

# STRENGTHENING ARMENIA-DIASPORA RELATIONS

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Raffi (1835-1888)

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The successive administrations in Armenia since independence have effectively stripped the nation of the rewards for its victories: the modern-day examples of audacity, perseverance, and success of unseen proportions. Something that could have empowered and served the foundation for the “new history,” has been turned into a liability of major proportions. The Diaspora did not seem to mind that: the “old history” was still too strong in their minds and hearts and they were not about to let that be replaced by something else. An opportunity given to the nation by its best—the Leonids, Montes, Shahens, and Tatouls of the world and countless others, who still carry the wounds of the Karabakh war and the memories of the short but epic reconstruction that followed—was effectively allowed to be lost by politicians in Armenia and largely unsuspecting-but-effectively-complicit Diaspora. But Petrossian is still hopeful. Her “United States of Armenia” is build around the aspiration of “every Armenian around the world taking out the coin of the golden dream from underneath their mattresses to contribute to building of a new country” from a fresh start offered by a not-so-distant victorious past. All that needs to be ensured, she believes, is for the coin not to roll into the mud and forever vanish, as it has on occasions in recent past.

## A. Challenges of Diaspora Organization

Despite frequent statements by Armenian politicians regarding intentions to tap into the Diaspora's potential, this has not gone beyond rhetoric and the Diaspora has been largely unable to effectively contribute to Armenia's political, economic, and social development. Twenty or so years of assistance of all kinds by and large have not translated into sustainable development and progressive policymaking in Yerevan.

The real wealth of the Diaspora resides in its expertise and global networks. If governed well, these are the ingredients Armenia will need to ensure sustained development. These, in our view, can only be unlocked through an adroit set of incentives designed to facilitate the Diaspora's participation in Armenia's political process and institution building. Similar to the rights enjoyed by stakeholders in a well-governed corporation, the Diaspora should be given the right of representation in the Armenian polity, if it is expected to play any serious role in its economic development and national security. Without an ability to effectively monitor the outcomes of its own participation, it is hard to see how the Diaspora can qualitatively improve the reality on the ground.

At this juncture, however, neither Armenia nor the Diaspora has lent any serious thinking to the benefits of this stronger integration. While on Armenia's side, reasons behind this is mostly related to the lack of political will, on the Diaspora's side issues are twofold. First, the Diaspora lacks vision for Armenia and has disagreements as to what is important for Armenia's development and national security. Internal bickering and taking consistently unpopular positions have made it irrelevant to major events and trends taking place in Armenia, particularly to the quest of people of Armenia to be well-governed. To date, it has set no mechanisms for mobilizing (physical or human) resources and monitoring of activity on the ground, and has not produced an evaluation of its multi-year effort of involvement in Armenia.

Second, there appear to be institutional challenges within the Diaspora. It remains fragmented, with little, if any, forward-looking policy-oriented thinking taking place. Diaspora has little experience with forming ties beyond individual communities, seldom venturing to form sustained transnational ties among themselves. Such ties would have created a minimum level of international organization capable of expressing pan-Diaspora views of major events and developments affecting Armenia and the Diaspora. Traditional Armenian political parties in the Diaspora and the Church have tried to fill some of the vacuum, but they have been unable to reach out to significant number of Armenians across the globe.

Nevertheless, many in the Diaspora remain committed to building stronger ties between the Diaspora and Armenia. Political, economic, and cultural ties with the country would—as the argument goes—strengthen Diaspora Armenians' sense of identity and belonging. And while true integration requires trust and years of meticulous work, it is time for the nation to take steps in this

direction to avoid new dividing lines down the road with potentially devastating and irreversible consequences. It is high time for Armenia as a nation to reap the fruits of its sacrifices and hard work invested by generations of Armenians who lived and toiled in foreign lands.

## **B. A Call for a Collective Action**

Throughout the modern history, and despite the calamities the nation has been through, Armenians have shown remarkable abilities to consolidate and effectively safeguard their future. From the battle of Sardarabad, to the defense of Zangezur, and Karabakh war, Armenians have come together on hot button issues to support each other across borders. Yet, achieving similar levels of consolidation in tranquil times have proven increasingly challenging.

Similar to the classic collective action problem of economics or political science (e.g., Olson, 1965), here too failure to act collectively carries the risk of foregoing solutions that are otherwise optimal/efficient from the nation's point of view. As Mancur Olson—one of the most influential economists of the 21st century—demonstrated in his influential book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, it does not have to be the case that if everyone in a group has interests in common, then they will act collectively to achieve them.

