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Armenia Looks to Join Russia-Led Eurasian Union This Year

By The Moscow Times

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin (R) talks to his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan during their meeting in Sochi.

Armenia could join the Russia-led trade bloc the Eurasian Economic Union, or EEU, this fall, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan said after meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi.

Armenia has cultivated a close relationship with Russia to secure itself against neighbors Turkey and Azerbaijan, where a long-running land dispute has in recent days turned increasingly violent. Last year, Armenia agreed to join Russia's Customs Union, a predecessor to the EEU that also includes Kazakhstan and Belarus.

"We never imagined joining the EEU this year. But I think we will sign it [an accession treaty] possibly in the fall," Sargsyan said in an interview with Armenian news outlet Armnews TV on Monday.

The EEU is one of Putin's pet projects and envisions an European Union-style political and economic space built on the foundation of the Moscow-led Customs Union. The bloc will come into being on Jan. 1, 2015, and Moscow hopes to rally many former post-Soviet nations into its ranks.

Sargsyan's meeting with Putin was primarily intended to address the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a contested region nestled between the two South Caucasus nations. Putin met with the leaders of both post-Soviet nations on Saturday, followed by individual sit-downs on Sunday to discuss their respective bilateral relationships in detail.

Sargsyan said his meeting with Putin had focused on how Western sanctions against Russia will impact the Armenian economy, which is highly integrated with Russia's.

But Sargsyan pointed out that Russia's ban on Western food imports last week — a response to last month's so-called Phase 3 sanctions aimed at pressuring Russia to abandon its support for separatist groups in eastern Ukraine — has opened huge market spaces for Armenian agricultural goods to be exported to Russia.

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