

Baku Insists On Armenian Withdrawal From Four Border Villages

By Shoghik Galstian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Just days after the latest round of talks on delimiting the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, Azerbaijan demanded over the weekend that Armenia immediately and unconditionally withdraw from four border villages.

The office of Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev, who led the Azerbaijani delegation in the March 6 talks, said that “there is no doubt about their belonging to Azerbaijan.”

The ruined villages are among eight border areas, most of them enclaves inside Armenia, which were controlled by Azerbaijan in Soviet times and occupied by the Armenian army in the early 1990s. For its part, the Azerbaijani side seized at the time a bigger Armenian enclave as well as large swathes of agricultural land belonging to this and several other border communities of Armenia. It occupied more Armenian territory during border clashes in 2021 and 2022.

The Armenian government says that a total of 200 square kilometers of Armenia’s internationally recognized territory adjacent to 31 Armenian communities is now controlled by Azerbaijan. It says that it is ready, in principle,



Voskepar, a village in the Tavush border region

to consider swapping the former Azerbaijani enclaves for those lands or seek other compromise solutions.

Reaffirming Baku’s position on the issue, Mustafayev’s office claimed that Azerbaijan never occupied any Armenian territory. It said that the “immediate liberation” of the four villages must take place see WITHDRAWAL, page 4



Azerbaijan Makes No Secret of Plans to Erase All Armenian Traces from Karabakh

By Marut Vanyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

“You can endlessly gaze at 3 things: fire, a flowing river and how the symbols of Armenian terrorism are being demolished in the Karabakh. Structures erected by the separatist regime after the 1994 occupation of Karabakh are currently being dismantled,” wrote Azerbaijani media reports, about the demolition of the Artsakh (Karabakh) Parliament and War veterans’ buildings in Stepanakert.

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Yerevan Confirms Lack of Major Progress on Peace Deal With Baku

By Astghik Bedevian and Shoghik Galstian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan indicated on Thursday, March 6 that he and his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov did not make significant progress towards an Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty during two-day talks held in Berlin last week.

Mirzoyan said Yerevan continues to insist that the treaty should be based on mutual recognition of each other’s Soviet-era borders certified by a 1991 declaration signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and other newly independent ex-Soviet republics. The two South Caucasus countries should delimit their border accordingly and also retain full control over all

transit routes passing through each other’s territory, he said.

“We continue to work with Azerbaijan on these subjects, and in case of progress, of course, you will all be informed,” Mirzoyan told a joint news conference with his visiting Cypriot counterpart Constantinos Kombos.

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Human Rights Group Condemns Cancellation Of Artsakh Program in Germany After Azerbaijani Pressure

BERLIN/FRANKFURT — After massive intimidation efforts by Azerbaijani organizations and the ambassador in Berlin, the hybrid book presentation of *The Cultural Heritage of Artsakh* will only take place digitally, instead of in person, it was announced on March 6.

In an open letter on March 3, 20 Azerbaijani organizations called on organizers to cancel the book presentation. The letter was even published by the Azerbaijani state-run news agency azertac.

The event was organized by the German Council on Foreign Relations



Prof. Tessa Hofmann protesting in Germany

(DGAP) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, is a thorn in Baku’s side. The International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) condemns the political influence on freedom of assembly and expression in Germany, which is accompanied by intimidation and threats.

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Armenia Moves to Expel Russian Border Guards From Yerevan’s Airport

By Denis Leven

YEREVAN (Politico.eu/Public Radio of Armenia) — Armenia’s Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan announced Thursday, March 7, that Russia has been officially informed its border guards are no longer welcome at Yerevan’s Zvartnots Airport.

“The Armenian side has informed [the Russian side] that it does not need [anymore] the border guard service of Russian border guards at the airport; of course, thanking the Russian side,” Mirzoyan said.

Mirzoyan explained that back in 1992 the presence of Russian border guards at Zvartnots was initially intended as a temporary measure to support Armenian independence. “We now believe that

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ARMENIA

NEWS from ARMENIA

Medieval Censer with Incense Unearthed

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — An ancient censer with incense remains was unearthed in Armenia on March 7.

The early medieval rock-cut container was one of the 56 archaeological objects discovered in the village of Ohanavan. The item was cleaned in the laboratory of the Service for the Protection of the Historical Environment and Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserves of Armenia.

“The censer was covered with dust, and fortunately specialists worked with the object; when cleaning it, they found incense from the 5th century that smelled very good,” said archaeologist Ashot Piliposyan.

The agency reports that the incense will be studied in order to discover its composition.

Ex-Yerevan Mayor Banned From Council Meeting

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Former Yerevan Mayor Hayk Marutyan, who was ousted from the City Council along with two other opposition members on February 5, was banned from attending a municipal council session on March 12.

Speaking with reporters outside the Municipality, he said the authorities had illegally rejected the National Progress faction’s request to allow Marutyan to attend and address the session.

He claimed local laws allow individuals invited by the municipal council factions and the mayor to attend its meetings.

He criticized the proposed public transport fare hike in the Armenian capital, stating the payment plans should not be mandatory.

Ararat Marz Stands in For Mars for Astronauts

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — The Austrian Space Forum in cooperation with the Armenian Space Agency kicks off its AMADEE-24 Mars analog simulation in Armenia on Tuesday, March 12.

Six astronauts from Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain will work in isolation from March 12 to April 5, to prepare for a future Mars mission. The test site in the province (marz) of Ararat was selected for its geological and topographic similarity to Mars.

The six will live and work in a habitat specially designed for them. They will only leave the habitat wearing the OeWF’s Mars suit prototype. For the duration of the mission communication with the Mission Support Center in Vienna, Austria will only be possible with a 10-minute delay in order to simulate the distance from Earth to Mars. Conducting the experiments in the areas of human factors, robotics and geology, the analog astronauts will use a drone and robotic vehicles to explore and map their environment, take soil samples and transport heavy loads.

During the mission, the trainees will be cut off from the outside world and rely solely on their team to complete their tasks and solve emerging problems.



EU Ambassador to Armenia Vassilis Maragos, center, with TUMO CEO Marie Lou Papazian, left

TUMO to Renovate Gyumri Market into an International Culinary School with EU Support

GYUMRI — TUMO will renovate the historic Gyumri market into an international culinary school with a grant from the European Union, as well as donations from the JHM Foundation, Judith Saryan and Victor Zarougian.

The 2.5-million euro grant agreement was signed on March 11 in Gyumri by EU Ambassador to Armenia Vassilis Maragos and TUMO CEO Marie Lou Papazian. Collaborating with the French Institut Lyfe (previously known as Paul Bocuse), TUMO will craft a new curriculum that blends Armenian culinary heritage with global standards. The hub will also accommodate spaces for workshops, booths for local vendors, restaurants, shops for handmade goods, and a venue for events.

Construction will commence soon and the grand opening of the market and culinary school is scheduled for 2026.

In collaboration with the esteemed French institution Institut Lyfe (formerly Institut Paul Bocuse), TUMO will craft a curriculum that integrates the best practices and globally recognized standards in culinary education. Outstanding students who complete the two-year program will have the chance to continue their studies

at Institut Lyfe in Lyon, France.

“Our main goal with this new education program is to craft a new generation of Armenian chefs by combining the curriculum of the renowned French culinary school with tried and true methodologies from TUMO Studios, already implemented in Armenia. Students will incorporate their learning with workshops guided by international experts,” said TUMO CEO Marie Lou Papazian.

The culinary school will accommodate 30 students annually, most of whom will receive scholarships to pursue their studies entirely free-of-charge.

“This project represents the beginning of a new chapter for the economy of Gyumri. By empowering the people, especially the youth and entrepreneurs, with skills and opportunities, we are empowering Gyumri to fulfill its immense promise and potential. The EU is proud to support initiatives that unleash human capabilities and foster sustainable economic development in the regions of Armenia. Last but not least, we would like to thank TUMO and the Municipality of Gyumri for their cooperation and partnership in this project,” said Ambassador Vassilis Maragos,

Head of the EU Delegation to Armenia.

The project will revitalize the old market area of Gyumri, which has been abandoned for years. TUMO will oversee the reconstruction of the building.

Upon completion, the market will be turned into a space that serves as a hub for education, culinary arts, and economic development.

The hub will also accommodate: Spaces for workshops and other educational events; Booths for local vendors to work in secure and hygienic environments; Restaurants; Shops for artisanal and handmade goods; Venue for festivals, concerts, fairs and other events.

In addition to EU funding, the project will be supported by the John and Hasmik Mgrdichian Foundation as well as Judith Saryan and Victor Zarougian.

In the upcoming weeks, an international architectural competition will be launched to choose the team responsible for reconstructing the center. Once the team has been selected, construction will begin promptly. The grand opening of the market and culinary school is scheduled for 2026.

Armenia Moves to Expel Russian Border Guards From Yerevan’s Airport

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Armenia has the institutional capacity to independently implement border guard services at the airport,” he added.

The blunt goodbye comes amid a serious deterioration in relations between Yerevan and Moscow.

Two weeks ago, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced the country would suspend its membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance of former Soviet countries. Armenia blamed Russia for failing to ensure its security during Azerbaijan’s lightning military assault against Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.

The current discussion only concerns the

removal of Russian border guards from the airport; those stationed at the Turkish and Iranian borders are not affected.

Armenia’s Security Council secretary, Armen Grigoryan, said Wednesday that an official letter was sent to Russia about the border guards being ejected, but Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov disputed this.

Armenia’s position is that the service at the “Zvartnots” international airport should be fully performed by the border guard troops of Armenia, Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan at a briefing with journalists this week.

When asked why such a need has arisen, Grigoryan said “Armenia is building its capacity in various directions during the period of independence, and at the moment

Armenia has full capacity to fully control the airport.”

National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan had earlier said it would be right for the Russian border guards to leave the “Zvartnots” international airport.

“As far as we understand,” Peskov said, “there have been no decisions made in this regard. No such decisions have been communicated to us through official channels.” The Russian embassy in Yerevan did not immediately respond to a request for comment from POLITICO.

The push to remove Russians from the airport follows accusations by Armenian NGOs that Russian border guards misused their access to the Border Electronic Management System to facilitate a kidnapping.



ARMENIA

Ladaniva Will Represent Armenia at Eurovision 2024

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — The duo Ladaniva has been selected to represent Armenia at the 68th Eurovision Song Contest in May.

Ladaniva is made up of Armenian vocalist Jaklin Baghdasaryan and French multi-instrumentalist Louis Thomas. With their music, the pair embody a vibrant blend of Armenian folk with global musical influences.

Their entry for the Eurovision Song Contest will be released in the coming days.

From traditional Balkan melodies to the rhythms of maloya, jazz and reggae, the duo's songs have been said to transcend borders, blending traditional Armenian tunes with inspirations drawn from their extensive travels across Latin America, Africa and Reunion Island. Ladaniva's music is a reflection of their diverse backgrounds and insatiable curiosity for world cultures.

The name Ladaniva has been inspired by an off-road retro car brand, symbolizing the band's adventurous spirit and their journey through different cultures and traditions. Jaklin and Louis accidentally found out that both of their fathers owned the same car while living in Armenia and France, and 'voilà' – they had their band

name.

