RESPONSIBLE NOSTALGIA

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The **Armenian** Weekly
By Lalai Manjikian, PhD Candidate, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, January 26, 2010

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And now that we do have a "home"-land, in some ways compensating for those homes lost through genocide, nostalgia nonetheless seems to remain an integral part of the relationship between Armenia and the diaspora. However, falling for a romantic and mythologized view of Armenia is easy, but also naive. Viewing Armenia though a strictly nostalgic lens can distort some of the critical social, economic, and political issues Armenia faces. Naturally things always appear ideal and utopic from a distance, which may also explain why so many of us were caught off guard with the advent of the protocols, a process that was clearly in the works for a while now.
The protocols process proved to be a wake-up call for us to never take Armenia for granted. It reminded us to strive to always look more closely, to actively seek ways to overcome and reduce the distance between ourselves and the homeland, to better understand what unfolds on the ground in Armenia within various spheres. It reminded us that, ideally, we should adopt more of a

proactive position towards Armenia, and most importantly, to stand by her side, no matter what.

By the same token, we can hardly be blamed for maintaining a predominantly nostalgic relationship with Armenia. After all, nostalgia is hard to fully bypass when you live far away from the homeland. Most diasporans have developed nostalgic feelings towards Armenia long before even setting foot in the country. Over the years, the images, stories, songs, and poems dedicated to the homeland have been plentiful. We also live vicariously through friends' and relatives' experiences, read books, watch films; some of us have attended Armenian schools; and many of us are members of various diasporic organizations—all fueling nostalgic sentiments.

And once in Armenia, nostalgia is inescapable as well. Remnants left by a collapsed Soviet Union that included Armenia for more than 70 years are palpable. Nostalgia is suspended in time and space inside every cement crack and inscribed in every movement of its raw landscape. The old collides with the new in unexpected ways, leaving us "foreign" flâneurs to languish in a time warp. It is hard to ignore the decrepit Russian Ladas racing through classic Soviet urban planning to keep up with the blindingly new Mercedes and BMWs. From the century-old stone churches tucked away in a barren mountainous landscape, to concrete architectural relics of the Soviet Union, juxtaposed with gigantic digital screens in the city's center and pumping Russian and European advertising campaigns, an omnipresent nostalgic energy lingers. This nostalgia desperately tries to transgress into the present, while Mount Ararat, complete with remnants of the Ark, placidly observes the frenzy from a distance.

The post-protocols world holds an unsteady, highly unpredictable future for Armenia. It makes me want to instinctively turn to nostalgia. Efforts to support Armenia did not dwindle, nor did nostalgia. However, it seems to me that in the aftermath of the protocols, restoring a sense of "responsible nostalgia" is not a bad option. Nostalgia is not only about a past utopia but, adopted correctly, can help us take responsibility for the future, too. The future may not be completely utopic, but it is ours to help develop.
So please, bring on the ceramic pomegranates, khatchkars and Hayasdan songs. Who can resist a dadeeg's smile or the warmth of douf stones anyway? It's never too late to catch up with our old friend nostalgia…