In November 2017, the Republic of Armenia (RA) plans to sign an important treaty with the European Union. The document is known as the “Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement” (CEPA). In the view of its supporters, the expansion of cooperation with the EU as a result of the CEPA implementation should benefit the Armenian economy. However, the conditions put forward by the European party make people doubt the benefits of the agreement for the Republic of Armenia.

One of the important requirements of the EU, which Armenia must fulfill in accordance with the CEPA, is the closure of the Armenian nuclear power plant.

The Armenian (Metsamor) NPP is located near Metsamor in the Ararat Valley, 28 km from Yerevan. More than 100 Soviet enterprises and organizations, most of which belonged to the RSFSR, took part in the construction of the station and the manufacture of necessary equipment, and after the collapse of the USSR, it was taken over by the Russian state corporation “Rosatom.”
The first power unit of the Armenian nuclear power plant was launched in 1976, and the second unit was put into operation in 1980. The project of the station was developed taking into account the seismic activity of the Armenian highland. The increased strength of the buildings, the monolithic slab in the basement and the hydro-depreciation system made it possible to prevent an accident during the devastating Spitak earthquake of December 1988. The earthquake claimed tens of thousands of lives and caused tremendous damage to the Armenian infrastructure and industry, but there was no radiological catastrophe. Moreover, the Armenian NPP remained fully operational.

However, in fear of new ground tremors, the Soviet leadership decided not to take the risk, and in early 1989, the operations of both units of the nuclear power plant were ceased. The Armenian SSR then shifted to using hydrocarbon fuel as its main energy source. Armenia does not have its own larger or smaller oil and gas fields. Therefore, hydrocarbons were supplied by rail and gas pipelines from the Azerbaijan SSR, the Turkmen SSR and the RSFSR. After the dissolution of the USSR and the beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, the shipments by Azerbaijan were stopped. The transit of Russian energy carriers through the territory of Georgia also became impossible due to the military activities in Abkhazia and Ossetia. Turkey, which supported Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict, blocked all communication through the Turkish-Armenian border. Armenia thus found itself blockaded.

After that, the energy crisis of 1992-1995 broke out in Armenia, which became a difficult page in Armenian history. The relaunch of the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant helped overcome it. In 1993, the Government of Armenia decided to begin rehabilitation work on the second power unit of the station. The first unit was then already partially dismantled and was not fit for restoration. In November 1995, Power Unit No. 2 of the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant was put back into operation again.

At present, the station generates up to 40% of all the electricity consumed in the RA. Despite the successful operation of two Armenian thermal power plants and several dozen hydropower stations, as well as energy exchange with Iran, it remains a strategically important target for Armenian energy security. Therefore, for many, the demand of the European Union to close the Armenian nuclear power plant is puzzling: do the expansion of cooperation with the EU and the possibility of the introduction of a visa-free regime cost 40% of electricity?

It should be noted that the EU has long been pushing for the closure of the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant. This issue has been raised periodically in the negotiations between Brussels and Yerevan since the early 2000s. Also, Azerbaijan and Turkey have for many years been demanding that the station operations be discontinued. However, these two countries have been engaged in a long-standing conflict with Armenia, and there is nothing surprising about their desire to try and weaken it. Nevertheless, the motives of the EU leadership are not yet very clear.

Usually, the supporters of the station closure are explaining their position in terms of security considerations. Thus, on 26 April 2017, the day of the 31st anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan once again called upon the international community to turn its attention to the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant. It was stated that the station was built based on the same technologies as the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, that it is located in a seismically hazardous zone, and that no major repairs have ever been carried out on it in all its years of existence, as the RA does not have the means to fully maintain its nuclear power plant. According to the representatives of the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Armenian NPP poses a threat to the lives of millions of people in the region of the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean seas.

Most of these statements are untrue. First, the Armenian NPP does not have much in common with the Chernobyl NPP. As mentioned above, the plant was designed taking into account the increased seismicity of the construction area. At the Armenian NPP, VVER-440 reactors were installed that are much more stable than the RBMK reactors operating at Chernobyl. Secondly, the operation of the station is constantly supervised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has repeatedly confirmed its security. Other international organizations are also in agreement with the IAEA.

