

SARGSYAN: INTEGRITY & INVIOABILITY OF BORDERS

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Mr Sargsyan, Vladimir Putin once described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” What was this catastrophe for you – a tragedy or a victory?

I think that for a large number of people, the Soviet Union's collapse was a tragedy because they lost a familiar life and apparent prosperity and had to abruptly change their lifestyles. Enormous efforts were required to ensure their security. With the Soviet Union's disintegration, existing tensions escalated into armed actions, or to put it bluntly, into war. However, many nations were dreaming of independence and having received it, they translated the dream that many generations had had through the centuries into reality.

Independent Armenia is only 20 years old, which is a very short span of time in Armenian history. Armenia lost its independence centuries ago, and the two and a half years of the first independent republic is just a moment in history. Soviet Armenia was a very important stage in our national history, a period when the nation's collective memory was taking shape. This is what allowed us to hold our ground.

Are you saying that the foundation that helped you to hold out after the Soviet Union's collapse was laid in Soviet times?

Yes. This foundation was rooted in our economy, demography, culture, science and the formation of our nation's institutional memory.

Was Soviet history generally good or bad for Armenia and its people?

Just as every other Soviet nation, Armenians had to share a common fate with all the problems that the Soviet Union faced. On the whole, I think there were many more good events than bad ones.

Armenia was developing and the Soviet status of Armenia in 1988 in no way compares to what it was in the pre-Soviet period. I think that Armenia was moving ahead pretty quickly.

Do you agree with those who claim that Armenia had a privileged position in the Soviet Union?

Did it? I don't think so. The Armenian people are hard-working and purposeful. To be honest, I have never heard such an opinion.

You have mentioned many positive factors in Armenia's Soviet history but why was Armenia one of the starting points for the Soviet Union's disintegration?

There were two major reasons for this. First, despite Armenia's steady progress, we did have a nationality issue. We lived in a large country that did not always consider our interests in its foreign policy, for instance, in bilateral relations with Turkey. Armenians were scattered all over the world primarily because of the genocide against them. In Western societies, Armenians could express themselves freely on this score. We heard about this talk and it influenced us. The official policy evoked a very negative response in Armenia.

Second, at the dawn of Soviet power, the Soviet Communist Party's Caucasian Bureau decided to separate the historical regions of Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan from Armenia and transfer them to Azerbaijan. We have never accepted this, primarily in Nagorny Karabakh. The people of Karabakh have constantly protested this illegal decision. This protest became more pronounced with Gorbachev's perestroika. When people saw that they were unable to achieve justice, they made a noise.

When did you realize that the Soviet Union was doomed?

It's hard to recall now when exactly I realized this, but since 1988 I was actively involved in the Karabakh movement. Being a party worker at the time I understood that this movement was forever, that we must go all the way or not a single Armenian would be left in Karabakh just like in Nakhichevan. I quit the Soviet Communist Party. Of course, I realized that independence would not be easy, that losses were inevitable. I understood our region and we were ready to face any difficulty.

And do you remember the day when you realized that this was the end? We all hoped for some time that we would preserve the unity and resolve our problems within one country but then it became clear that this was it, that we will part and take independent paths, no matter what.

I think it was near the end of 1990 when we learned that the interior troops would leave Nagorny Karabakh. On the eve of this pullout we realized that we'd have to deal with our problems ourselves and that turmoil was ahead.

Even so, everything started with Nagorny Karabakh. This was when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. What is the ideal solution to this problem now?

This problem can be resolved only by compromise. We have been searching for it all these years, but the bottom line is that the people of Nagorny Karabakh must decide their destiny themselves and must have every opportunity for secure development on their historic land. The OSCE Minsk Group is dealing with this issue. President Dmitry Medvedev is doing much in this respect and we are most grateful to him for his efforts. It was the Minsk Group that suggested a document that was dubbed the three Madrid principles – non-use of force or its threat, territorial integrity and the right of peoples to self-determination. This document makes it possible to continue the talks and start drafting a comprehensive peace treaty.

We understand very well what these three principles mean. After long deliberations the Azerbaijanis also accepted them, but their interpretation is peculiar. Up to this day, the Azerbaijani government has threatened to resume military action at every level. This is a violation of the first principle. Both we and they understand the principle of territorial integrity but they have elevated it into an absolute dogma outside the context of international law. They interpret the right to self-determination only within the context of their territorial integrity. But this is not self-determination. This is truncated, primitive self-determination. Therefore, it will be very difficult to resolve the issue unless Azerbaijan understands the essence of this principle. Karabakh has upheld its independence in a bloody, severe war, in extremely hard conditions and it would be naïve to assume that its people will give up what they have achieved.

But if the two countries interpret the principle of territorial integrity differently, if they draw different borders on the map, progress is most unlikely isn't it?

I think we do understand this principle differently. But this is one of the principles by which the world is guided. These principles – territorial integrity and the right to self-determination have enabled both Azerbaijan and Armenia to become independent. So, why are they accepted in one case and rejected in the other? This is contrary to logic. Territorial integrity does not mean the inviolability of borders. Otherwise, we wouldn't see the emergence of new countries. Dozens of them have appeared on the world map in the past 20 or 30 years.

Do you think the recent emergence of two new states in the South Caucasus will reflect on the Karabakh settlement?