As Jaklin explains: "The Lada Niva is a car that goes anywhere and climbs undiscovered heights, just like we do in our band. We're excited for this opportunity and ready to spice up Eurovision 2024 with our musical diversity."

David Tserunyan, Armenia's head of delegation, anticipates that Ladaniva's irresistible vibe and the song's empowering story will resonate with Eurovision fans:

"This year we're thrilled to present a unique and multi-cultural entry that will

make everyone dance their hearts out and carry a meaningful message with a fun and light spirit! Jaklin and Louis create songs from everyday life experiences, and soon you will hear the story of a free girl – breaking societal stereotypes."

Founded in 2019, Ladaniva initially gained viral acclaim with their hit song *Vay Aman*, showcasing their fresh style and innovative approach to world music. The group released their eponymous debut album under the French label PIAS in 2023.

The music video for one of the singles from the album, *Shakar*, has attracted over 14 million views on their YouTube channel.

Their mission is clear: to connect people and cultures through their music. Ladaniva's journey at Eurovision 2024 promises to be a celebration of diversity, creativity, and the power of music as a cross cultural bridge.

The Eurovision Song Contest will get underway in Malmö, Sweden on Tuesday, May 7.



The duo Ladaniva

Yerevan 'Actively Discussing' EU Membership Bid

By Artak Khulian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Armenia's leadership is considering applying for membership in the European Union, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan told Turkish state television in an interview aired over the weekend.

"Taking into account all the challenges that we have had to face in the last three or four years, new opportunities are being actively discussed in Armenia," he said. "I will not reveal a secret if I say that the idea of joining the EU is one of them."

"The people of Armenia have European aspirations, and as I said, we are going through a process and we will see what the end result of the process will be, which at the moment no one can be sure or predict," added Mirzoyan.

Parliament speaker Alen Simonian, another key member of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's political team, was the first to publicly float the idea on February 29 amid a further deterioration of Armenia's relations with Russia. Simonian claimed that Armenia has "much better democracy indicators" than some EU member states.

Pashinyan reportedly discussed the possibility of an EU membership bid with parliament deputies from his Civil Contract party during two meetings held last week. According to the Yerevan newspaper Hraparak, some of those lawmakers voiced serious misgivings about the idea, arguing that Armenia is heavily dependent on Russia for trade and energy and that Moscow is therefore in a position to wreak havoc on the Armenian economy.

After holding talks with an Armenian delegation led by Mirzoyan on February 13, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the two sides have agreed to draw up an "ambitious new partnership agenda." He did not elaborate.

Pashinyan said earlier that his government wants to move closer to the 27-nation bloc "as much as the EU finds it possible."

Former Official Rejects Pashinyan's 'Failed' Policy on Azerbaijan

By Gayane Saribekian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Edmon Marukyan, a former Armenian opposition leader who worked as ambassador-at-large until this month, has criticized Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for continuing to make "unilateral" concessions to Azerbaijan even after the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Marukyan insisted that Pashinyan's strategy of resolving the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has been a complete failure and will not bring peace as he elaborated on his decision to resign.

Marukyan announced the resignation in a February 29 statement, citing "differences in our visions on a number of fundamental foreign policy issues." He had worked as ambassador-at-large since March 2022.

In a weekend video posted on social media, the leader of the Bright Armenia Party complained that Pashinyan's administration keeps offering more concessions to Azerbaijan despite getting nothing in return. He pointed out that Yerevan stopped championing the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination in 2022 in return

for Western pledges to help protect their "rights and security." Baku, he said, not only did not reciprocate that policy change but also launched a military offensive last September that restored Azerbaijani control over Karabakh and forced the region's population to flee to Armenia.

"The idea that we will unilaterally show goodwill and Azerbaijan will appreciate that and will show goodwill too did not work, does not work and will not work," added Marukyan.

Armenian opposition leaders likewise say that Pashinyan's appeasement policy will not stop Azerbaijan from demanding further Armenian concessions and resorting to military action for that purpose.

Marukyan also took issue with Pashinyan's calls for a new Armenian constitution reflecting the "new geopolitical environment" in the region. He essentially echoed opposition claims that the premier wants to scrap the current constitution under Azerbaijani pressure.

Analysts believe that Pashinyan first and foremost wants to get rid of a preamble to the constitution that makes reference to a 1990 declaration of independence adopt-

ed by the republic's first post-Communist parliament. The declaration in turn cites a 1989 unification act adopted by the legislative bodies of Soviet Armenia and the then Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.

Vagharshak Hakobyan, a parliament deputy from Pashinyan's Civil Contract party, dismissed Marukyan's explanations for his resignation. "Did he realize that there are differences [with the government] after being Nikol Pashinyan's subordinate for three years?" said Hakobyan.

The pro-government lawmaker suggested that Marukyan stepped down to prepare for Armenia's next general elections due in 2026.

Bright Armenia used to be one of the country's main opposition groups. Like other opposition leaders, Marukyan blamed Pashinyan for Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan and demanded his resignation in the wake of it. He accepted the premier's offer to become ambassador-at-large nine months after his party fared poorly in the 2021 snap elections, failing to win any seats in the Armenian parliament.



ARMENIA

Azerbaijan Makes No Secret of Plans to Erase All Armenian Traces from Karabakh

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An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you destroyed our Aghdam and Fizuli, now we are destroying your Stepanakert, Azerbaijanis usually bring such a counterargument on social media.

While the Parliament building is being demolished, Artsakh MPs made a statement warning that Armenian cultural monuments and churches are in danger.

“The latest manifestations of vandalism are the desecration of the Holy Mother of God Cathedral in Stepanakert, the destruction to the ground of the Artsakh National Assembly buildings and the Union of Freedom Fighters,” reads the statement.

President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan was nicknamed “son of the statue” for placing statues dedicated to his father and predecessor dictator, Heydar, all over Azerbaijan. Aliyev doesn’t like other statues. The statue of Charles Aznavour, Alex Manoogian, Khachatur Abovyan and Stepan Shahumyan, after whom the Artsakh/Karabakh’s capital city is named, was removed in Stepanakert. Following the Azerbaijani media, we can assume that Stepanakert will look completely different soon (how unusual is it to see the Stepanakert stadium in the colors of the Azerbaijani flag?). “All the “illegal” buildings and monuments built by Armenians will be removed in Karabakh,” the Azerbaijanis declare every day.

Stepanakert is a typical Soviet city with its khrushchevskas (typical Soviet three-to-five story apartment buildings) — you cannot compare it with Rome. But it’s not just about demolishing buildings. Demolishing the buildings destroys the lives of the people who lived there, their memories and dreams.

What will be the next “illegal” building, people’s apartments that they have built for years with their hard work? Life will show this too. What saw Artsakh Armenians, perhaps they should not be surprised at anything.

Yerevan Confirms Lack Of Major Progress On Peace Deal With Baku

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According to Sargis Khandanyan, the chairman of the Armenian parliament committee on foreign relations, Bayramov and Mirzoyan made “some progress on some issues.”

“Nevertheless, if the progress had been such that we could talk about possible time frames for the signing [of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty,] there would have been [official] statements to that effect,” said Khandanyan. “As things stand now, I think that further work and new meetings are needed.”

In a statement issued right after the Berlin talks, the Armenian Foreign Ministry said only that the two ministers agreed to “continue negotiations on the open issues.”

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met in another German city, Munich, on February 17. Pashinian said afterwards that Azerbaijan remains reluctant to recognize Armenia’s borders “without ambiguity” and is planning military aggression against his country. Aliyev countered that Baku has no “plans” to invade Armenia.



Stepanakert, 2023 (Marut Vanyan Photo)

According to Azerbaijani media Baku to allocate \$2.4 billion for reconstruction of Karabakh and 140,000 people (Azerbaijanis) are expected to return by the end of 2026.

While Baku is demolishing building and replacing them with new structures in Artsakh/Karabakh, its residents live scattered in Armenia, they consider it unrealistic to return to their homes at the moment, others, unable to cope with social difficulties, simply emigrate from Armenia.

“Approximately 30,000 Artsakh citizens have left Armenia,” said Armen Asryan, leader of the Union of the Relatives of Soldiers Killed and Missing in the 3rd Artsakh War NGO during a press conference on March 6 in Yerevan.

“There is no statistics on how many Artsakh citizens left Armenia. The (Armenian) authorities can say that number clearly. Anyway, we have a serious fear that the number can significantly increase in the spring. In this kind of social and housing programs it becomes more obvious,” said Artak Beglaryan, the former Artsakh State Minister added at the same press conference.

The Artsakh/Karabakh Armenians are in a very difficult social and psychological situation currently. Azerbaijanis say (mostly mockingly) forget Artsakh (Karabakh); it’s already in the past, and Armenians say we will return one day. In any case, the fact is that Artsakh/Karabakh is under the control of Azerbaijan and the Armenians consider it unrealistic to go there soon.

It’s hard to say this, but it’s really frightening to think that the Artsakh/Karabakh Armenians will say for a hundred years that we will go home one day, but they won’t be

able to go there, as we are witnessing in the case of Diaspora Armenians.

The following are some comments from Artsakh Armenians now in Armenia:

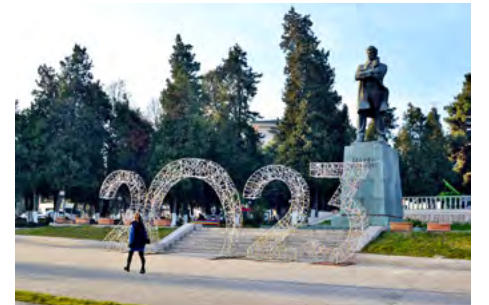
Gayane Budayan, Hadrut, Artsakh/Karabakh Hadrut: “I really don’t expect anything good. It is clear that they will demolish and destroy, whatever they don’t like, they will transform. The Artsakh/Karabakh Armenians will face the same fate as the Armenians of Shahumyan; some will fly to Russia, others to other countries, others will somehow survive in Armenia. How do I see the future of Artsakh in the next 70-80 years? It’s very hard to say. I do not know... The Artsakh Armenians are neglected by the Armenian authorities, that is a fact that has its reasons, I think everyone understands that.”

Anoush Shahramayna, Stepanakert: “If I try to imagine what Artsakh will be like in 10 years, I should at least see what is being done by Armenia.. Can we properly represent our rights as Artsakh Armenians in international courts? What happened was no longer a war; Azerbaijan simply forced us out of our country. Who should raise again the rights of self-determination and return of the Artsakh people? What should be done for this? These questions must be answered first. We must understand that time is not working in our favor. We need concrete goals, development and civilized struggle. As for the situation of Artsakh Armenians, it is very complicated, unstable social situation, the risk of any displaced person being outside is very high. There are no social guarantees, and with the termination of social assistance programs, the problems will deepen. Many Artsakh families have left

Armenia, but they do not have refugee status in another country. I think the maximum should be done to keep the people of Artsakh in Armenia. We need continuous social support programs, an active and realistic housing security program.”

