"WHOEVER CONTROLS THE PAST CONTROLS THE FUTURE..."

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Category: Opinions

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By Hovhannès Guevorkian, Representative of Artsakh in France, 22 March 2026

Recently, during a press briefing, the Armenian Prime Minister stated 'Nagorno-Karabakh has always been part of Azerbaijan' and that 'the Armenian authorities have always recognized this, but have concealed it'. In making this statement, the head of the Armenian government is not merely offering a debatable interpretation, he is stating what he presents as an absolute truth, a truth that brooks no nuance, no contradiction, nor any reminder of the facts.

If this recognition has 'always' existed, it has been remarkably well concealed. So well concealed that, for nearly twenty-five years, the Armenian authorities negotiated under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group as if the status of Nagorno-Karabakh remained to be determined. So well concealed that the co-chairs themselves (France, the United States and Russia) put forward numerous proposals based on a balance between territorial integrity and the right of peoples to self-determination. So well concealed, indeed, that these very proposals provided for an interim status, security guarantees and, above all, the subsequent determination of the final status through a legally binding expression of the will of the populations concerned.

In other words, if one follows the Prime Minister's logic, not only the Armenian authorities, but also the entire international mediation process would have ignored for decades a 'truth' that was nevertheless obvious. A truth so well hidden that it does not appear in the fundamental texts of the Minsk process, which were explicitly based on the coexistence of several principles—including that of self-determination—and on the very idea that the question of status remained open.

But what is striking about this statement is not merely its disconnect from the facts. It is the conception of truth that it reveals. A truth that no longer derives from history, documents or the reality of the negotiations, but is now defined by its conformity to a political line. What serves the politics of the moment is true; what contradicts it, is dismissed.

George Orwell wrote: 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.' In this logic, truth is no longer what is, but what those in power claim it to be. It becomes an instrument, not a requirement.

For her part, Hannah Arendt pointed out that modern political lying consists not merely in concealing the truth, but in replacing it with a coherent construct, to the point of blurring the very distinction between fact and fiction. When those in power assume the right to redefine reality, it is not merely opinions that change: it is the facts themselves that become open to challenge.

It is in this light that we must view a recent, highly significant episode: the dismissal of the director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan, after she presented the Vice-President of the United States with a copy of a book deemed at odds with the government's current political stance. Many academics have expressed concern over this decision, seeing it as an attack on academic

independence and the integrity of historical research.

The parallel is illuminating. On the one hand, a 'truth' proclaimed at the highest level of government, presented as a retroactive fact, intended to be imposed as the official interpretation of the past. On the other, a head of a scientific institution being called to order for disseminating content perceived as non-compliant with this line. In both cases, the same mechanism is at work: anything that diverges from the defined policy is no longer merely contested — it ceases to be considered true.

Michel Foucault spoke of 'regimes of truth' to describe those moments when a society comes to define as true whatever is validated by power relations. Truth is then no longer independent: it is produced, organized, filtered.

Thus, truth no longer lies in the facts, nor in the archives, nor in the work of historians or diplomats. It shifts. It becomes a political construct, tailored to the needs of the moment. It is no longer what is patiently established; it is what is decreed.

Comments



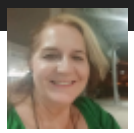
Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-05-17 05:12:11

Vahe's comment is important because it reminds us that the catastrophe of Artsakh cannot be explained only through the policies of the current Armenian government. Levon Ter-Petrosyan's warning in 1997 now sounds tragically prophetic. Maximalism, overconfidence in the status quo, and the illusion that time was working in Armenia's favor must be discussed seriously. They contributed to a situation in which the aim of keeping Karabakh Armenian ended in its depopulation of its native Armenian inhabitants. But I would still not dismiss Guevorkian's central concern. The Minsk process did not guarantee Artsakh's independence, that is true. Yet it also did not define Artsakh's final status as a closed and immutable internal matter of Azerbaijan. The ideas of interim status, security guarantees, a corridor, and the later determination of final status through a legally binding expression of will show precisely that the question was kept open. For this reason, we should avoid both extremes. We should not defend past maximalism, but neither should we accept the erasure of diplomatic and historical complexity in the name of today's political realism. A state may change its diplomatic policy after defeat, isolation, and serious security threats. That is painful, but understandable. What is far more dangerous is the retroactive projection of today's political necessity onto the past, as if decades of negotiations, documents, proposals, fears, and claims had never existed. The depopulation of Artsakh's Armenians is the result of both strategic failures and a brutal asymmetry of power. But discussing those failures does not justify disciplining memory, silencing scholarship, or turning historical complexity into a government-approved formula. Peace can only be built without narrowing the space of truth. Otherwise, peace becomes not a process of reckoning, but a method of managing memory.



Vahe H Apelian – 2026-05-05 21:04:51

There are happenings in history, e.g. Artsakh is depopulated of its native Armenian inhabitants. There are interpretations to explain the loss. Any of these interpretations, or explanations can very well be the truth for someone. I do not subscribe to the dramatic verbiage of Hovhannès Guevorkian. The mission of Minsk was never to have the Mountainous Karabakh Oblast not be in or within the Azerbaijan, lest of course if Azerbaijan conceded. I quote from President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's November 1, 1997 historic policy paper. He titled it "War or peace, time to get serious", "Rejection of compromise and maximalism (striving to achieve the maximum and not the possible) is the shortest way to the complete destruction of Karabakh and deterioration of the situation in Armenia. It is not about giving or not giving Karabakh. It is about keeping Karabakh Armenian. It was inhabited by Armenians for 3000 years and it should be inhabited by Armenians after 3000 years." The strongmen of the day Robert Kocharyan, Serzh Sargsyan, Vazken Sargsyan, having Vartan Oskanian in their midst, conspired against their political patron Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Not only they ousted him from office, but had Robert Kocharyan assume power, that he would pass to Serzh Sargsyan leading to what LTP had feared all along. Karabagh is depopulated of its native Armenian inhabitants, without return.



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-05-04 09:47:34

Dear Hovhannès Guevorkian, Your article is important because it treats the question of Artsakh not merely as a diplomatic or political issue, but also as a matter of memory, truth, and historical responsibility. When the political needs of the present begin to determine the meaning of the past, a dangerous threshold has been crossed. History cannot be treated as a field that may be rearranged according to the current positions of states. The experience, struggle, losses, and displacement of the people of Artsakh cannot be confined within the narrow formulas of diplomatic language. Of course, Armenia's current situation is deeply painful and complex, shaped by defeat, encirclement, security concerns, and diplomatic pressure. This reality cannot be ignored. Yet it is precisely in such moments that the language of historical truth becomes even more fragile. When state reason begins to alter the language of the past in order to save the present, this is not merely a political choice; it also means that the memory of a people is being disciplined. This is why the most important aspect of your article is that it addresses Artsakh not only as a question of territory or diplomacy, but also as a question of memory and truth. The search for peace, of course, cannot be dismissed. But if peace is built at the cost of silencing or rewriting the past, then it is not genuine peace; it is the diplomatic disciplining of memory. The case of AGMI and Edita Gzoyan is also striking in this regard. When historical institutions, museums, and academic spaces are pressured to align themselves with the current political line of the state, it is not only the interpretation of the past that is damaged, but also the courage to defend truth. Institutions that preserve a society's memory should belong to the realm of historical responsibility, not diplomatic sensitivity. Your article reminds us of a difficult but necessary question: To what extent can a state turn the suffering and historical truth of its own people into a subject of diplomatic bargaining? And more importantly, when the language of the past is changed, how can the moral foundation of the future be preserved? Thank you for this powerful and thought-provoking article.