In an age of globalization and transnationalism, when physical borders are less significant and networks are becoming as important as any other ingredient of economic development and national security, Armenians around the world have a clear comparative advantage. With some innovative thinking, liabilities can be turned into assets and the nation can again be as united as it wants to be. Indeed, a new blueprint for the nation's future mentioned earlier in the Report would factor in the full range of opportunities offered by the 21st century. The good news is that the key to this blueprint does not have to be complicated.

The problem of collective action, commonly known as the "free rider" problem, is solved when both the benefits and costs of taking the action are internalized. The search for ways to act collectively in the Armenian context should start from the search for the common ground—a set of principles and objectives that most, if not all, institutional bodies of the Armenian world could agree on. Subsequently, a transnational organization can be brought forth to help collect the benefits of the unified action but also internalize the costs involved. The search for these principles and also on the right institutional structure could begin in academic circles, taking the form of public debates to help refine and solidify the underlying assumptions and approaches. The human capital necessary to initiate this process and take it further too needs to be identified. Conceptually, however, the fundamental logic behind the formation of the organization would be simple: to make the organization large enough (by finding a wide enough common ground among the sides involved) so that the incentives of the organization mimic the incentives of the nation as a whole.

While the exact objectives of a trans-Armenian institution could be a subject to debate, and questions remain about its operational aspects, some basic principles and structure for such an

organization can perhaps already be identified:

- Representation: Diaspora organization should be geographically representative, and transcend ideological boundaries. To guarantee a wide participation among the stakeholders involved, the fundamental objectives of the institution should be the most common denominator of positions among key stakeholders and should embody the principles of fairness, justice, and universal human rights standards;
- Clarity of mission: The organization and its constituent bodies should have clear and achievable aims;
- Independence: The organization should strive to be independent from interference of individuals, political parties, and other institutions of the Armenian world as well as from any foreign influence;
- Governance: The organization and its elected officials and officers should be accountable and transparent;
- Operations: The organization should offer a forum for a true discourse. It should have clear processes for designing and adopting policy positions consistent with its mission and ethical policies.

Undoubtedly, to be most effective, the push toward closer engagement through the creation of such an organization should come from Armenia, the custodian of cultural and religious values, where de jure foundations of properly functioning institutions exist. The following two factors are critical, however, if Yerevan is to lead the way for the formatting of such a transnational organization: (1) strong political will to support the process and (2) well-functioning democratic institutions in Armenia. Absence of these factors, however, should not prevent the Diaspora communities from moving toward forming a trans-national structure outside of Yerevan's jurisdiction, keeping the window open for Yerevan to have an observer status within the organization.

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To earn trust of the Diaspora and be seen as credible in their actions to bring the two halves together, the government of Armenia needs to take real steps to improve governance and reduce the state capture. The wholesale corruption in Armenia has names and addresses known virtually by everyone, making it conceptually easy and politically popular to eradicate it. Furthermore, the government needs to improve its communication with the Diaspora refraining from offering too much propaganda and instead offer more in terms of real and credible action. To show institutional intent, the government could commission a strategy for developing of Armenia-Diaspora relations. The primary objective of this strategy should be to help ease the way for Diaspora involvement in Armenia's economic and political life and propose a set of measurable indicators of progress in this regard.

In their dealing with official Yerevan, Diaspora organizations should articulate the need for more

effective and stronger ties with Armenia, including, as mentioned above, through involvement in Armenia's economic and political life. The largely disengaged status quo only benefits those among Armenia's leadership that have own personal interests well above those of the country and the nation. Each major Diaspora organization should undertake a thorough assessment of recent developments as a prerequisite to embarking on a change to reflect the time and the needs of the nation. Failure to do so will lead to further disengagement of individual Diasporans and entire communities from Armenian issues, with potentially sizable damage to Armenia's developmental prospects as well as national security. A search should be underway constantly for more innovative modes of engagement both with Armenia as well as with other Armenian communities world-wide. The 20 past years will not all go in vain if the Diaspora learns the lessons now and puts the necessary emphasize on what is important and what is not.

Maintaining and strengthening the Armenian identity in a globalized world will almost certainly require innovative approaches going forward. The elements of the roadmap provided in the chapter—and in fact our views offered throughout the Report—are not the ultimate wisdom on this subject. They aim to encourage stakeholders to think about a collective action toward a better, more efficient set of outcomes and for the good of the Armenian nation as a whole.

*To access the report in its entirety click on the link here [Policy Forum Armenia](#)*