Armine Hayrapetyan, Stepanakert: “What is happening today in Artsakh after the ethnic cleansing was expected from Azerbaijan. In the course of history, we have seen it both in Nakhichevan and in northern Artsakh. Azerbaijan will try to do the same with today’s Artsakh, will try to erase the Armenian traces. The demolition of the parliament building caused an uproar among Armenians, which is strange to me, frankly. Aliyev proceeded to the destruction of state symbols in order to show Armenians, Azerbaijanis and the world in general that there is no Artsakh state. We should oppose Azerbaijan and speak to the world about our rights, but this is not being done, perhaps due to their (our) socio-psychological trauma. However, time does not wait and we must sober up and act. We must not accept our weakness. In this changing world, everything is possible, so as a result of geopolitical developments, everything can be different. The issue of Artsakh is not just the issue of Artsakh Armenians, but of all Armenians all over the world. The more indifferent we are, the more time will work against us.”

Samvel Tavadyan, historian, Artsakh: I think that the resettlement of Artsakh depends on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.



Stepanakert, 2023 (Marut Vanyan Photo)

Because the peace agreement isn’t signed and there are security problems, it would be difficult for Azerbaijan to implement the resettlement plan. I think that with the elimination of the political past, the hope of our return to Artsakh is also eliminated, showing that peaceful coexistence is impossible and that Azerbaijanis are not going to tolerate even the presence of cultural heritage. Regarding Armenia’s social programs, I think that Armenia should review the housing provision program, create more affordable conditions for Artsakh Armenians to purchase apartments, even in the form of long-term interest-free loans for young families.

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before the two sides start delimiting and demarcating their border. The delimitation process must result in Armenian withdrawal from the four other disputed areas, he said.

The Armenian government did not comment on the demand as of Monday evening. The office of Mustafayev’s Armenian opposite number, Mher Grigoryan, was in no rush to reply to a written question from RFE/RL’s Armenian Service.

Vagharshak Hakobyan, a pro-government parliamentarian, urged reporters to

keep waiting for an official reaction. He also said vaguely that border talks between countries around the world typically result in mutual territorial concessions.

Opposition lawmakers were concerned about the development. One of them, Gegham Manukyan, said that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s ambiguous position and statements on the issue could be used by Azerbaijan for legitimizing a “new aggression” against Armenia.

Yerevan insists on using the most recent Soviet military maps to ascertain the long

border between the two South Caucasus countries. Baku rejects the idea backed by the European Union.

The lingering border disputes are a key hurdle to the signing of an Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty. In an interview with Turkish state television broadcast late last week, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan complained that Baku now does not want the treaty to make any reference to the 1991 Almaty declaration by newly independent ex-Soviet republics that certified their Soviet-era borders.



INTERNATIONAL

Azerbaijan Charges Journalists and Activists Following Raid on TV Station

By Aytan Farhadova

BAKU (OC-Media) — Three journalists and four pro-democracy activists remain in detention in Azerbaijan following a raid on independent media outlet Toplum TV and a political organization on March 6.

That day, police raided the offices of Toplum TV as well as the shared office of the Institute for Democratic Initiatives (IDI) and the Third Republican Platform, the latter an opposition political grouping formed in December 2023.

The raid on Toplum TV represents the latest in a new [crackdown](#) in Azerbaijan on what remained of the free press in the country, which began in November 2023 with a raid on the offices of AbzasMedia.

Later that night, Toplum TV's YouTube [channel](#) appeared to have been taken over, with the name of the channel changed and all of their videos removed. The channel's Instagram was also taken down.

Police reportedly detained all staff of the media outlet that were present in the office, a total of 18 people, and a number of employees of the Institute for Democratic Initiatives. The flats of three journalists and two employees of the IDI were raided by police on the same day.

While the majority of those detained were released later on Wednesday night, seven remain under arrest on charges of smuggling foreign currency. The same charges were levied against five media workers associated with [AbzasMedia](#) in November and December, all of whom remain in pre-trial detention.

Zibeyda Sadigova, a lawyer representing one of those detained, [stated](#) that several of the detainees were beaten by police.

Akif Gurbanov, the head of the IDI and the Third Republican Platform, was amongst those detained. His flat was raided by police following the search of the Toplum TV offices.

According to his lawyer, Shahla Humbatova, Gurbanov is facing charges of smuggling foreign currency as part of a group, punishable with five to eight years of imprisonment. Humbatova added that police had seized €30,000 from Gurbanov's flat, along with documents. Gurbanov denies all charges against him, and has stated via his lawyer that the money was planted by police.

Ali Zeynal, Ramil Babayev, and Ilkin Akhmedov, all members of the Institute for Democratic Initiatives, and journalists Mushfig Jabbar, Elmir Abbasov, and Farid Ismailov were detained on the same charges. Zeynal's flat was also raided on Wednesday evening, with his family claiming that police seized □120,000 (\$71,000) from his home.

While official reports claimed that Jabbar was detained at the Toplum TV office, his wife, Narmina Jabbar, told OC Media that Jabbar was arrested while on his way to work, and then taken to his flat, where a search was conducted. She added that police appeared to have planted an envelope containing cash during the search.

Ismailov's mother, Malahat Ismailova, told OC Media that police claimed to have found money in the pocket of an old jacket during their raid on their home. According to Ismailova, Ismailov maintains that neither the money nor the jacket belonged to him. Ismailova added that her son's salary was sufficiently low that she regularly sent the stipend that she receives as an IDP from

Kalbajar, to support Ismailov.

The editor-in-chief of Toplum TV, Khadija Ismayilova, told journalists that the raids appeared to be intended to entirely silence dissent in Azerbaijan. Ismayilova was previously arrested by the Azerbaijani authorities and sentenced in 2015 to seven years in prison on charges widely condemned as politically motivated.

‘It looks like [the authorities] want to fully liquidate independent media in the country to leave no platform for critical opinions’, said Ismayilova.

‘We have not been involved in any illegal activities. Therefore, there are no legal explanations for what is happening’, she added.

International Reactions

A number of politicians and international organizations were swift to condemn the arrests.

US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller [stated](#) the country's “strong objections” to attempts to ‘intimidate, repress, and punish’ journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures.

‘We call on Azerbaijan to end the harassment of those exercising their fundamental freedoms and urge the release of all individuals being unjustly held in politically motivated cases’, said Miller.

He added that American officials repeated the points in ‘private diplomatic conversations’ with their Azerbaijani counterparts.

Freedom House, an international non-governmental organization condemned the “unacceptable attack” on critical voices in Azerbaijan.

“We urge democratic governments to hold the regime accountable for this wave of repression,” they wrote.

Human Rights Group Condemns Cancellation of Artsakh Program in Germany After Azerbaijani Pressure

CANCELATION, from page 1

The event, titled “Protection of the endangered cultural property of Nagorno-Karabakh” with the presentation of the book *Cultural Heritage in Artsakh* and a symposium became the victim of a digital smear campaign. The intimidation included the mass sending of e-mails with the same content by pro-state NGOs from Azerbaijan masquerading as civil society. In addition, there were numerous complaints by telephone, and the Azerbaijani ambassador had also wanted to prohibit the mention of the term “Nagorno-Karabakh cultural asset”. The massive encroachments on freedom of assembly, academic freedom and freedom of expression in Germany show the brutality and determination of the Aliyev regime. “Opposition voices are not only persecuted and fought in their own country, but now the scientific discourse abroad is also being aggressively attacked,” wrote the ISHR.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have been pursuing a destructive policy against Armenia for three decades. After the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Republic of Artsakh) was ethnically cleansed in September 2023 after months of blockade, siege and a military offensive, they seem poised to launch another military attack to seize land in southern Armenia. Last but not least, representatives of the Aliyev regime accuse the Armenians of criminal appropriation of their own millennia-old cultural heritage and deny their right to exist in the state of Armenia, which

they call “Western Azerbaijan.”

In addition, Russian President Vladimir Putin's angry statements has also been massively worrisome, and the ISHR therefore warns of the existential danger for Armenia. While Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is of public interest, the massive danger to Armenia remains a side note, the Frankfurt-based human rights organization complains.

To the event organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the German Council on Foreign Relations

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More than 100,000 Armenians were expelled after the victory of the Azerbaijani army in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and state institutions were dissolved at the beginning of the year. Now there are fears that the millennia-old Armenian cultural heritage in the region could be destroyed by the Azerbaijani army – similar to what happened in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan in 1997 and 2006: 28,000 monuments were destroyed there, and an Armenian cemetery had to make way for a military training area. There are very good reasons to ask what international protection could look like, says Dr. Tessa Hofmann, an expert on Eastern Europe: “Currently, Azerbaijani forces are destroying Armenian cemeteries in Artsakh and bragging about their deeds on social media.” Artsakh

is the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh.

Hofmann is co-author of the anthology *The Cultural Heritage of Artsakh*, which was to be presented at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) on March 6.

“This protest is accompanied by public tweets, e-mails and messages from bot accounts that flood the accounts of the editor-in-chief of the magazine IP, the managing director of DGAP and the former director,” Wiebke Ewering, head of press and communications at DGAP said.

Parallel to the event, Berlin authorities approved a demonstration by Azerbaijani organizations in front of the DGAP against the alleged ignorance of Armenian crimes, which allowed further pressure to be generated. Since a constructive, safe discussion space could no longer be guaranteed, the decision was made to use the virtual space, according to spokeswoman Wiebke Ewering.

Added Hofmann, “It is extremely worrying if a threatening backdrop of the authoritarian Aliyev regime is given in without need, said Hofmann. Azerbaijan is exploiting its key position between the West and its adversaries Russia and Iran. “For the second time in a century, Armenian civil society has had to accept that world public opinion reacts to its annihilation with indifference,” says the South Caucasus expert. This has given Azerbaijan the signal to dare even more.

INTERNATIONAL

Azerbaijan Destroys Soviet Hero Baghramyan's Statue

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The Azerbaijani regime continues to destroy complexes and monuments related to the Great Patriotic War in occupied Artsakh, the Cultural Ombudsman of Hayk NGO warned on March 10.

“Another victim of the cultural genocide in Azerbaijan was the monument to Marshal of the Soviet Union, twice Hero of the USSR Hovhannes Baghramyan,” it said in a social media post on Sunday.

The organization also reported the destruction of a statue representing the image of a traditional Armenian grandmother in the area adjacent to Stepanakert's Revival Square.

Armenia, Georgia Discuss Strategic Partnership

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — On March 11, Armenia's Ambassador to Tbilisi Ashot Smbatyan met with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, the Armenian Embassy reports.

The strategic partnership declaration signed between Armenia and Georgia and the deepening of bilateral cooperation in various fields was on the table.

Kazakh Leader Visits Azeri-Occupied Shushi

SHUSHI (Panorama.am) — The presidents of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Ilham Aliyev, respectively, on March 12 visited Shushi, the cultural capital of Azeri-occupied Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh).

The Azerbaijani media shared photos of their visit.

The two had earlier attended the inauguration of a children's center in Varanda. The previous day, Tokayev announced that Kazakhstan was happy about Azerbaijan's “historic victory.”

