VARTAN OSKANIAN'S INTERVIEW WITH RADIO FREE EUROPE

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Aired on Saturday, August 1, 2009.

On debating members of the Armenian National Congress

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Each administration is responsible for its period in history. Today, there has been a change in administration, there is a new administration, and they have decided to continue the negotiations from where we left off. Therefore, today, the authorities are responsible and the debate should be between the administration and the opposition. I think that for 18 months, the opposition hasn't understood this and it continues to try to conduct a debate with the past administration. I think it would be more useful if the administration and the opposition actually did debate the issues which concern our people.

On the Madrid principles

During the whole of the Nagorno Karabakh negotiations process, all comprehensive solutions have been based on four fundamental principles. Those have never changed. The first is the status of Nagorno Karabakh, the second is the return of territories, the third is the return of refugees, and the fourth is security guarantees. I want to repeat this: from the first day all comprehensive proposals have been based on these principles. I assure you that it will be the same in the future. In other words, if Madrid fails – and we're already talking about the Krakow principles, if they fail – and in the future, there are new documents, they too will be based on these same principles. If the Armenian side would really rather not see the return of territories or the return of refugees in future documents, in other words, if we are to be lead by the "not an inch of land" principle which, really, of course, would be a great solution, and in that case I have nothing to add, then at that time, either Armenia or Nagorno Karabakh or both, as the Armenian side in the negotiations, must reject

negotiations. If, however, we are engaged in negotiations, then these principles will be there.

As for negotiated proposals, the content of the Madrid principles is disproportionately advantageous in comparison with that of all previous proposals. On this, there is no doubt and no argument. As regards the status of Nagorno Karabakh, in the past, the worst proposal was high autonomy within Azerbaijan, and the best was a horizontal link between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan within a common state, but the content of the Madrid principles specifically offers self-determination for the people of Nagorno Karabakh, and this naturally and obviously means Nagorno Karabakh independence or reunification with Armenia.So, the Madrid principles in comparison with those which came before are disproportionately better, without doubt. And I would hope that you would agree with me that I'm one of the very few people who is thoroughly familiar with all previous documents and can make such a comparison.

As to the other principles – territories, refugees and security – I can say the same. The formulations are such that they offer the opportunity, when the details are negotiated prudently, to truly arrive at an outcome that is advantageous for us.

Principles are, of course, important but more important are the details that must be negotiated. We did not succeed in arriving at an agreement on the details with the Azerbaijani side because Azerbaijan's demands were unacceptable for us, and our demands were unacceptable for them. There was no common ground. We had our benchmark, based naturally on our national interests, and we were unable to arrive at an agreement within range of that bar.

Today, the focus, the debate should be about that benchmark. Today's leadership is not the same. Serzh Sargsyan is not Kocharian, Nalbandian is not Oskanian. There are clear policy changes. I am frequently blamed for criticizing foreign policy just because I was foreign minister for 10 years. Yes, I was minister, but the administration has changed. Certain policies being implemented today are fundamentally different from the policies we implemented, so there is room for criticism. When there are things with which I disagree, I criticize. That's why today I will repeat, and in fact I call on the opposition as well, that their task today is to clarify what the benchmark is. Our bar was high. I have concerns about where the bar is today. Azerbaijan says whatever it wants to say, Bryza talks about the return of six or seven territories, Aliyev rules out the independence of Nagorno Karabakh – and our leadership is silent. This is my concern. This is what the opposition should be worried about today, and our public too. And we must specifically challenge the authorities, raise questions and ask that they clarify where that bar stands today, to quell our concerns. The opposition's issue isn't with me, but with the authorities.

On Matt Bryza's explanation that Nagorno Karabakh's non-participation in Nagorno Karabakh talks was the result of a decision by the Armenian side

Bryza does not appear to be thoroughly informed. He's probably unaware of the background. Nagorno Karabakh's participation was interrupted in March 1997, when the Minsk process itself stopped. In other words, when I was appointed foreign minister, Nagorno Karabakh was no longer in the process. But there was an ongoing process between presidents, ministers and meetings between the advisors of the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. It's true, in those days, we were faced with a choice – to continue the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations, or to raise the Nagorno Karabakh participation issue. It was decided that we would continue to negotiate, because the alternative was that the talks generally would be stalled. So the decision was about whether to continue or not, and not whether Nagorno Karabakh

would participate or not. That's absurd. So the truth is that Nagorno Karabakh's participation was interrupted in 1997.

Today, of course it's desirable that Nagorno Karabakh return; everyone understands that without Nagorno Karabakh there cannot be a final agreement. So the sooner Nagorno Karabakh enters the process, the more engaged they become and their wishes taken into consideration, their consent on a final agreement will be more likely. Presenting the Nagorno Karabakh authorities and people with a fait accompli will make it much more difficult to bring them on board. There's no doubt and Azerbaijan too must realize this – that the sooner Nagorno Karabakh enters the process, the more the process will benefit.

On an assessment of the 1998-2008 negotiations period

In 1996, there was the Lisbon statement by the OSCE Chairman-in-office. It's true it's not a binding document, and only a statement, but it was done in the name of all OSCE member states, with the exception of Armenia. In 1997-98, it was very difficult for us to break down that wall because those countries were convinced of a Lisbon-based solution. The documents of 1997 regarding the Nagorno Karabakh resolution, especially the first one which was comprehensive and referred to the status, was completely based on the Lisbon principles. President Ter-Petrossian categorically rejected that proposal. Later, when it was clear that agreement on the status would be complicated, they brought forth a step-by-step proposal, about which Ter-Petrossian made a public statement, wrote an article, and the rest is history. But that the notion of autonomy was reinforced among states was unequivocal. When I say we were struggling against that, it was not against a document that we were struggling, but against that perception. We did, in fact, succeed in changing that perception. I'm not in competition with the former administration. I believe that between 1998 to 2008 Armenia's diplomacy succeeded to break down that wall on autonomy and reach codification of the right of self-determination that we have today.

