# PATRIOTIC BUT EXHAUSTED, THEY LEAVE ARMENIA

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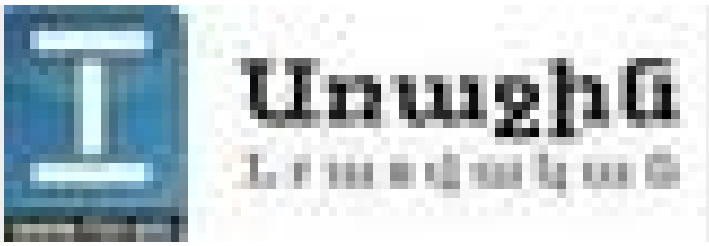

**Category:** Opinions

Takouhi Hagopyan, Առաջին լրատվական , December 4, 2010

An interview with Paris-based French-Armenian writer Denis Donikian, translated by **Hasmig Kurdian,** Toronto.

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**Takouhi Hagopyan**: In one of your books you referred to the pre-March and post-March 2008 events in Armenia. What was the situation in Armenia until then, and how have things changed since then?

**Denis Donikian**: I have written a number of books since the late 1960s. Two of them were about the Soviet era (*Ethnos and Les Chevaux Paradjanov*) and one on the popular movement (*Le Peuple Hai, Contes et récits – The Armenian People*). Another book (*Our Other Country*) depicted the Kotcharian era. Human rights is the central argument in all of them. I took part in the two most recent parliamentary and presidential elections as an observer in response to the appeal of the late Amalia Kostanian, president of the anti-corruption centre of Transparency International. My observations in Armenia, spanning 2006 to 2008, as well as my presence at the March 1 events at the French Embassy, led me to publish my bilingual book, *Yerevan 06-08* (Actual Art, 2008). Following that, I wrote many articles that can be read on my blog Ecrittératures. or in the 'Nouvelles d'Armenie' monthly, where I criticize the current Armenian government. I have visited extensively the different regions of Armenia and interviewed the people there. My most recent book, *Hrashapar Sunik* (bilingual publication by Actual Art, 2010), depicts the abject poverty of the villagers. The situation gets worse by the year. I was in Armenia in October and noticed that people who used to be closely attached to their homeland are now exhausted and have decided to emigrate. I have written a highly critical article about the Tadev cable car, which was translated and forwarded to 'Hraparak', '168 Hour' and 'Hetq', but for reasons unknown, none of these media outlets has replied to me.
**TH:** You have supported the petition that demands the release of journalist Nicol Pashinyan. Armenians in Diaspora have usually been cautious in taking a clear stand regarding the inner politics of Armenia, especially in matters concerning human rights. What has happened to change this stand? Has the deep-rooted stereotype been shattered?

**DD:** I have signed the petition that appeared in Keghart.com . Moreover, I have reproduced an article in my blog . In my writings I have been critical of the French-Armenian community for not taking a clear and critical stand in this matter. I have always considered French-Armenians as economic citizens of Armenia. Hence, they not only have the right to know how their contributions are used, but have the obligation to be critical of the social injustices that take place in Armenia.
There has been a change in the Diaspora. However, community leaders who are closely associated with the government of Armenia, often display blind obedience, which leads me to conclude that the different governments of Armenia have tended to please the Diaspora so as to receive fianancial aid, but turn deaf ear to criticism.

**TH**: On your visits to Armenia, you make a point to meet writers and artists. Who do you see mostly? In your opinion, what role do these intellectuals have in bringing about change in Armenia, and what changes are of the highest priority?

**DD:** There was a time when I was in frequent touch with the 'Bnagir' group, later known as 'Inknagir', comprising Vahan Ishkhanian, Violette Grigorian, Vahram Martirossian, Marine Petrossian, and Arpi Voskanian, whose works I have translated to French. Nowadays I meet them less frequently but I encounter people who are closely associated with the 'Actual Art' publication and cultural association, especially editor-in-chief Mkrtich Matevossian, who is producing fabulous work worthy of support and commendation. We often cooperate not only in the publication of my works but of other writers as well. Unfortunately, I have come to believe that writers in Armenia have neither the cultural background to produce high-caliber literature about their country, nor do they have the financial means to have these works reach the public at home or abroad. They are under the enormous pressure of history, national fervour and the wish to break taboos.

**TH:** Among contemporary writers in Armenia, can you cite anyone whose works have been translated and read outside Armenia?

**DD:** The French public is not familiar with Armenian writers. To find a wide audience, it is necessary that works of high caliber be professionally translated. As far as I know, we have neither. French publishing houses look for Armenian novelists. Ironically, Vahram Martirossian's novel *Soghank*, was published in Canada - not in France. However, we hope that the young generation of writers such as Hratchia Saripegian, Harout Kbeyan and others, who are between 25 and 35, take this challenge positively.
**TH:** Last year, when President Sargsyan visited France right before the signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols, there was widespread opposition by Diasporan Armenians to them. Could you tell us your views of the protocols?

**DD:** The recognition of the Genocide of the Armenians by Turkey is the main purpose of French-Armenian activism, especially the French law that considers it a criminal act to deny the Genocide of Armenians. Despite various undertakings, this issue unfortunately drifts them away from the

problems Armenia faces. The urgency of the recognition of the Genocide has become a mission of higher priority than that of the living culture. I have been involved in this struggle since the mid-'60s. I have written numerous articles as editor-in-chief of the yevrobats.org website. The articles have been published in *Toward Europe* by 'Actual Art'.

I have been involved in bilateral dialogue with French people of Turkish origin and we have placed a wreath at Komitas' statue every year. I'm also in contact with three Turkish intellectuals who initiated the petition to ask for Armenians' forgiveness on behalf of the Turkish people. I do not condone confusing the Turkish government with the wider Turkish population. Armenians should concentrate their efforts on the former, but work with the latter. The decisions President Sargsyan had made about the protocols had deeply aggrieved French-Armenians, even if the latter were influenced by Dashnagtsutiun's push to see the protocols annulled. Diaspora-Armenians believed that President Sargsyan was 'selling' the Genocide Cause for the opening of the borders with Turkey, and that they had no leverage against Turkey in the negotiations. I wrote an article about the development, titled '[The Armenian Diaspora or the Cuckolds of Armenia]', the English translation of which was published in the 'Lragir' daily.