Aliyev thanked the Kazakh leader for his “brotherly support in restoring Karabakh.”

Yerevan, Delhi to Join Forces to Handle Labor Migration in Armenia

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Yerevan and Delhi will join forces to create mechanisms that will handle labor migration issues in Armenia, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reveals, according to Sputnik Armenia, on March 12.

The agreements were made during the visit of Armenian Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Narek Mkrtchyan to India.

The initiative comes amid a growing influx of Indian citizens seeking employment in Armenia.

The parties are considering concluding a memorandum of understanding in the field of labor and employment.

In addition, it is planned to create a specialized platform through the Unified Social Service which, on the one hand, will help Indian workers find work, and on the other, offer them vacancies in Armenia.



INTERNATIONAL

Archaeologists Unearth Evidence of Ancient Brain Surgery near Lake Van

By **Levon Karamanoukian**
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Archaeologists working in the South-east Regions of Lake Van have unearthed ancient human skulls that evidence brain surgery techniques dating as far back as the Iron-Age. The excavations at Kaniya Bekan Necropolis are headed by Hakan Yilmaz, an associate professor at the Department of Archaeology at the Van Yüzüncü Yıl University.

According to Hakan Yilmaz, the excavations indicate that the inhabitants of the region, dating back 3,200 years ago, practiced cranial surgery that exhibited “a high degree of medical knowledge.” He adds, “About sixty percent of those who underwent these surgeries showed signs of healing, suggesting a relatively successful medical practice.”

The skull findings show evidence of trepanation (burring a hole) and surgical drilling of bone with healed edges suggesting that the recipients of the surgery survived for quite some time after the procedure.

The necropolis of Kaniya Bekan is located southeast of Lake Van in the Uzuntekne neighborhood of Çatak (Շաւուղի) district. According to the Van Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the region of Çatak was once an old Armenian settlement that officially changed its name to a more Turkified version in 1960. According to the Armenian Patriarchate, the Armenian-populated Çatak district had “a census of 1,096 Armenians (219 houses) and 9 Kurds (2 houses)” at the turn of the 20th century. There are currently 33 neighborhoods in the Çatak (Շաւուղի) district in present-day Turkey.

Anthropometric dating of the Kaniya



A skull with showing trepanation



Map of the region

Bekan necropolis indicates that the remains may coincide with the rise and fall of the proto-Armenian civilization of Urartu in the region centered around Lake Van.

The archaeological findings include a treasure trove of evidence related to Iron-Age burial practices, diet and lifestyle patterns, and medical knowledge. Of the skulls currently excavated, scientists have noted that most cranial surgeries were performed on the back of the head or the right and left sides. The burial practices included dog burials alongside human remains; and offerings of smaller animals along the entrances of human burial sites which suggest a pattern of ritual offerings to the deceased.

Evidence of cranial surgery found near Lake Van show similarities in ancient cranial surgery techniques with other ancient civilizations, including those found in Incan, Egyptian, Roman, Kenyan, and Greek

excavations. The methods used to core the skull in the Çatak skeletons, however, display a method of trepanation previously attributed to the first-century Roman physician Aulus Cornelius Celsus in his treatise De Medicinis. Celsus described a method in which multiple burr holes are made in the skull in a concentric pattern and connected using a chisel. The findings at Çatak (Շաւուղի) pre-date the earliest mention of trepanation by Hippocrates by three millennia.

Archaeologic excavations in the Lake Van region of Asia Minor are an active sight of scientific study, helping identify the Bronze and Iron-Age civilizations including the Urartians and the proto-Armenian civilizations of the Armenian plateau. The current study at Kaniya Bekan continues to reveal important clues to the lifestyle of ancient people living in the region.

Iran Repeats Warnings to Armenian Leadership

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Outside powers cannot bring peace and stability to the South Caucasus, Iran’s leaders have told Armenia’s visiting Defense Minister Suren Papikyan in what appears to be a fresh warning to Yerevan.

It comes amid a further deterioration of Armenia’s relations with Russia, its long-time ally, and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s apparent efforts to reorient his country towards the West.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed the importance of “the non-interference of outsiders in regional affairs” when he met with Papikyan, a key member of Pashinyan’s political team, late on Thursday, March 7.

“Allowing outsiders to interfere will not bring security; security and peace will be guaranteed only by the cooperation of the countries of the region themselves,” Raisi was quoted by his office as saying.

Iran’s Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani was similarly reported to tell Papikyan on Wednesday that “seeking se-



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi with Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan

curity outside the region” could only “bring about more challenges to regional peace and stability”.

Tehran has repeatedly conveyed the same message to Yerevan in the past sev-

eral months. Pashinyan’s administration has been seeking closer security ties with the United States and Europe amid its unprecedented tensions with Russia. It also prefers Western mediation of peace talks with Azerbaijan.

Pashinyan seemed to acknowledge last month that his government’s declared efforts to “diversify” Armenia’s foreign and security policy are prompting concern from not only Moscow but also Tehran.

Armenian opposition groups say Iran’s stance is another reason why Yerevan should exercise caution in its dealings with the West. They argue that unlike Western powers, Iran could intervene militarily to prevent Azerbaijan from opening an extra-territorial corridor to its Nakhichevan exclave through Syunik, the only Armenian region bordering the Islamic Republic.

While signaling concerns about the pro-Western tilt in Armenian foreign policy, Raisi praised the current state of Armenian-Iranian relations. He said he hopes Papikyan’s talks with Ashtiani will result in a major boost to regional security.

The Armenian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday March 6 that the ministers reached “a number of understandings on issues of mutual interest.” It did not elaborate.



INTERNATIONAL

Doctor Runs Ultramarathon To Help Improve Healthcare in Rural Armenia

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay — FIDEC Armenia’s Medical Director and infectious diseases specialist, Dr. Pablo Elmassian successfully completed an ultramarathon from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, covering a distance of 600 kilometers in 14 consecutive days.

The campaign, titled “Moving Forward to Improve Healthcare in Armenia,” and launched last December, received significant support, raising around \$122,000 for health programs in vulnerable rural communities in the Shirak province. The campaign, titled “Moving Forward to Improve Healthcare in Armenia,” launched last December, received significant support, raising around \$122,000 for health programs in vulnerable rural communities in the Shirak province.

Dr. Elmassian’s run from Argentina to Uruguay concluded with a celebratory event in Plaza Armenia, Montevideo, attended by Armenian and Uruguayan authorities. “This extraordinary achievement by Dr. Elmassian demonstrates his unwavering commitment to improving health in Armenia and also highlights the resilience and solidarity of the Armenian community worldwide,” said Dr. Daniel Stambouljian, President of the FIDEC Armenia Foundation.

Elmassian is an infectious diseases specialist and the Medical Director of FIDEC Armenia. With a passion for



Pablo Elmassian’s arrival in Uruguay’s Armenia Plaza

long-distance running, he combines his love for sports with charitable endeavors to support healthcare programs in Armenia.

FIDEC Armenia’s comprehensive health programs ensured free, high-quality medical services for the vulnerable rural population excluded from the Armenian government’s Basic Benefit Package (BBP). In 2022,



Pablo Elmassian’s media coverage

with the financial support of the Armenian-Argentinian community, the program was successfully implemented in the communities of Horom and Pemzashen in the Artik region. Elmassian’s solidarity ultramarathon allowed the program to be extended in 2023-2024 to also cover the communities of Jajur and Akhurik in the Akhuryan region.

A generous donation from the Armenia Fund of Argentina (Fundacion Armenia), an institutional partner of FIDEC Armenia, supplemented the funds raised through this solidarity campaign. This donation enabled the provision of treatment for six months to 600 patients with chronic diseases in the communities of Akhurik and Jajur.

“We believe that investing in health is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for the well-being of communities in our fatherland Armenia. Through our steadfast commitment and collaborative efforts for the past two years, we complemented FIDEC Armenia’s healthcare programs with vital medication, thus helping them build the culture of preventive healthcare among the rural population,” said Alejandro Kalpakian, President of Fundacion Armenia.

FIDEC Armenia aims to achieve an additional fundraising goal of \$150,000 to carry out personalized healthcare interventions for refugees who had to flee Artsakh and resettle in rural communities in the Armavir and Ara-

rat provinces. To contribute, visit: www.runningforarmenia.com, where every donation, no matter how small, will significantly impact the lives of Armenians in need.

FIDEC is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that



Medical professions at the Shirak Health Program 2023-2024,

helps improve healthcare and the quality of life. Its subsidiary organization, FIDEC Armenia Foundation, has been making a difference for 15 years and continues to address healthcare needs in underserved communities of Armenia. Learn more at: www.fidec-online.org

Armenian Sources Blast Azerbaijani TV Interviews with Artsakh POWs

YEREVAN (Panorama.am/news.am) — The We Exist initiative denounced on March 12 an interview with the former Artsakh leaders held captive in Azerbaijan as a blatant violation of human rights and a demonstration of power. “The interview with the captured and illegally detained former leaders of Artsakh, as announced by Azerbaijan’s state television channel, was yet another display of the egregious violation of human rights and a demonstration of power. Currently, eight representatives of the highest authority of the Republic of Artsakh are held in captivity in Azerbaijan,” it said in a statement.

“Conducting interviews with these detained individuals is impermissible, as it is evident that they are subjected to coercion and incapable of genuinely expressing their thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, such interviews contravene the provisions of numerous international conventions and agreements. “The We Exist initiative strongly condemns the fact of captivity and the disproportionate steps taken against the former leaders of Artsakh. We appeal to the relevant international structures, demanding urgent actions to prevent crimes in Azerbaijan. The gross violation of international humanitarian law by Azerbaijan should

receive an adequate evaluation. Artak Beglaryan, the former Minister of State and Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), similarly raised an alarm about this. “We urge the United Nations, International Committee of the Red Cross, the Organization for Security and Cooperation, the European Union and the Council of Europe to take the necessary steps to safeguard the internationally guaranteed rights of detained persons,” read his statement. President Aliyev’s genocidal and dictatorial regime in Azerbaijan violates international law once again. They not only have abducted the leadership of Artsakh,

but also have prevented the possibility of their legal defense. Beglaryan emphasized that the former leaders of Artsakh — who are detained in Azerbaijan — are now being forced to give interviews. “Using hostages for the purpose of propaganda and mass humiliation is also a crime. By the way, the First Special Adviser of the United Nations on the Prevention of Genocide, Juan Mendez, clearly notes in his report of November 1, 2023 that the arrest of Artsakh leaders is evidence of genocide, as it shows the intention to destroy the [Armenian] community [of Artsakh],” Beglaryan added.

Community News

Bella Ishanyan Named Mass. High School Journalist Of The Year

BOSTON — The Massachusetts Scholastic Press Association (MAS-PA) recognized 12 outstanding seniors as its 2024 All-State High School Journalism Staff on February 22, and also named Newton South senior Bella Ishanyan as the 2024 Massachusetts High School Journalist of the Year.

