

RUSSIA, OUR BEST FRIEND

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By **Nerses Amirian**, Toronto, 7 February 2014

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My father, who doesn't speak Armenian, says to me after each visit to the motherland: "Son, I feel that my soul is nourished and I can't live without this feeling." Despite the negative narrative among many Diaspora Armenians who turn their back to their ancestral land and the non-stop propaganda that Armenia is ruled by oligarchs, that depopulation will mark the end of the country, that the president is a crook, etc, I feel Armenia is intelligently managed in the turbulent Caucasus, a buffer zone and an extension of the Middle East.

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One of the latest arguments in the Diaspora is that Russia is a threat to Armenia and that Moscow plans an Armenia without Armenians. I hear these arguments from Diaspora Armenians who live in the West and most of whom haven't visited their homeland, lack solid information about Armenia and cannot understand that there is an Armenia because Armenians are considered by Russians as loyal friends, an ancient Christian people who are Russophile and have contributed to Russia in many fields and still continue to do so. Those who want Armenia destroyed hope Armenia becomes anti-Russian. Thus they spread their anti-Russian propaganda.

In 2008 Russia didn't abandon South Ossetia--one of the tiniest nations anywhere, with no oil or other natural resources. Their only asset is their loyalty to Russia. In 2008, during the August War with Russia, Georgia received arms from many Western countries. Western private militias fought side by side the Georgian army. At the end Russian tanks were closing in on Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. It was only through President Sarkozy's intercession that the life of Georgian President

Miheil Saakashvili was saved. The Georgian leader had been called 'son' by U.S Secretary of State Colin Powell while Georgia was praised as a 'model' country by the Europeans and Americans for its intention to join the EU or NATO. At the end of the war, Georgia was once again humiliated and as a result of the war Georgia lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In recent centuries Georgia has survived thanks to Russian protection. But this fact is no immaterial to Georgians. Millions of Georgians live in Turkey. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's family originated in Georgia. Georgians who live in Turkey are Islamized and only a few can speak a sprinkling of Georgian. If a conflict emerges between Turkey and Georgia these Georgians will side with Turkey because their Sunni faith keeps them loyal to Turkey.

Samuel Huntington stated that religious or ethnic affiliation shape peoples' perception of different conflicts. Why, for example, was NATO member Greece unenthusiastic about the bombing of the Serbs by NATO forces in 1999? The reason is simple: Serbs, like the Greeks, are Orthodox Christians and have an affinity to the Byzantine Empire just, like the Greeks.

To which civilizational group does Armenia belong? Are we western like the British or Islamic like the Libyans? As Eastern Christians we belong to the Orthodox world headed by Russia. Russia is the only superpower which cares about the fate of Eastern Christians, just as it cares for the wellbeing of Syrian Christians.

International relations are, in general, based on interests. States have long-term agendas; they follow them right or wrong. But what if states also have a subconscious and memory? Syria is home to a Russian naval base in Tartus, a city on the Mediterranean. People can say that it's because of the base and arms sale that Russia doesn't abandon Syria. I agree. But let's look back to the 1990s when the Soviet Union broke apart. People mocked "Evil Empire" Russia. People said it was "Bangladesh with nuclear weapons". Even the tiny Chechens defeated them and created their own independent state. Even "Slavic Orthodox Brother" Bulgaria, which also owes Russia its independence from the Ottomans, declared Russians were no more welcome. Sofia joined NATO and became a member of the European Union. Experts predicted that following the Chechens' victory more secessionist nations would emerge within the multinational Russian state and that Russia was doomed to collapse.

What was the Syrian approach to Russia in those years? They kept the Russian naval base in their country and continued their warm relations with Moscow. I propose Syria is so dear to the "Russian state memory" that Moscow will not abandon it just like Damascus didn't abandon Russia in the latter's vulnerable years. Propositions to transfer the base to Cyprus (the Greek part) or the multi-billion Saudi bribe to bring down Assad didn't influence Russia. It didn't compromise its friendship and rejected the 'Libyan scenario'.

In Istanbul some years ago an Ossetian official told me that President Yeltsin of Russia was so embarrassed by the negative attitude of Western leaders toward Russia that he stated: "I will find

such a man that nobody among will ever dare laugh at us." Myth or reality? President Yeltsin, the sad image of Russia during that country's years of vulnerability, selected Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to replace him in 1999. Under Putin Russia recovered and found its place in the world. He stopped the looting of his country, re-organized the economy, boosted the military power and reasserted its territorial integrity. Russia rose from the ashes like the phoenix and refound its glory. It is once again a respected superpower. The Bear is back.

But Russia is an enigma to Armenians living in the West. We are mostly ignorant about Russia's history and what it is today. We know about the evil Communists, the gulags, the state atheism of Soviet times. Most of us don't know that Moscow is the Third Rome: after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks Russia became the main center of Eastern Christianity. The coat of arms of the Russian state is the double-headed Byzantine Eagle. (Some Armenologists say that the symbol was imported by Byzantium from Armenia). Russia is the continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, aka the Byzantine Empire. It was the Byzantines (Armeno-Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius) who converted the Russians to Orthodox Christianity in 988. It is a country where the cathedrals are more majestic than those of Italy.

Communist rule was a rupture in Russian spirituality. Tsar Nicholas II wanted to reconquer Constantinople and save the Armenians and other persecuted Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Earlier on, when the Russian army reached (1878) Hagia Stephanos, a province of today's Istanbul called Yesilkoy, Western Powers such as Britain, France and Germany interfered and convinced the Russians that the Ottomans would no longer persecute their Christian subjects. The Russian army withdrew. We know what Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the Young Turks, and Ataturk did following the withdrawal of the Russians. For more than 200 years the West has protected the Ottomans when Russia defeated them over and over. Even today no Western state cares for the plight of Christians in the Middle East.

Saddam Hussein was an irrational and brutal leader but Iraqi-Christians, including the Armenians, lived a comfortable life and were not oppressed. Before the American invasion, Saddam Hussein sent his Chaldean Foreign Minister Tarek Aziz to the Vatican. Aziz met Pope Paul John II and begged him to act as an intermediary. The pope tried to convince the U.S and the other members of the Western coalition to find a peaceful solution. His efforts were in vain. Only a shadow of Christianity remains in Iraq. Around 15,000 Armenians still live in the country.

How can one forget the mass slaughter (1922) of the Greeks and Armenians of Smyrna (now Izmir) by the Kemalist forces as British and French navies, docked at the city, idly watching?

Armenians remember the French rescuing one part of Musa Dagh's Armenians and taking them to Port Said in Egypt. That was the only help that we got. We were betrayed over and over by the West and our blood fed rivers. Some Armenians would say "the Russians betrayed us, too. They retreated from Van in 1915." It was the Soviets who retreated, not the Russians. When civil war broke out (1917)

in Russia, the Tsarist army was urged to retreat to defend the regime. The Tsarist army lost and the Bolsheviks succeeded. If there was no Bolshevik Revolution, Armenians would have been saved by the Russian army and the Ottomans wouldn't have dared launch the Genocide. The Bolsheviks killed millions of people and the majority of their victims were ethnic Russians. Despite Lenin's treachery, Soviet rule saved Eastern Armenia and Armenians later acquired high positions in the Soviet state. Nothing remained of Western Armenia.

Russian Communism is gone. Russia has a Patriarch named Kiril who can tell to Putin during a tete-a-tete: "If you abandon the Christians in Syria, we won't support you anymore." And Putin heeds the patriarch's advice. There's no way a Western leader would take into consideration the opinion of a Christian spiritual leader in defense of the Middle East's Christians.

For me, as an Armenian, Russia is the bearer of light. The great Russian people have always defeated warrior tribes surrounding their country and managed to create a great civilization. They defeated the Mongols, Napoleon, the Turks, and with the help of other Soviet republics beat the Nazis. Russians have kept the secret of survival which the Byzantines forgot. Russia has the best missile technology and more nuclear warheads than the United States. Russia is the saviour of many nations (Serbs, Bulgarians, Ossetians) who suffered from tyranny. It was the Russians who saved the Jews from Aushwitz in 1945. As an Armenian, I am thankful to this great nation.

Do Armenians of the West know of the strongest Armenian Diaspora? The strongest Armenian Diaspora is not in the Unites States or in France but in Russia. Its members are ministers, generals, billionaire businessmen, scientists, media personalities, university professors. Did the one-million strong California Armenians have a Secretary of State of Armenian origin? They had Governor Deukmejian or House Member Pashayan but they never had a cabinet minister. Russia's current foreign minister Sergey Lavrov is half-Armenian. Russia is the talisman "kismet" of Armenians just as the United States is for Israel. I thank the Armenian government for erecting the United Cross Monument in Yerevan, symbolizing the Russian-Armenian brotherly relations which was unveiled during President Putin's December visit to Armenia.

Armenia has no bigger friend than Russia. Despite Russia's selling of weapons to Azerbaijan, I have confidence in Russia's friendship--a friendship based on self-interest, knowledge, and sentiment. America also armed Saddam. The West sold chemical weapons to Iraq. Americans promoted him as the leader of the Arab World. Where is Saddam now?

