armenia, it will encourage competition in the system," the minister said.

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