The 12 members of the All-State staff submitted portfolios of their work, resumes, and reflective essays as part of their applications, which were reviewed by a four-member



2024 Mass. High School Journalist of the Year Bella Ishanyan photographs a protest march (photo Ken Martin)

judging panel — Journalism Education Association (JEA) Massachusetts director Brett Zinger, JEA New Hampshire director Tim Cain, JEA Connecticut director Dave Fortier, and Lian Parsons-Thomason, professional journalist and president of the Boston chapter of the Asian American Journalists Association.

The depth and breadth of Ishanyan's writing, design, and leadership on her school paper, *The Lion's Roar*, impressed judges, as well as



her reporting for professional publications, MASPA Executive Director Brian Baron said.

Ishanyan now becomes the Massachusetts representative in JEA's national High School Journalist of the Year Contest. JEA will name a national winner and runners up at its spring national convention in Kansas City in April, with scholarship money as prizes.

One of the professional publications Ishanyan has contributed to is the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*.



Michael Avakian with some of his paintings for sale (Ken Martin Photo)

Holy Trinity ACYOA Holds Fundraiser Program for Artsakh Families

By Kenneth Martin

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — An art and food event modeled after the Vernissage outdoor marketplace in Yerevan and organized by the Holy Trinity Church Armenian Church Youth Organization of America (ACYOA) chapter, was held on Saturday, March 3, in the large church hall on Brattle Street.

Proceeds from the rental of tables by vendors and donations were donated to aid Artsakh families who fled to Armenia after the recent military attack by Azerbaijan on the Armenian-populated region.

The Boston Armenian community and organizations and especially youth have stepped up to help families who have lost their homes and possessions and family members to Azeri aggression, violence and ethnic cleansing.



Fr. Vasken Kouzouian at the program (Ken Martin Photo)

Organizers of the event were the Executive Committee of the ACYOA: Lara Varjabedian (Chair), Lori Atinizian (Vice Chair), Sasoun Krikorian (Internal PR), Alina Kouzouian (External PR). The organizers thought it would be a nice idea to do something to support local businesses while also raising money for humanitarian aid, hence the Vernissage marketplace.

Funds will go to supporting displaced families from Artsakh who are without heat and in need of firewood. ACYOA is partnering with others in the church who are also raising money for this cause. Enough money was raised to help 48 families get heat.

Vendors included artists, authors, and fashion and crafters selling delicious food



and pastries, books, custom clothing, local honey, handmade jewelry, paintings, wood cuts, and photographs filled the hall with their wares as church and community members came from far and wide to buy and enjoy items and join friends, old and new, in

support of the people of Artsakh. The organizers hope to hold the Vernissage event annually.

Some of the baked goods on sale at Holy Trinity (Ken Martin Photo)



Shahbazian Foundation Empowering Remote Villages Of Armenia Through Educational Initiatives

BOSTON — The Shahbazian Charitable Foundation was founded in 2014 by Prof. Joseph Shahbazian and Dr. Bella Margarian in memory of their beloved brother, Janson Shahbazian. Prof. Joseph Shahbazian is a physicist, medical engineer, author, inventor and philanthropist, and Dr. Bella Margarian is a higher education administrator, author, inventor and philanthropist. They have supported hundreds of pupils and students from the remote villages of Armenia since 2014 with computers,



Shahbazian Foundation founders Prof. Joseph Shahbazian and Dr. Bella Margarian

scholarships, and stationery. Even before that, when they were still university students, they supported students in different regions of Armenia, such as Tavush, Martuni, and Ijevan. Now, students of those schools have become teachers and employees of the same schools.

According to the founders, access to quality education in remote corners of Armenia is often a distant dream for many students and families. Limited resources, geographic barriers, and socio-economic difficulties create formidable obstacles to learning. However, amid these challenges, the Shahbazian Foundation has stepped up to make a difference and transform the educational landscape in remote villages, unlocking opportunities and empowering communities for a brighter future.

Before implementing any educational initiatives, the charity conducts thorough needs assessments and community consultations to understand the specific challenges and aspirations of the villages it serves. By engaging with local stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community leaders, the charity ensures that its interventions are culturally relevant, contextually appropriate, and aligned with the needs and priorities of the community. Community involvement is central to the success of their initiatives. The charity works hand in hand with local communities, empowering them to take ownership

continued on next page

COMMUNITY NEWS

Shahbazian Foundation Empowering Remote Villages

from previous page

of their educational journey. Through parent-teacher associations, community-led initiatives, and participatory decision-making processes, the charity fosters a sense of ownership, pride, and collective responsibility for the success of education in remote villages.

The Shahbazian charity is committed to measuring the impact of its educational interventions and continuously monitoring progress towards its goals. Through rigorous monitoring and evaluation, the charity assesses the effectiveness of its programs, identifies areas for improvement, and adapts its strategies accordingly. Moreover, the charity promotes sustainability by fostering local leadership, building capacity, and mobilizing resources within the community to ensure that educational gains are maintained and scaled over time. One of the first steps in improving education in remote villages is to address essential resources like educational materials, books, and technology. Recognizing the pivotal role of teachers in shaping the future, the charity offers training programs and professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and pedagogical practices. Through workshops and mentoring, teachers gain the knowledge, confidence, and resources to deliver high-quality education that meets the diverse needs of students in remote settings. The charity ensures sustainable impact and long-term success by investing in teacher capacity-building. By empowering remote villages through tailored educational initiatives, this charity is changing lives, transforming communities, and shaping the future. Through strategic investments, the Shahbazian Foundation breaks down barriers and unlocks every child's potential, one village at a time.

The Shahbazian Foundation focuses on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs by facilitating student development, encouraging excellence through creative learning, and promoting community/school partnerships. The foundation plans periodic lectures by inviting professionals and academicians worldwide for lectures and training on timely topics around Armenia.

One of the key strengths of this nonprofit organization is the ability to innovate and adapt to the diverse needs of society. From implementing technology-driven learning platforms to promoting experiential learning opportunities, the organization



2022-23 Shahbazian Foundation Scholarship recipients during an excursion in Yerevan



Shahbazian Foundation

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21.11.2023

Mary Ghazarian Gurunian lecture at Northern University in Yerevan

pioneers new educational approaches that engage students and equip them with the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

The foundation has spent about \$500,000 from their family fund for their projects in the last 10 years. Looking ahead, the Shahbazian Foundation is committed to continuing its efforts towards educational reforms and rejuvenation. As the Foundation celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2024, they have committed to a one-million-dollar budget for the next five years to reform and rejuvenate the science curriculum in high schools of the Gegharkunik region in Armenia. This initiative aims to enhance the quality and relevance of science education in the area, giving students a solid foundation for future academic and professional pursuits. The Foundation's efforts will profoundly impact the lives of the students in the region, providing them with the necessary tools to succeed in the modern world. The Shahbazian Foundation is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization registered in Massachusetts.

For more information about the Shahbazian Foundation, find it on Facebook or LinkedIn.



Institute for the Study of Eastern Christianity

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Grace and Paul Shahinian
Armenian Christian Art and Culture Lecture Series

WOMEN AND POWER IN MEDIEVAL ARMENIA:
Between Local Dynasties and Eurasian Empires

PROFESSOR ZARA POGOSSIAN
UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE

Date: March 21, 2024
Time: 5 p.m.
Location: Heritage Hall*

The Catholic University of America
Father O'Connell Hall
620 Michigan Ave., N.E.
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Tekeyan Cultural Association
Metro Los Angeles Chapter

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KATIA TAVITIAN KARAGUEZIAN
Keynote speaker and author



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COMMUNITY NEWS

Sisters-in-Law Bring Touch of Magic to Kitchens

By Alin K. Gregorian
Mirror-Spectator Staff

BELMONT — When it comes to business, it is notoriously hard to work with family. Just try telling that to sisters-in-law Margarit Belorian and Ani Stepanian, who own and run the successful Bel Kitchen and Bath in Belmont.

They aren’t just sisters-in-law; they are best friends and operate on the same wavelength. (Margarit is married to Ani’s brother, Hovik.)

They started the business in October 2015, out of Stepanian’s home. A year later, they opened the showroom on 96 Park Avenue.

“We mostly do kitchens. We design a layout of the kitchen, unless the customer is very specific about keeping their existing layout. We go on to the home and take measurements, unless they have architects’ drawings, and they prefer for us to work off their drawings,” Stepanian said. “We have a full conversation with the client and come back here and we design, a lot of times, more than one option, to make it painful for us and easy for the client.”

“We also source the cabinetry,” Stepanian added.

The duo provides different price-point options using various manufacturers’ lines. The suggestions and designs are then shown in 3-D detail to the clients on their massive screens at the showroom.

Stepanian explained that people sometimes come in with a specific plan but when she and Belorian show them alternatives they had never thought of, they change their minds.

She added that they will offer different suggestions, based on their experience, if they can offer a “better layout or design for the space, that fits more things or if it gives them more workable space or is more in line with what is popular today.”

Sometimes older buildings present challenges, such as a Cambridge kitchen they had worked on, which because of venting issues, needed to have the stove stay where it was.

“We go with what gives them the most storage, what makes the most sense in terms of how they walk around and how they live; that’s why it’s important for us to visit someone’s home because we get a sense of how they move in the space, how they walk in, where they drop their keys, where and how many people they entertain,” she said.

Belorian is the guru that plays with the software for the design, making everything fit to the inch, Stepanian said.

That comes down to attention to details, Belorian said. “The most important skillset you have to have is to be able to take measurements. It’s very critical,” she added.

The duo recalled that they completed work on a tiny

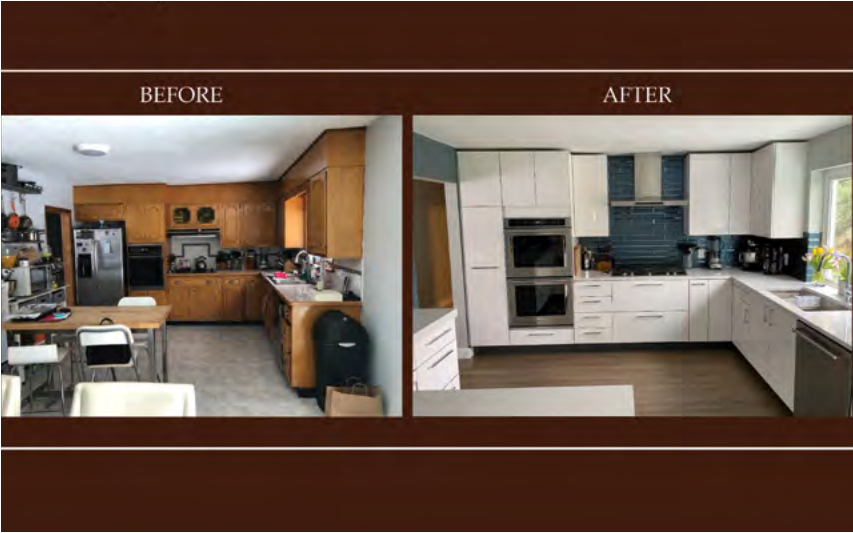


Margarit Belorian, left, and Ani Stepanian at Bel Kitchen and Bath’s showroom

kitchen in a condo in Somerville, which measured less than 7 by 10. “This kitchen was tiny. We literally used every inch in any clever possible way, with pullouts — even three-inch pullouts for spices. It took a lot of creativity. Thank goodness they had a competent installer and it worked out,” Stepanian recalled.

