A COORDINATED EFFORT THROUGH DEMOCRACY

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Category: Opinions

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Two-thousand-and-eight was a year full of political activities in the homeland and geopolitical developments that left their impact on Armenia.

- The presidential election was held in February and was followed by the tragic events in March that shook up Yerevan and the whole country.
- The Russian-Georgian war that broke out in August had many negative effects on Armenia, but the Armenian economy would have seen more catastrophic results had the war lasted longer.
- Armenia's president, S. Sargsyan invited his Turkish counterpart to come to Yerevan and watch the football match between the teams of the two countries. In September, President Gül made the unprecedented journey that seemed to signal a thaw in the diplomatic relations between the two countries, and shortly afterwards a meltdown of Armenian-Turkish relationship was observed.
- During the Fall, Turkey proposed the Caucasus security initiative supported by Russia, and Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations about Nagorno-Karabakh were reactivated. These events culminated in the Russian-sponsored Maindorf Declaration.

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- In the midst of all these activities Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey held tripartite meetings and discussions about Karabakh. They plan to have more meetings devoted to Karabakh as well as to other outstanding issues, such as the closed borders between Turkey and Armenia, and the Genocide of the Armenians that Turkey denies.
- On the international scene, two events deserve special mention. Barack Obama, a supporter of the Genocide bill, was elected as the new President of the USA. The European Council initiated and continues to exercise pressure on Armenia for its failure to meet Human Rights standards.

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Turkish-Armenian Relations

The Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations which previously were conducted through the Minsk group, transformed into Armenian-Turkish negotiations, whereby the Turkish side represents both Turkey and Azerbaijan, while the Armenian side represents Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Turkey continues to keep its border with Armenia closed, and refuses to establish diplomatic relationships with Armenia only because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Indeed, in taking such a course towards Armenia, its policy is nothing more than an extension of Azerbaijan's policy towards Armenia.

During these negotiations, Turkey actively promotes the idea of forming a joint commission of historians to study what happened during 1915-1923. The goal is to prevent the new US Administration from calling the massacres Genocide. Historically the Armenian Diaspora has conducted the efforts related to the recognition of the Genocide by the international community. It is fair to claim that the current format of negotiations provides obvious tactical advantages to the Turkish party. Neither Nagorno-Karabakh Republic nor the Armenian Diaspora is represented in the talks.

To make matters worse Turkey and Azerbaijan claim that the Republic of Armenia is an aggressor and has

annexed Azerbaijani territories. They try to play the card of the victim, and propagate the idea that the issue of the occupied Azeri territories should be part of the discussions related to the Genocide. Moreover, Turkey tries to create artificial conflicts of interests between Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora in order to claim that there is no pan-Armenian position with respect to the Genocide issue.

It will not be surprising to see Turkey seeking Russia's help to prevent furthering the promotion of the recognition of the Genocide in the Western countries, where the Armenian Diaspora is active. Of particular importance for Turkey is the USA, where the president-elect has made reassuring promises to Armenians. While Russia itself has a very influential Armenian Diaspora, it does not have direct leverage over the Armenians in the Western countries. However, Russia has the potential of inducing indirect modifications through Armenia to reduce the level of demands by the Western Armenian Diaspora.

Russia – Turkey - Europe - NATO

After the war in Georgia, Turkish and Russian relations became warmer as Turkey showed support to Russia's actions. Her neutral to pro-Russian stand is partly explained by trade motives and secondly by a latent desire to distance itself from US interests in the region. In return, Turkey expects favors by having Russia exert pressure on Armenia to make concessions in Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, and possibly other matters.

The war was a Russian effort to prevent NATO expansion in the Black Sea area. USA replied by establishing a diplomatic post in Crimea. This strategically important peninsula, which is part of Ukraine, is inhabited by a pro-Russian population and where the Russian Black Sea Navy base is located. The Russia-West tension will involve Crimea in the near future. To continue to enjoy Turkey's friendly stance Russia has to content with Turkey's expressed intent of having continuance of Russia's change of stance and intrusion in matters related to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Unfortunately, on many occasions Armenians have paid too high a price for Russian interests in the region, eventually rendering Armenia weaker and more dependent on Russia. On the other hand, the US administration, while being pressured by its domestic Armenian Diaspora, can impose some conditions over the Republic of Armenia if it decides to recognize the Genocide.

The thrust over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh comes from not only Turkey and Russia. The West requires secure transfer routes for energy resources from Azerbaijan and Central Asia bypassing Russia. In that pursuit, it tries to please oil-rich Azerbaijan. A quick resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict makes it possible to realize such a goal, provided Armenia makes significant concessions. Accordingly, the co-chairs of the Minsk group upheld the principle of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. The principle of self-determination has gone out of the door despite the involved countries' recent recognition of independence of separatist formations: Kosovo by USA and France, South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia.