I consider that a success. When I hear these arguments which target individuals or former administrations, I think sometimes we are blinded by these arguments and motivated by revenge and don't think about what we're saying and doing. I say this with great conviction – if we lose this one principle, the principle of the right of the people of Nagorno Karabakh to self-determination, it will be very difficult to revive it. Indeed, the negotiations can go off in a completely other direction and the principle of territorial integrity may be reinforced. Today, we are at an advantage over Azerbaijan, specifically because of the existence of the self-determination principle, and that is why we must be cautious in our statements and criticism.

I want to repeat this – we must understand how far we can go in our concessions, because without concessions there will be no resolution, since the situation now is more complex than in the past, and this complication is the consequence of our miscalculated foreign policy. Today, the Armenia-Turkey situation affects the Nagorno Karabakh issue, pressure has increased, so all seem to be in a hurry on the Nagorno Karabakh issue, in order to make it possible to also resolve the Turkey-Armenia border issue. Under that pressure, it is possible to take steps that are not necessarily in our national interests, especially since during this year and a half this administration has taken such steps, that is why there is room for concern.

On the Turkey-Armenia process and the seeming absence of an Armenian agenda

In my time, there was a clear agenda. I think there is one today as well. But to what extent the Armenian side can bring

on discussion of that agenda, or impose that agenda, that's another matter. There's always been an agenda, I'm sure there is one today. The problem is that Turkey was able to make its own agenda more prevalent during this time. In other words, as of today, Turkey has gotten what it wanted from this process. I don't know what will happen in the future, but the Armenian side has so far gotten nothing.. From the first day, I said there was clear miscalculation here. And more and more, we are convinced of this. The president's last statement does not correct the situation. The president continues to leave a window open. I believe the president should state more clearly that if the border is not open by the time the football game takes place, then I can't go to Turkey. But he has still left this window open and that's exactly what Turkey wants. They've received what they wanted, they continue to reap dividends, and I don't know when our leadership will be convinced that the Turkish side is exploiting the situation. They should have been convinced of this long ago and so long as the process continues the way it's been, the Armenian side will continue to lose.

On the 'artificial' and 'false' nature of Armenia's democracy

If government is not formed through free and fair elections, then we will never be able to create the right checks and balances within our political system. Without such balance, we can't solve our problems, and impose the rule of law. Fair and free elections are necessary but not sufficient conditions for democracy. There is no doubt about this. I'm not saying anything new: this is the international practice and the experience of democratic countries. Without normal elections, your democracy is incomplete, and not serious. So our focus should be on that and we need to find the mechanisms to make that happen.

On national mobilization in the context of domestic tensions, reciprocal distrust and a deficit of legitimacy

In my statement at the Stepanakert conference in July, I said that the same factors that make mobilization imperative also obstruct such mobilization. Here the authorities have a huge role to play. I believe they must take minimal but specific steps to improve the political environment in the country, to inspire hope that something will change and to create clear mechanisms to solve problems. Under such circumstances it may be possible to collaborate on our most pressing problems.

There seems to be an impression that independent of everything, however bad the situation internally, however much we may be opposed to each other, when there are external threats facing the state, we will come together. In extreme situations, I am convinced that is indeed the case. But we must also recognize that we are also faced with political threats. The situation may become such that there will not be war but that there may be efforts to impose on us conditions that go counter to our national interest. So we must recognize that there are not-so-obvious internal and external political threats and dangers around which we must also rally together. The authorities must take a leading role in this and recognize that there are such issues. Because, at the end of the day, it is the rule of law, a healthy political environment and appropriate checks and balances, that will make it possible for us to solve our problems.

Armenia is a very politicized country, everything is politicized and we have problems everywhere. And as much as those problems may be social, at the end, everything is political. So the solution to these problems must be sought in the political arena. We will only succeed in solving them if we can create the right political mechanisms. Recently, I proposed creating a second political pole, commensurate to the existing power pole. I believe that's the right path. Both the administration and the opposition should think about that because that is in our national interest. The authorities must

support this, or at the very least, not obstruct it, in order for such a pole to emerge.

On March 1, 2008 and accusations about willfully re-interpreting that day

I disagree. That day I had nothing to gain or lose. That day I took upon myself a great responsibility, more than could be expected of a foreign minister. I sensed the dangers of that day and it was with that awareness that I spoke out. It would have been easy to refuse a press conference that day, but that would not have been the responsible thing to do. If only other political figures, from both sides, who were the key players that day, had also demonstrated such responsibility, if each had done what he could, I am convinced we might have avoided one of the blackest days in our nation's history. My conscience is clear that I did my part. It didn't succeed. But I stood before our people and called on the authorities and the opposition to sit and talk.

On entering the political arena

In my interviews, my statements, I am already perceived as someone who is in the political arena. That has not been formalized by a declaration or an organization. Nevertheless, I am in politics. I can't be indifferent to the events that transpire in Armenia today, and I will do everything to be able to have input and become useful, especially to help form a healthy political environment in our country, and to work with everyone, to reach at least a bi-polar political system – one that would noticeably reinforce our democratization processes.