“I think the contractor was shocked,” joked Belorian.

Another interesting project for them was for a family who was moving to Brookline from London, during COVID. The entire interaction was on Zoom. “Clearly it was an amazing project. We did some bathrooms, the laundry area and the mudrooms. It is a very historic, stately home, very tastefully and tactfully done. Her project is one of my favorites,” Stepanian said.



When asked what the average cost for a kitchen is, Stepanian said, there is no such thing as an average cost because there are so many variables. “You can look up two kitchens that look exactly the same and one could be twice the cost of the other,” she said. Adding to the price are the types of wood or functionality, such as a pullout drawer. “Anytime you add functionality, you add to the cost of cabinets,” she noted.

They themselves do not take part in the construction end of things. “Most customers who come to us already have a contractor,” she said. Otherwise, Bel can suggest some trusted constructors.

Bel Kitchen does not advertise and both women said they prefer to get clients through word of mouth.

“Margarit and I, our business model is that we are not going to advertise willy-nilly,” Stepanian said. “Most of the people who find us, find us through other people. It’s a warm lead. It’s such a better customer. Nobody just walks by and comes in. Nowadays a lot of people find us through our Google reviews but most of our business comes from repeat customers who have somebody whose kitchen we did, cousin or neighbor....”

The two came to the home design business as second careers. Belorian’s background is in computer science and designing data bases, while Stepanian worked in finance.

Asked if Belorian missed her former profession, she said with a chuckle, “Not a single day!”

The two got their start when Belorian got laid off from her job at Citizens Bank. “She [Margarit] had this great idea because at that time we had done [house] flips and other construction projects. She noticed how much we loved doing the kitchen side of things when we were doing these projects and so when she got laid off, she thought that is a perfect opportunity to do it as a

continued on next page

Our projects

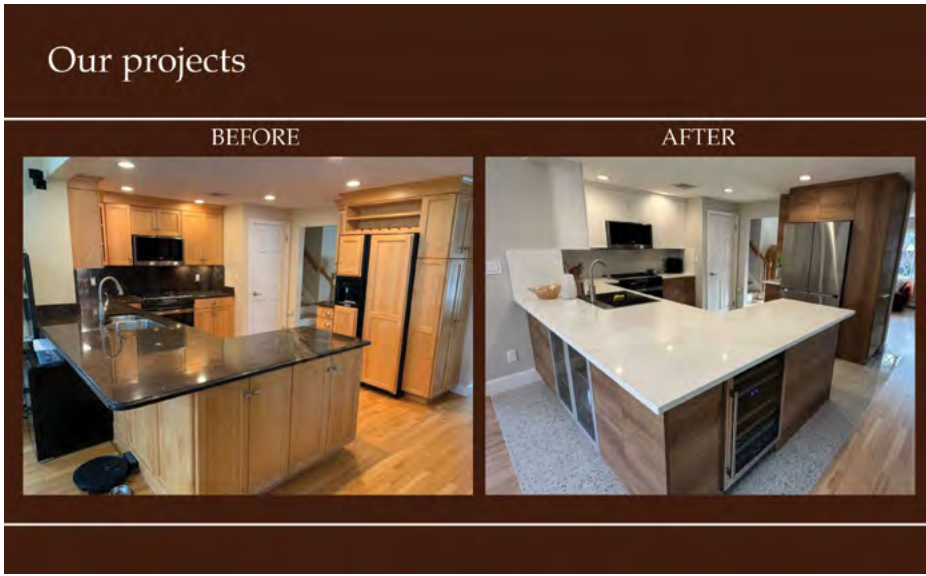
BEFORE

AFTER



COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page
business,” Stepanian said. “I initially was a little afraid because growing up all our parents said was ‘you don’t go into business with family.’”
Belorian convinced her sister-in-law that everything would run smoothly. Stepanian agreed and gradually transitioned out of her full-time job.
“We see each other day in and day out but fortunately and luckily we figured out a way. Part of it is we have different strengths and we respect each other’s strengths. Each of us deals with a different side of the business and there isn’t a lot of stepping on each other’s toes,” Stepanian said.
Said Stepanian, “We made a decision to work a certain way. It’s very low pressure, no pressure. We have fun with this. We treat every kitchen as if it is our own. We painstakingly go over design after design. There is never a hard sell. We give them options and quotes, but we tell them if they find better quotes on anything elsewhere, to go with it. It’s



always an easy conversation.”
“We’ve had really great customers. When we come here, it doesn’t at all feel like we are going to work,” Stepanian said. Customers pick up on it, Belorian added.
And finally, asked what sort of kitchen is popular, Stepanian said, “For a good 10 years, everyone was doing white and grey kitchens. White is kind of timeless, but now we have a lot of woods coming back, within the past year,” she said, adding they are not the old-fashioned wood cabinets of previous decades, but with a cooler undertone. She also predicted that interest in gold-colored hardware would decrease.
Belorian added that European laminates are also very popular.
For more information about Bel Kitchen and Bath, visit <https://belkitchenandbath.com/index.html>.

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Symposium to Be Held in Memory of Prof. Hovannisian at UCLA

LOS ANGELES — The Promise Armenian Institute at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA — The Promise Armenian Institute at UCLA will hold an all-day symposium dedicated to honoring and celebrating the life and legacy of the late UCLA Professor Richard G. Hovannisian.

The symposium will feature remarks by Professor Hovannisian’s former students, distinguished colleagues and friends and family, as well as screenings of short videos. The day will also include a musical performance of Historic Armenian pieces provided through the UCLA Armenian Music Program.

Professor Hovannisian was a faculty member at UCLA for over 50 years and was the first holder of the Armenian Educational Foundation Professorial Chair in Modern Armenian History, now named in his honor. His monumental work includes *The Republic of Armenia* in four volumes, several volumes on the Armenian Genocide, fifteen volumes in the series Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces, and documentation of over one thousand interviews of genocide survivors conducted with his students.

“His tremendous work and legacy will continue to inspire and guide scholars for

many generations. It is a privilege for us to honor Professor Hovannisian’s impact and legacy in this important symposium,” stated Ann Karagozian, director of the PAI and distinguished professor in the UCLA Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering.

Hovannisian was a pillar in the field of Armenian studies in the United States and a mentor to generations of scholars, students and community leaders. His passing in July of 2023 continues to be deeply felt at UCLA and around the world, and the Promise Armenian Institute aims to pay homage to his vast accomplishments and express a vision for the future through this symposium.

“Remembering Professor Richard G. Hovannisian: Looking Back, Moving Forward” will take place on Saturday, April 6, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Pacific Time) at the UCLA Mong Learning Center (Engineering VI Building). Lunch and refreshments will be provided throughout the day, and the event also will be accessible remotely. Those wishing to attend in person may RSVP at bit.ly/RGH04-06-24.

This symposium is co-sponsored by the UCLA Richard Hovannisian Endowed



Chair in Modern Armenian History, UCLA Narekatsi Chair in Armenian Studies, UCLA Armenian Music Program, The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA School of Law, UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies, UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy, Fowler Museum

at UCLA, National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), Society for Armenian Studies, UCI Center for Armenian Studies, CSU Fresno Armenian Studies Program, USC Institute of Armenian Studies, Ararat-Eskijian Museum, and the USC Shoah Foundation.

OBITUARY

Judith Kolligian A Life in Service to Others

JAMAICA PLAIN, Mass. — Judith Kolligian, of Jamaica Plain, passed away peacefully, surrounded by family on Tuesday, February 6. She was 78.

Born on September 14, 1945, Judy was the daughter of the late Madeline (Ohanian) Kolligian and J. Mark Kolligian. She is survived by her siblings Tanya DeFrancesco and Mark Kolligian (Nancy B.); her nephews and nieces Adam DeFrancesco, Nicole Leone (Frank), Bailey Kolligian (Shane), and Max Kolligian (Haley); great-nieces and great-nephews, Samantha, Sofia and Joseph Leone, and Jakob DeFrancesco, as well as countless friends and family.

Judy was predeceased by her sister Eunice (Kolligian) Franceschi, and brother-in-law Andrew DeFrancesco.

A 1964 graduate of Belmont High School, Judy was in the Acapella and Renaissance Choirs. At Colby College, she majored in music and was a member of the Colbyettes.

Upon graduating from college, Judy joined VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). After several months of training, she moved to New York City. One of her many accomplishments while there was to establish the first community garden in the heart of the city for underprivileged young



people. She eventually moved back to Massachusetts and settled in Jamaica Plain.

Judy dedicated her life in service to others. She worked as the house manager for Fortune House in Jamaica Plain, supporting adults with disabilities — and in 1970, received her master’s degree in community counseling from Northeastern University.

Her dedication to community extended far beyond her work in counseling. In 1987, she joined the JP Renaissance Singers. Around that same time, she also became a limerick-writing specialist for the JP Women’s Dirty Limerick Society.

She was passionate about many social causes and became a devoted volunteer for Boston Climate Action Network.

Judy spent her lifetime summering at her

family’s home in Old Silver Beach Village in Falmouth and created many fond memories with family and friends.

In addition to music, she loved traveling. She traveled throughout the US, made several trips to the Caribbean and went to Armenia and historic Armenia in 2006 with her cousin, Nancy Kolligian. Judy traveled to Italy numerous times, both on her own, and with family to visit her sister, Eunice, who lived in Florence.

A wake followed by a service was held on Wednesday, February 14 at Joyce Funeral Home in Waltham. In lieu of flowers, donations in her memory may be made to “Resist (for BCAN)”, P.O. Box 301240, Boston, MA 02130, OR to the charity of one’s choice.

Alice Setian

NEWTON, Mass. — Alice Setian of Newton died on March 3.

She was the daughter of the late Krikor and Zartar Setian; sister of the late Gabriel George Setian and the late Elizabeth Kachagian, aunt of Sandra Breitborde and her husband, Lawrence, Gregory Kachagian and his wife, Donna, and Lynda Kachagian; grand-aunt of Nicholas Breitborde and his wife, Nicole Miller and great-grand-aunt of Noah and Nathan Breitborde.

Funeral services were held at Saint Stephen’s Armenian Church, 38 Elton Avenue, Watertown, on Saturday, March 9. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made to the church.

Graveside prayers and burial were held at North Burial Ground, 5 Branch Ave., Providence, RI, on Wednesday, march 13.



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Arts & Culture

Navasard Hakobyan wins Dallas Opera's National Vocal Competition

DALLAS (Opera Wire) — The Dallas Opera announced the winners of its National Vocal Competition this week.

Taking home first place was baritone Navasard Hakobyan. The Armenian singer is a second-year artists of Houston Grand Opera's Butler Studio and won first prize at the 2022 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. He has performed at the Houston Grand Opera in "Madama Butterfly," "La Traviata," and "The Marriage of Figaro," among others.

In second place was bass-baritone Jongwon Hon, who joined Santa Fe Opera as a 2022 Apprentice Artist. He then went to San Francisco Opera



Navasard Hakobyan

to become a part of the Adler Fellowship Program.