For example, in August-September 2017, The World Association of NPP Operators audited the operation of the Armenian NPP. A panel of experts from eight countries assessed the plant performance in terms of international safety standards. Following this assessment, some of them stated that the level of safety of the Armenian NPP is higher than that of most European nuclear power plants.

The European Union also recently had the opportunity to verify the plant's security: in the summer of 2016, a group of experts from the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group and representatives of the European Commission conducted an expert assessment of the report on the “stress test” at the Armenian NPP. It should be recalled that, after the accident at the Japanese station “Fukushima-1” in 2011, it was decided that all European nuclear power
plants were to undergo a “stress test,” during which reactors were supposed to operate under conditions close to the conditions of the Fukushima accident. A number of non-EU countries, including Armenia, also voluntarily decided to conduct such tests.

With regard to the maintenance of the Armenian NPP, to which, according to the Azerbaijani MFA, the RA does not have any funds allocated, it should be recalled that, since the relaunching of the station in 1995, Russian specialists from Rosatom have been carrying out the planned repairs. Rosatom is currently in the process of extending the operating life of Power Unit No. 2 of the Armenian NPP in accordance with the agreement that the Russian Federation and Armenia concluded in 2014. In May 2017, the RA Ministry of Energy stated that two thirds of these works had been completed. The Russian party took over the financing of the modernization of the nuclear power plant by allocating Armenia a credit of USD 270 million and a grant of USD 30 million.

Thus, the statements coming from Azerbaijan about the threat posed by the Armenian NPP to the whole region appear groundless. Many experts believe that the large-scale company deployed by Azerbaijan and Turkey against the atomic energy of the Republic of Armenia only has the goal of weakening its old enemy, inflicting it with maximum damage by any means. There is even a perception that the closure of the nuclear power plant is necessary for Azerbaijan in connection with its military plans.

It should be recalled that in April 2016, after more than 20 years of armistice, some fighting broke out between the armed forces of the RA and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on the one hand and the Azerbaijan troops on the other. The fighting was soon halted, but after that, some high-ranking Azerbaijani officials began threatening Armenia with a missile attack. One of the reasons why these threats are not yet feasible is the state of the Armenian NPP. Local weather conditions are such that in the event of Azerbaijani missiles hitting a station loaded with nuclear fuel, the wind would carry the resulting radioactive cloud back to Azerbaijani territory. Thus, the NPP is not only an important source of energy for Armenia, but also a defense barrier against military blackmail.

If the behavior of Azerbaijan and its ally Turkey seems understandable, the reason for their support by the European Union is unclear. The EU is not offering Armenia any specific substitution for its nuclear energy. There are only unclear promises of investment in renewable energy sources. Given the precarious financial situation of the EU, its promises should not be relied upon. The RA itself does not have the means to change its energy in a revolutionary manner. It is argued that once it accepts the EU conditions and signs the CEPA, the country will immediately undergo a new energy crisis or become energy dependent on the countries that would agree to supply Armenia with hydrocarbons. If it were Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic could forget its independence. Perhaps Brussels, which is now concerned about the integrity of the EU after Brexit and the events in Catalonia, would welcome such a result.

However, the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant is clearly not scheduled to close in the near future. As mentioned above, Rosatom is now working to extend its term of service to 2026. The possibility of building a new unit equipped with a more modern and safe Russian VVER-1000 reactor is still being discussed. In October 2017, the Russian company TVEL (a subsidiary of Rosatom specializing in the production of nuclear fuel) and the management of the Armenian NPP signed a new major contract for the fuel supply.

At the end of October 2017, there was held a regular meeting of the Security Council for Nuclear Energy under the President of Armenia, at which Armenian leader Serzh Sargsyan stated that the preservation and development of nuclear energy remains a strategic direction for the country.

All this clearly contradicts the conditions of the CEPA. The EU may have to reconsider its requirements if it wants the treaty to be signed.

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