Armenia is experiencing pressure on yet another level. In its December meeting in Paris, the European Council Parliamentary Assembly's Human Rights Monitoring Commission – PACE - proposed an extremely drastic measure to punish Armenia through suspending its voting power in the European Council. The decision was made on grounds that human rights conditions in Armenia were not acceptable. It was related to the continuance of imprisonment of opposition members regarded as political prisoners. While Armenians should welcome genuine European community concerns of human rights conditions in Armenia, it is impossible not to notice a concurrence in timing of the Commission's decision with concerted efforts of several parties to exercise

pressure over Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations.

Hypocrisy of the West

It is ironic that the European Council recognized the results of the presidential election in Armenia as legitimate, and went on even further by appreciating "the progress in the election process" over the previous years. Yet the very same Council declares the same country to be in violation of Human Rights because of the presence of political prisoners.

Is not recognizing the results of the presidential election, later turning around and talking about Human Rights violations at a crucial time of negotiations a well planned means to exert pressure over Armenia? Is the suspension of a mere 6.8 million dollars designated for one of the Millennium Ventures program planned for 2009 on the same grounds of human rights violations just a coincidence? Meanwhile the West approves 4.5 billion dollars to Georgia despite the presence of the same unacceptable Human Rights conditions, and despite the facts of the Geogian authorities chasing their political opponents resulting in, for example, France granding political asylum to Irakli Okruashvili - the former Defense Minister of Georgia - who currently is in the opposition. Moreover, the West is mum even about the Georgian massive attacks on South Ossetian civilian population.

The same European Council endures dynastic transfer of power in Azerbaijan. On March 18, 2009, Azerbaijan will conduct a referendum. It is proposed to remove the clause from the Constitution that bans the same person being elected President of the country more than twice. If the referendum is successful it will effectively make Ilham Aliyev a life long President. While this proposal has nothing at all in common with the European standards of democracy, the European Council remains silent. The reaction of the European Council regarding to the expected massive forgeries in the referendum will be another measure to evaluate the true mission of that organization in the region.

Democracy and Pan-Armenian Strategy

Bearing in mind the potentially disastrous outcomes of the above developments, Armenians everywhere, in the Armenian Diaspora and the Republic of Armenia, need to work out a clearly defined joint strategy and an action plan. While external factors are out of our control, building a humanistic oriented democratic Armenia depends only on Armenians. This will not only lay grounds for repatriations in future, but also combat current external pressures on Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations. Our history, values, rich cultural heritage, an established Armenian Diaspora in the Western countries are all significant factors and ideal internal resources for building democracy in our country. We currently face huge political pressures within our society, and it is expected to get worse with the damaging effects of the world economic crisis on Armenian economy.

Ironically, while we Armenians uphold the democratic principle of the right to self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh to counter the calls for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, we have no success in building a democratic society at home. Releasing prisoners who are detained based on unsubstantiated pretexts, initiating a political dialogue with the opposition, and diffusing the tense political atmosphere are vitally important for a country involved in its future-defining negotiations.

It is high time that we coordinate our efforts to circumvent manipulations hatched up by major geopolitical forces that today, once more, are playing the Genocide card to the tune of their interests and to the detriment of Armenians and Armenia. A pan-Armenian strategy would provide the means to neutralize such efforts.

Without a pan-Armenian strategy defining and prioritizing our national goals and centred on building a fair and democratic society at home - a materially better one than in the other countries of the region - external influences will significantly increase the pressure on Armenia, and could lead to unacceptable concessions for both Nagorno-Karabakh and the process of the recognition of the Genocide by the international community. We have to realize that Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations will decide not only the future of it but also Armenia's existence as a whole. We have to succeed in fully incorporating the Armenian Diaspora into building a prosperous homeland. Armenia must be able to protect all its people and fully represent aspirations of the Armenian Diaspora.

Political stability based on democracy and respect for Human Rights is a precondition for the mentioned goals. The Armenian authorities must convince that the national interests are ahead of personal gains and the desire to hold political power. They should stop using the presence of external threats as an excuse to create an oppressive atmosphere in the country. Likewise, the political opposition, the intelligentsia, the various interest groups, and the Diaspora need to recognize that unity is crucial, and look beyond immediate limited interests. Armenian democrats, inside and outside of Armenia, need to recognize those external threats, and hold the survival of Armenia uppermost in their minds.

The measures outlined above will define our collective responsibility as a nation towards future generations; and as a nation looking to the future we have no right to fail in these momentous times.