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InterMedia Survey Finds Armenians Most Favorably Inclined Towards Russia and Optimistic about Democracy in their Country

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Despite a powerful Diaspora lobby in the United States, Armenians’ positive feelings towards the U.S. are nearly 40 percentage points behind their feelings towards neighboring Russia. So says a survey of the small (3 million inhabitants) yet strategically located nation, conducted earlier this year by InterMedia, a Washington, D.C.-based research, evaluation and consulting organization.

The InterMedia survey found fully 90 percent of Armenians are favorably inclined towards Russia, but only 53 percent say they are so inclined towards the United States.

“The higher favorability towards Russia compared to the U.S. is not surprising,” says Lyuda Andriyevska, one of InterMedia’s project managers for Eurasia. “Russia has been the main strategic partner for Armenia for centuries. Currently, Russia provides landlocked Armenia with oil and gas, invests heavily in business and infrastructure, sells weapons and supports many positions of Armenian foreign policy, the touchiest of which is its dispute with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.”

Armenia is strategically significant in the region due in part to its location at both the energy and ethnic crossroads of Europe, Asia and Middle East. With growing demand for energy resources in the world, Armenia is an important player among three regional powers—Iran, Turkey and Russia—all of which compete for political and economic leadership in the region. By offering its support, Russia prevents Turkey from penetrating into Muslim and Turkic-speaking Central Asian republics and so keeps its influence in the Caucasus region. Through Armenia, Russia also has direct access to Iran’s energy resources.

Only slightly more than one-quarter of Armenians, 28 percent, are favourably inclined towards their northern neighbour, Georgia. “One reason is the souring of Georgian-Russian relations over the last couple of years,” says Ms. Andriyevska. “Georgia serves as a lifeline for the Armenian economy, as all the inland trade with Russia goes through it. However, the ongoing conflict

between Georgia and Russia has seriously disrupted communication and transportation of energy and food supplies to Armenia. This should serve to increase Armenians' animosity towards Georgia and perhaps even take some of the lustre off their feelings towards Russia.”

Despite its warm feelings, Armenia has tried to diminish Russia's influence by cooperating with Iran on its own. Armenia and Iran are cooperating on several large-scale energy projects, including gas transit from Iran to Armenia (the first pipeline opened in May 2007), and construction of highways and hydro-electric plants on the border of the two countries. Armenia is also exporting its electric energy to Iran.

Armenians' own national interests are also reflected in their opinions towards other neighbors. Favorability among Armenians towards Turkey and Azerbaijan continues to be extremely low—only 4 percent of the population is favourably inclined towards Turkey, and even fewer, 2 percent, towards Azerbaijan. Both neighbours have shied away from economic activities with Armenia since mid 1990 as a result of the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. Although Turkey has no direct involvement in the conflict, it maintains a blockade of Armenia as a demonstration of support for Azerbaijan's claims to the region.

The InterMedia survey also found Armenians are pro-European but less keen on NATO. Seventy percent of the population agree or strongly agree with the statement that “Armenia should join EU.” NATO, on the other hand, has the support of only slightly more than a quarter of the population, 27 percent.

Although favorability toward Russia is high, there are fundamental differences in public sentiment between the two countries. The InterMedia survey finds Armenians are more optimistic about democratic changes in their country and have more faith in the power of the electoral process than do Russians. Almost two-thirds of Armenians, 64 percent, anticipated increased chances for democracy and personal self expression after the presidential elections in February 2008; only 5 percent of the Russian population expected similar improvements in terms of democracy and self expression after their own 2008 presidential elections. (InterMedia's Russian survey took place in January 2008.)

Survey results also showed that Armenians' most hoped-for post-election improvements include the “stable development of Armenia” (82 percent), higher salaries and pensions, (79 percent), and a better life for their families and themselves (78 percent.)

InterMedia is a leading international media research, public opinion, evaluation and consulting organization creatively equipping clients to understand their audiences, gauge their effectiveness and target their communications in transitional and developing societies worldwide. Based in Washington, D.C., and active year-round in more than 60 countries, InterMedia helps clients understand complex issues in challenging research environments. The company's strengths include its people—area experts skilled in scientifically-based research and focused on client solutions—its vast global network of local research partners and contacts and its rich data archive of more than 670 media and opinion surveys carried out over the past 15 years.

Survey Details: *InterMedia conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,000 face-to face interviews in Armenia between 22 January and 27 February 2008. The survey was conducted via a multi-stage random probability sample of the adult population of Armenia (those 15 and older). The sample data were weighted on gender, age, type of settlement, and education. Maximum margin of error, with a 95% confidence interval, is $\pm 2.2\%$.*

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