There was tie for third featuring sopranos Elisa Sunshine and Katerina Burton. Sunshine is a recent graduate of the Adler Fellow Ship Program and performed at the San Francisco Opera in "Die Frau ohne Schatten." Burton graduated from the Cofritz Young Artist Program has debuted in "Carmen" at the Washington National Opera.

The Jonathan Pell People's Choice Award was given to Lisa Marie Rogali. The mezzo has performed with such companies as Detroit Opera, Minnesota Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, North Carolina Opera, and Opera Saratoga, among others.

The finals took place on March 8, 2024.



Navasard Hakobyan, right, in Houston Grand Opera performance of "Madama Butterfly"



Warren King "The Distance We've Travelled"

Vantage Points

Four Diasporan Artists on View at the Sheen Center

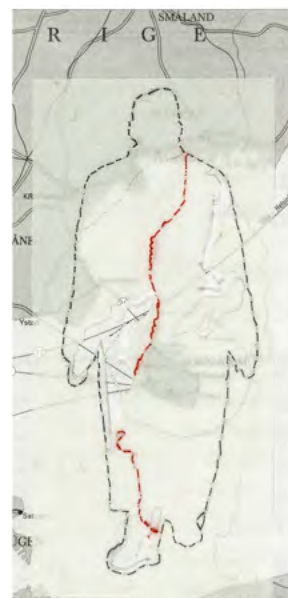
By Christopher Atamian
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

NEW YORK — Under the leadership of its dynamic Director of Programming Victoria Hanavan, the Sheen Center on Bleeker Street is fast becoming a destination point for the arts

in New York City, be it for theater, opera or art. Its intimate Janet Hennessey Dilenschneider Gallery has also stepped up its game of late, including the recent 2024 solo show "Eternal Threads" which featured Syrian-born artist Kevork Mourad's large fantastical mixed media on fabric constructions.

Hanavan has also enlisted Mourad's help as a curator and if the current exhibition, "Vantage Points," is any indication, the results show promise. Mourad wanted to display the resiliency of these artists who use different media to situate themselves vis-à-vis their positioning in the world: "Celebrating a diaspora of creativity, these four artists craft narratives that honor their home countries and ancestors, even in the distant echoes of foreign lands, Mourad explains: "From the vivid brushstrokes of the painter to the photographer's lens capturing the fleeting moment, to the sculptor molding tales from cardboard to the collage artist piecing together memories, each artwork becomes a tribute to the enduring spirit of belonging." The curator presents four artists who filter the world through their own particular lens with grace and candor. Mourad gave each one an intimate corner of the gallery to show off a few key works. As he relates: "These four visionary creators delve deep into the respective histories of their ancestors, looking back through the lens of their current vantage point."

Lebanese-Palestinian Sumayyah Samaha has been exhibiting her work for years at leading galleries such as 22 Wooster Gallery and Leila Heller. Samaha has received numerous awards, including grants from The Pollock Krasner Foundation, and the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation. Her three untitled oil on canvas paintings on display here—all bright, colorful medium sized works—recall Calder and de Kooning with a hint of Picasso, but their almost zoomorphic forms come together in a wholly original way. In the work pictured here, a deep red tubular creation rises upwards and opens into a sunflower-like creation in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas. In the two other untitled works on display, Samaha mutes her colors and employs a remarkable variety of browns and ochres. In the middle painting, a strategically placed pool of sky-blue draws attention away from the center of the canvas which once again displays a rich affinity for crimson and bright reds.



Adrienne Der Marderosian, "Between the Measure of Time," 3 1/2" x 7 3/4", (Digital Photo), 2015

see ARTISTS, page 15

Jazz/Piano Sensation Tigran Hamasyan in Keyboard Concert Series at Fresno State

FRESNO — The Tigran Hamasyan Trio will perform in concert on Monday, March 25, at 7.30 p.m. in the Concert Hall on the Fresno State campus. Hamasyan will be accompanied by Evan Marien on bass and Arthur Hnatek on drums.

The concert, part of the Philip Lorenz Memorial Keyboard Concert Series, is co-sponsored by the Armenian Studies Program of Fresno State, the Thomas A. Kooyumjian Family Foundation, the Armenian General Benevolent Union Greater Fresno Chapter, the Helen Zevart Peterson Armenian Fund and Fresno State Jazz Studies.

Hamasyan fuses potent jazz improvisation with the rich folkloric heritage of Armenia. Born in Gyumri, Armenia, in 1987, Tigran grew up in a household that was full of music — his father more of a rock fan while his uncle was a huge jazz buff. When he was just a toddler, Tigran gravitated



Pianist Tigran Hamasyan

to tape players and the piano instead of regular childhood toys, and by the time he was 3, he was working his way through figuring out songs on piano by the Beatles, Louis Armstrong, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath and Queen. His jazz tastes early on were informed by Miles Davis's fusion period, and then around the age of 10 when his family moved to Yerevan, he came to discover the classic jazz songbook under the aegis of his teacher Vahag Hayrapetyan, who had studied with Barry Harris. "That's when I understood what jazz is," Tigran says. "He taught me about bebop. He was a great teacher."

Tigran's music marks a daring interplay of extremes where the slamming intensity of high energy contemporary groove-metal meets the celestial-bound melodies and metrically-complex folk music traditions largely sourced from his Armenian heritage.

"He's the hottest pianist in jazz, and he likes to mix things up, whether it's bebop, thrash metal, or dubstep. But his heart is in the folk music of his native land, Armenia" (The Guardian, London).

General tickets for the Concert are available for \$40 per person general admission, \$30 per person for seniors, and students \$5 per person. Tickets may be purchased online at the following website: <http://www.keyboardconcerts.com/> or at the door.



ARTS & CULTURE

Recipe Corner



by Christine Vartanian Datian



Zatiki Chorek: Armenian Easter Bread

“As a young girl I would make this chorek/choreg recipe with my dear mother. She would give us a small piece of dough and we would shape it into flowers, letters, birds or some abstract figures. My mom would make the braids and roulades filled with walnuts or apricot preserves, sprinkled with poppy or sesame seeds,” says Nouné Jihanian, the talented Armenian blogger at Cafe Osharak. “My aunt Victoria makes chorek and gives it away as a gift for Easter. This recipe was passed down, and now I am here to share it. The aroma of the baked chorek was sweet and enticing, lingering in our kitchen for days. It penetrated into all the nooks and crannies of my senses and became engraved in my memory.”

“What makes chorek so memorable is the unique spice called mahleb. It gives chorek its distinctive taste and enchanting aroma. Mahleb is the wild cherry stone kernels that are not as bitter as ordinary cherry’s but have very delicate and exquisite flavor. Known for its medicinal properties mahleb was used since ancient times, and eventually made its way into the kitchen as one of the spices prevalent in countries around the Mediterranean.”

“Recently I came across an article which had an excerpt from Fethiye Cetin’s autobiographical book, *My Grandmother: An Armenian-Turkish Memoir*,” says Nouné. “The book is about her grandmother, one of the many brave, courageous Armenian women who were forced to become Muslims to survive and escape the death march during the horrendous events of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1922. This passage tells a story of chorek and how it was a secret message between the Islamized women who had the same fate. Women who tried to hide their identities from their children and grandchildren but who held on to a sting of their roots by sharing their customs with one another.”

“Cetin is a Turkish human-rights lawyer who has represented, among others, Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian journalist assassinated in Istanbul in January 2007. Growing up in the town of Maden in Turkey, Cetin knew her grandmother as a happy, respected Muslim housewife called Seher. Only decades later did she discover the truth. Her grandmother’s name was not Seher but Heranus. She was born a Christian Armenian. Most of the men in her village had been slaughtered in 1915. A Turkish gendarme had stolen her from her mother and adopted her. Cetin’s family history tied her directly to the terrible origins of modern Turkey and the organized denial of its Ottoman past as the shared home of many faiths and ways of life”:

“Cetin recalled the day her identity shattered: She was a young law student when her beloved maternal grandmother, Seher, took her aside and told her a secret she had hidden for 60 years: that Seher was born a Christian Armenian with the name Heranus and had been saved from a death march by a Turkish officer, who snatched her from her mother’s arms in 1915 and raised her as Turkish and Muslim.”

“Do you know that when I was a child, my grandmother and I came to your house? My grandmother baked chorek all day. After sitting for a while, after tasting my grandmother’s chorek, we also visited Shasho Ibrahim’s wife, Aunt



Nouné Jihanian

Seher, and Tatuml, aunt. It caught my attention that day that all the people we went to served chorek. The choreks we tasted in other houses were like the ones we made in your house. When I was expecting a different kind of hospitality and was always disappointed to see the same pastry. My grandmother ate and drank tea in the homes of all the people we visited. It was only years later that my attention was drawn to the hospitality of that day and the community of homes we visited. ‘Shasho Ibrahim’s wife, Aunt Seher, was Armenian, and Aunt Tatiml later converted to Islam, like my grandmother.’”

“Easter heralds the end of Lent and celebration of new beginning, awakening and rebirth. This enriched bread chorek is loaded with eggs and butter, milk and sugar, similar to brioche, challah, pana pasquale.” Here are Nouné’s specific ingredients and directions:

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 1/4 cups butter, melted
- 6 eggs
- 1 1/2 cups sugar + 1 tablespoon for starter
- 1 1/2 cups milk + 1/4 cup milk for starter
- 8 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon active dry yeast (not instant/rapid rise)
- 1 teaspoon mahleb
- 1 egg for egg wash
- Sesame, poppy and nigella seeds, if desired

PREPARATION:

STARTER:

Mix 1 teaspoon of yeast with 1/4 cup of lukewarm milk. Add 1 tablespoon of sugar and flour to make a creamy consistency. Cover and let rise for 15-30 minutes.

DOUGH:

Start mixing the melted butter with one cup of flour in a standing mixer with paddle attachment. Then add the eggs and sugar and beat well. Add the milk followed by the starter. Sprinkle the ground mahleb.

Replace the mixer with the dough hook. Gradually add the flour. After adding 8 cups of flour, scrape the mixing bowl from the bottom and continue kneading (8-10 minutes).

The dough should feel smooth and elastic but not sticky. If it feels sticky add more flour until it no longer sticks. Once the dough is kneaded and glossy, place in a bowl that has room to rise, cover and place in a warm place. Let it rise for 2 hours. It should double in volume. The ideal temperature is 75°F (24°C).

Punch the dough down and make a couple of folds by bringing the dough from the bottom across diagonally over. Repeat for all sides. Cover and let it rise a second time. Once the dough rises the second time, divide it into portions.

Preheat the oven to 350°F while you shape and make the breads. Make the braids or rolls in any shape that you like. Beat the whole egg with a little bit of water and brush it on the ready breads. Let them rise for 15-20 minutes. Sprinkle with the seeds, if desired, and bake for 20-40 minutes. The smaller breads will bake quicker. The thicker braids will require up to 40 minutes.

