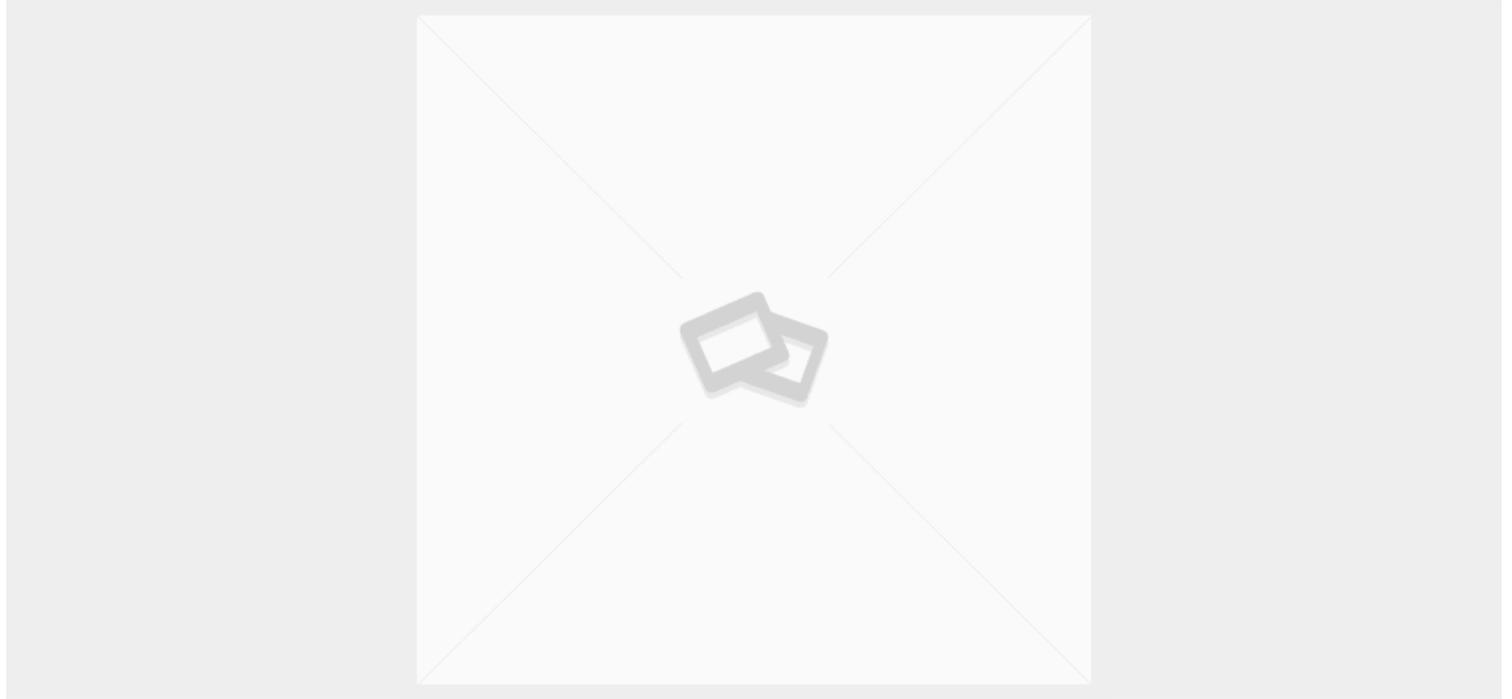


PARTICIPATION OF THE DIASPORA IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN ARMENIA

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Outline of presentation by Prof. Onnig Beylerian

At the Public Roundtable Discussion: Policy Directions in Post Election Armenia, Montréal, 20 June 2008

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Policy Directions in Post-Election Armenia

A Public Roundtable discussion

June 20, 2008

Montréal

Participation of the Diaspora in the Political Process in Armenia

By

Onnig Beylerian

Armenia's stance towards the Diaspora

- Despite frequent statements by Armenian politicians that Armenia seeks to "tap" the Diaspora's vast potential and resources, little is done to provide the Diaspora the opportunity to effectively contribute to Armenia's political and economic development.

Explanation

- This may sound paradoxical given the significant transfer of funds and all sorts of aid provided to Armenia by various Diasporan organizations and communities;
- But all of that assistance has not translated into actual influence in the Armenian political system;
- Diaspora ends up in providing funds and remittances without having a voice in the Armenian political process.

What has Armenia done so far?

- Armenia-Diaspora conferences (there has been three so far).
 - The conferences were good gatherings and achievements all by themselves. However, no permanent bodies came out of it.

- Change of constitution; dual citizenship
- Introduction of a Ministry for Diasporan Affairs
 - Until recently, the Diaspora was part of the Foreign Affairs Ministry as if though the Diaspora was a foreign entity

What's missing in the picture?

- Despite impressive talks about providing citizenship, the actual enabling legislation is deficient;
- There is no active immigration policy, even though there has been some thinking about a repatriation policy;
- Armenian society does not appear to be ready to receive foreign citizens of Armenian origin in large numbers;
- The political elite in Armenia remains largely closed to the idea of enlarging its ranks to receive Diasporan members since they feel comfortable in remaining isolated from the outside world;
- There is no political representation of the Diaspora either in the Armenian legislative body or in the government itself.

The Diaspora's position towards Armenia

- Despite significant efforts expended by Armenian organizations and individuals in the Diaspora, the latter remains largely unorganized and powerless to major events in Armenia.

Explanation

- The Diaspora's efforts are largely those of well-organized communities and organizations, some of which have long experience in sustaining their communities;
- But these economic and socio-cultural efforts are not based on policy and do not aim at building common institutions among the various sections of the world-wide Diaspora;
- The Diaspora's organizational level is very localized and the Diaspora traditionally has not been interested to create higher levels of organization;
- Traditional Armenian political parties have filled the political vacuum and were never interested to create the Diaspora's common institutions since they have their own internationally based organization
- It was not in their interest to do so since this might create potential rivals

Missing links

- Literally, Diasporan communities are cut off from each other;
- For instance, there is little interaction between the Russian Armenian community and organizations and those of North America
- Inasmuch as community leaders are efficient in what they do at the community level, they can not be characterized as

Diasporan leaders;

- There is absence of leadership in the Diaspora: it is difficult to assert that there is a powerful entity wielding substantial power, as claimed by many;
- This explains why there are no common institutions among the Diaspora as this was always considered useless and redundant;
- There is no policy-oriented thinking taking place in the Diaspora which aims at creating common Diasporan institutions with a clear mandate and programmes.

Conclusion

- If Armenia and its Diaspora want to build a secure future Armenia into the present globalized world community, they need to develop Armenia's soft power.

Realistic steps

- Armenia can not exclusively depend on its own armed forces and its alliance with Russia to secure its survival and development;
- Standing armies do not make a large difference in the present globalized world;
- We are in the era of soft power, much of which is provided by technology and global communication;
- Armenians are no strangers to technology; but they are weak in political technology;
- Armenia's potential resides both in its territory and outside of it; namely in every Armenian family or individual who embraces the concept of Armenia;
- Armenia and its Diaspora have to understand that Armenia's future lies in their respective hands;
- Armenia will have to consider that the Diaspora existed and thrived in difficult conditions when Armenia's sovereignty was denied by foreign occupiers and that the Diaspora represents its strategic rear;
- The Diaspora will have to consider that its sense of identity and continuity is fundamentally linked with Armenia's political, economic and cultural development;
- However, the pressing task for Armenia right now is to provide the Diaspora with a voice as a means of developing the Diaspora's common institutions.