The Karabakh issue is different from other similar issues. In general, all of these conflicts are different, and each has its own roots, consequences and dynamics. As a precedent, the formation of new states facilitates the international attitude towards the rights of the people of Nagorny Karabakh. And what matters is not whether we recognize the state sovereignty of Kosovo, South Sudan, Abkhazia or South Ossetia but that the international community accepts to a different extent that under certain conditions cessation is a legal form of implementing the right to self-determination.

Is there a high risk of hostilities being resumed?

I think there is a risk because I'm unable to understand why Azerbaijan is dragging out the negotiating process so much. Apparently, there are plans to build up power for a new military adventure at a convenient time. This is the wrong approach because events would develop in one of the two ways. The first would be an all out war and the subsequent occupation of Nagorny Karabakh, which is possible only in case of complete annihilation of the people of Nagorny Karabakh. The other would be an Azerbaijani defeat with the loss of territory, in which case it would complain about the loss of five or six or more regions. And what would come next? Another truce, agreements, ceasefire violations and another war... All these scenarios have no future.

Does Armenia consider the possibility of recognizing Nagorny Karabakh?

Of course it does. We are bound to consider this possibility. It could emerge if hostilities resume. People often ask a more straightforward question: "Why doesn't Armenia recognize the independence of Nagorny Karabakh?" This is because we are involved in talks and a recognition would put an end to them. It is still better to conduct the talks.

You are the third head of state in Armenia. What has the country achieved in 20 years and where has it failed?

Our biggest achievement is the preservation of stability in our country. We've been through hard times. We had to convert our economy from a state planned economy to a free market economy while securing the safety of the people. Azerbaijan unleashed a war; Turkey unreservedly supported Azerbaijan; and a civil war was raging in Georgia. Under the circumstances it was very difficult to provide the people with the basic necessities. We had huge problems with power supply. We had to do all this after a devastating earthquake that left hundreds of thousands homeless. Plus, almost half a million refugees fled to our tiny Armenia to avoid death. So, preserving stability was our biggest achievement.

Leaders are always tempted to criticize their predecessors. As they say, "it is easy to imagine yourself a strategist when you are not involved in the battle." I became the country's leader in 2008 and have always tried to avoid this approach. Criticizing your predecessors means shifting the responsibility to others. This is wrong. I'm grateful to my predecessors and to all those who have done something good for Armenia.

A common problem for all post-Soviet republics is forming a self-identity. Has independent Armenia achieved this? Are Armenians still a divided nation or have they acquired their own sense of home?

For the overwhelming majority of Armenians, Armenia is not simply a historic homeland, although two thirds of them live abroad and almost all are nationals of their resident countries. It would be unfair to say that they do not have grievances against their historic homeland. Armenians easily

integrate into their countries of residence. Maybe, this is why they are so successful in different fields. Regrettably, we have been unable to fully use their potential so far. I have tried in vain to understand this problem for many years. I'm sure that in the future we'll make better use of this enormous resource because people are our biggest asset, including those who live outside Armenia.

Can you achieve full economic growth without resolving the obvious geopolitical problems, in particular, without settling your relations with Turkey?

This question does not have an unequivocal answer – “yes, we can” or “no, we can't”, because if it is “no” then why have we developed for 20 years and if it is “yes” then why are we developing at such a pace? Needless to say, we won't die of hunger if we do not settle our relations with Turkey. But let me repeat what I've said many times – we do not consider economics to be the main reason to normalize relations with Turkey. As Napoleon used to say, “A country's geography makes its history.” Geography is a verdict, a country's destiny.

We live here and must maintain at least some relations with our neighbors but not at all costs – by no means. When we started normalizing relations with Turkey, many opponents warned us that it would prevent the acknowledgement of genocide all over the world. Fortunately, these predictions have not come true. The genocide is an indisputable fact and we must do everything we can to compel Turkey to admit it. This is our struggle for justice, for security. In the final count we are working to make such crimes inadmissible not only in our region but also in the rest of the world.

Soon it will be a hundred years since this tragedy, which happened in 1915. Is it possible to diminish its role in your bilateral relations?

Reconciliation can only start when Turkey acknowledges this genocide. There can be no reconciliation without this step. It would be wrong to assume that our attempts to establish relations with Turkey are aimed at reconciliation. Genuine reconciliation is only possible after repentance.

Do you think that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) reliably ensures the security of the Armenian borders?

Well, we are actively cooperating with other CSTO members. There are complete legal grounds for collaborative efforts of CSTO members. We are convinced of this.

CSTO is one of the bodies that the leaders of post-Soviet republics tried to establish to retain some unity. Are there any other spin-offs from common Soviet history?

Of course, there are lots of them.

Could you name some?

Our relations, the glorious traditions we established together, the history of combat brotherhood and friendship. After all, the acquisition of independence does not mean the break-up of friendly

relations. I consider our current relations with Russia very good. I don't even know when they were better – now or in Soviet times.

What do you think about the change in Russia's role in the South Caucasus? What does this mean for Armenia?

Russia is a key player in our region, as far as security is concerned. Very much depends on Russia. But we have never hoped that Russia would occupy an adamant pro-Armenian position. After all, Russia is a large country and Azerbaijan is also one of its neighbors. Therefore, Russia cannot unequivocally support one side in the conflict like Turkey does with respect to Azerbaijan. However, Russia is our ally in CSTO and if hostilities resume or our security comes under a serious threat, Russia has both commitments and opportunities to react.