For this recipe and braiding information, go to: <https://www.osharak.com/chorek-armenian-easter-bread/>

“‘Osharak’ is Armenian word that means ‘the nectar of the fruit,’ typically known as a drink that is refreshing, satisfying, and colorful. I am an Armenian native, living and working in Colorado, happily married to an Italian from New York. Most of my recipes are heirlooms from both our families that have become staples and true favorites.”

For more choreg recipes, see:

- <https://www.diningindiaspora.com/food/2018/3/30/choreg-for-armenian-americans-identity-is-braided-into-this-bread>
- <https://www.armenianinstitute.org.uk/food/cheoreg>
- <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/06/29/barbara-hovsepian-baghaj/>
- <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/04/06/recipe-corner-zatiki-chorek-armenian-easter-bread/>
- <https://mirrorspectator.com/2022/11/17/elmass-avedisians-famous-choreg-walnut-rolls/>
- <https://mirrorspectator.com/2022/05/19/barbara-adishians-chorag-with-golden-raisons/>
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ARTS & CULTURE

Four Diasporan Artists on View at the Sheen Center

ARTISTS, from page 13

Chinese-American sculptor Warren King uses large slabs of dark brown cardboard which he slices and forms into almost life-size depictions of a warrior or “Lion Dancer,” and in another work, “Chess Players at Columbus Park,” staining them in dark brown ink. His three sculptures all display the robust, muscular work of an experienced artist comfortable



Osheen Harruthoonyan “Black-Garden”

with working in three dimensions. “The Distance We’ve Travelled” most closely refers back to his own parents’ experience as immigrants from Taiwan and mainland China. King creates his work by slicing the cardboard into elegant, powerful cylindrical forms that recall the cubist paintings of Braque. The finely sculpted wood takes on almost lifelike form, and the viewer immediately relates to their palpable energy—they are unique and ready for prime time. A recipient of the 2023 Alex J. Ettl Grant from The National Sculpture Society, King is a welcome discovery.

Armenian-American artist Adrienne Der Marderosian, presents paired work from two series: “Traces of Memory” and “Tattoo Trails.” In “Tattoo Trails,” the more enigmatic of the two series, ghost-like

images of a solitary figure travel superimposed over what appear to be Scandinavian or Baltic maps. In “Passage” Der Marderosian presents the map as is, using the green (land) and blue (ocean) to fill in the empty figure’s outline. She however strips her second photograph “Between the Measure of Time” of color, providing an albino version of the figure in question. These elegantly printed digital photos mounted on dibond leave the viewer wondering who the artist’s mysterious outlined figures might be. A ghost? A wanted criminal? In actuality, they refer back to her family history during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 when her grandparents were forced to flee their historic homelands for the rest of the Middle East and eventually settle in the West. As Der Marderosian explains “in Tattoo Trails...isolated figures populate an unknown landscape, symbolizing the uncertain journey that refugees often navigate.” The tattoo concept also resonates with the fact that many Armenian women were tattooed as chattel during the Armenian Genocide.

Canadian artist Osheen Harruthoonyan’s three sublime black-and-white photos round out “Vantage Points.” Often compared to the great Japanese photographers Yamamoto Masao et Hiroshi Sugimoto, the mid-career Harruthoonyan uses his own personally patented darkroom process to lend his selenium toned silver gelatin prints an eerie quality that seems to almost reverse their white and black tones. Harruthoonyan’s works belong in major collections around the world and he was included in the important London Museum in Ontario’s 2019 exhibition “RESOLUTION: A Century of Photographic Art,” which brought together the hundred most important Canadian photographers of the past century.

Harruthoonyan’s work can roughly be divided between portraiture or pictures of



Sumayyah Samaha “Untitled” 1983

people taken from old photos from his personal collection, and his otherworldly studies of nature and the stars. Here, “Black Garden” and “Black Mirror” (both 25” by 25”) were shot in Artsakh, a historically Armenian region arbitrarily placed inside Azerbaijan by Stalin and recently ethnically cleansed of its Armenian population by the dictator Ilham Aliev. His third work currently on display, “Tree of Garni” spreads

its black branches out as if conjured by the witches in Macbeth as part of some eerie pagan ritual. These three works alone provide reason enough to visit the East Village Sheen Center, where Mourad has harmoniously brought together four talented artists from around the world. “Vantage Points” will run through March 31 at The Sheen Center, 18 Bleeker Street, New York, NY 10012.

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ARTS & CULTURE

‘timeful: a seeroon yeretzian retrospective’ Pays Tribute to Unique Artist

By Arpi Sarafian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

GLENDAL — Seeroon Yeretzian appeared on the art scene in Los Angeles upon graduating from the prestigious Otis/Parsons Art Institute and School of Design with a Bachelor’s Degree in Fine Arts in 1985. Numerous group and solo exhibitions followed and her art was much admired and collected. The recent “timeful: a seeroon yeretzian retrospective,” put together by her son Arno “to celebrate her while she’s still here,” showcases the various styles and phases of the artist’s career, from the earliest to the last few she painted in 2011.

Walking into the elegant Center for Armenian Arts in Glendale on opening night was like walking into a sanctuary of dazzling colors and shapes. Even for one who has been following the artist’s work from the earliest days

enriched her art.

When, because of the Civil War in Lebanon, Seeroon immigrated to “this new empire, America the beautiful,” she felt an immediate connection to the homeless and literally went into their midst, donating her time to the City of Los Angeles’s heART Project, a program that helped troubled youth to express themselves in artistic forms.

Over the years, the artist has moved away from the more direct expressions of issues in her earlier work — heads detached from their bodies symbolizing the effects of the Armenian Genocide, for example — to the subtler representations of her concerns in her later work. Even when the distorted figures and the faceless bodies that inhabit this later work are difficult to understand, they provide insight and invite reflection. My deepest regret is not having had conversations with Seeroon about her more surreal dreamlike sequences.

When in 2012 Seeroon was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig’s Disease), a disease that, in her words, left her with a “live head on top of a useless body . . . a chunk of useless garbage,” and could no longer hold a pen or paint, she started writing on the DynaVox EyeMax, “a miracle computer” with a camera that could track the movement of her eyes as she selected letters from the keyboard displayed on the monitor. This resulted in two volumes of poems, the 2012 *Word Weaving & Black Chair Confes-*

sions and the 2018 *Evolution is my Revolution*. “It was not my intention to write so that I publish a book. I wrote, simply, because I had no other way of communicating,” she tells the “Dear reader” in *Evolution is my Revolution*.

The artist may be bound to a wheelchair yet nothing can “touch my spirit,” she asserts. The unrestrained joy in her poems does in fact make all expressions of pity, “meghk e Seerooneh,” irrelevant. Even crucifixion, an obvious symbol of pain and punishment, transmutes into liberation. In



of her career, seeing it all so lavishly displayed in a single space was an arresting experience. The bright colors of the illustrations, the artist likes to call her “sunshine work,” blended with the darker palette of her “moonshine work,” paintings that give expression to her inner struggles and more socially relevant art. Crucified women and faceless figures trapped in webs and thorns are common themes here the artist has developed over the years.

With the sunnier side of her art, Seeroon pays tribute to her identity as an Armenian. The illustrations in this phase of her creations are inspired by prehistoric Armenian rock carvings, “the oldest art known to my ancestors,” and by the great masters of the Medieval Armenian illuminated manuscripts. It was after Toros Roslin, “the greatest of them all,” that Seeroon named the Roslin Art Gallery she established in Glendale in 1995.

Roslin was a “working gallery” where the artist could often be found painting or illustrating Armenian ornate initials. Her iconic “Splendor of Aypupen,” a composition presenting the 36 letters of the Armenian alphabet replicating the Armenian Ornate Initials, has been ever popular since its creation in 1989.

“The Ornate Initials became my incurable addiction, my happiness, my medication and meditation,” writes Seeroon. Also comprising this sunshine phase are the artist’s exquisite designs of colorful peacocks, a bird that carries an important meaning in Armenian culture.

With the darker hues, the artist looks inwards. No matter how painful or humiliating, her inner truth is something Seeroon has never shied away from. The insights into the lives of the homeless and the down-on-their luck, as well as her own experiences of growing up at the Tiro refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon — her parents and grandparents had been displaced from their ancestral lands in the 1915 Armenian Genocide — have much deepened and



some of her later work the cross and the nails of the crucifix are discarded and with arms wide open the women celebrate their freedom, boldly proclaiming “I exist,” to borrow the title of the artist’s 2010 painting where she places her portrait among the portraits of the great women painters history has chosen to ignore or to marginalize. Seeroon’s “Don’t feel sorry for me” still rings in my ear.

The retrospective brought back into our consciousness the defiant woman whose purpose nothing could diminish. In one her poems, the speaker comes face to face with God and has Him apologize for the suffering He has caused humanity. The artist does in fact plead for a



gentler, a “life-loving and peace-loving” God, or perhaps “God(dess),” as a replacement for a “cruel and punishing God.”

Seeroon’s art acquires much relevance in our current apocalyptic context. Hers is certainly not a comfortable view of life, but her art does give life significance amidst the destruction and the brutality we have immersed ourselves in. It reaffirms that the good and the human still exist in mankind. By foregrounding the debased and the vulnerable Seeroon shows that she cares, and caring is what makes us human.

The expressions of appreciation and the memories shared by those present on the “day of celebration” highlighted the woman whose life has been a “timeful,” a word the artist herself has coined, of giving, of sharing, of supporting, a most fitting finale to the retrospective that spotlighted the artist’s creativity and productivity.

The artist’s prolific output, the culmination of decades of tireless work, has been collected in two art albums, the eponymous 2011 “Seeroon Yeretzian” and the best-selling 2014 “Seeroon Darer: Armenian Ornate Initials.” A comprehensive catalogue of her paintings is in progress.





ARTS & CULTURE

CALENDAR
OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

CONNECTICUT

APRIL 27 — The Connecticut Genocide Commemoration Committee will observe the 109th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide on Saturday, 10 a.m., at the historic Connecticut House Chamber at the State Capitol, 210 Capitol Avenue, Hartford. The keynote speaker will be Dr. Melanie O'Brien, President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Associate Professor of international law at UWA law school at the University of Western Australia, Perth, currently visiting at the University of Minnesota. The program will include the Martyrs' Service which was created on the centennial of the Genocide and the canonization of the Martyrs. Clergy from Armenian Churches in Connecticut will participate in the service. A reception will follow the commemoration. For questions call Melanie at 860-651-0629.

MASSACHUSETTS

MARCH 21 — Armenian Cooking Demonstration: Kata, by Dr. Knarik Arkun. Learn how to prepare kata/gata/nazouk and afterwards enjoy samples with coffee/tea and socialize. 7 p.m., Thursday. First in a Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter series coordinated by Rita Balyozian. Baikar Building, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown. \$25 per person. RSVP necessary. Sossy, 617-281-1647 or email syogurtian@comcast.net

MARCH 22 — Member Preview of 'Gandzaran! Notable Selections from Our Collection', Armenian Museum of America, 65 Main St., Friday, 6 to 8 p.m. Preview and reception exclusively for members of the Armenian Museum of America. A new exhibit of 40 works of art from our collection curated by Ryann Casey. Some of the artists include Minas Avetisyan, Martiros Sarian, