



## EU associative agreements may raise security in South Caucasus

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Natalia Shapovalova

News.Az interviews **Natalia Shapovalova, a researcher at FRIDE** (a think tank based in Madrid).

**EU initiated talks with the South Caucasus countries on associative agreement in early July. The countries of this region further aim to join the EU. How far is Europe ready to go in this integration process?**

Today, the associative agreement on which negotiations are already held with EU's eastern neighbors (since 2007 with Ukraine) do not envision membership prospects. Probably, some changes are possible in the position of the EU member-states in the long-term perspective, but so far the associative agreements with Eastern Partnership countries will differ from those signed with the Central European countries primarily the aim of the association in the 90's. The agreements with the Central European countries regarded the EU membership of these countries as a final goal and association as a way to attain it. The agreements on stabilization and association with Western-Balkan countries signed in 2000 set their status as of potential EU members. No such mentioning should be expected from the associative agreement with the South Caucasus states.

**How soon will Europe be ready to simplify visa regime with such countries as Azerbaijan?**

The visa facilitation agreements are envisioned with Eastern Partnership member-states. They are signed along with the readmission agreement. Georgia has signed these agreements this year, while Ukraine and Moldova have been executing them for several years. The last opinion of the EU Board of 15 June 2010 about relations with the South Caucasus confirmed EU's readiness for visa facilitation once again. Thus, most depends on your country. As for the complete liberalization of the visa regime, the prospects here are vague. Even Ukraine, which has been holding a visa dialogue with EU since 2008 has not yet received the so-called road map-a plan of measures and reforms whose execution to help claim for visa cancellation.

**It is not a secret that in Europe there are numerous opponents of elimination and even facilitation of visa regime with the former Soviet countries who say this will promote growth in illegal migration, increase number of crimes and so on. What can you say about it?**

Along with the aforementioned reasons which naturally cause concerns of the EU countries, there are also political reasons. The cancellation of the visa regime in the relations with the European countries is often a sign to political rapprochement (for example, provision of the status of the candidate and prospects of membership). In addition, the nonvisa regime with one of the post-Soviet countries prompts the need to consider this possible for other countries. It is not a secret that when some EU countries spoke for cancellation of visa for Russian citizens at the last summit Russia-EU, Poland urged to provide this opportunity to Eastern European countries.

**Security is among the main segments of associative agreement. Can this fact prompt EU's intensification in the resolution of security problems in the South Caucasus, in particular, the Karabakh conflict settlement?**

The experience of southern neighbors of the EU shows that there is no direct tie between the agreement on association and EU's readiness to play a more active role in the resolution of territorial conflicts. However, positive implications can be expected from the agreements on association and in security sphere in the long-term perspective. First of all, the increase in trade, investments and internal reforms, if such occur in the Eastern partnership countries in the result of execution of agreements on association, could promote a more favorable political and economic atmosphere for resolution of conflicts in the South Caucasus.

**Turkey's example has shown that not all in Europe are ready to admit new members. Do you think the Muslim factor may face a curbing role in the development of EU's cooperation with Azerbaijan?**

Turkey is a big country and if it joins EU, redistribution of political power will occur within the EU itself since Turkey will claim for almost the same number of votes in the EU council as Germany has. I think this factor is of great importance. Turkey is a relatively poor country (compared to EU's average). In case of its membership, EU's budget will be redistributed dramatically. I think we should not exaggerate the importance of the Muslim factor. Turkey must continue developing as democracy. The same can be attributed to Azerbaijan.

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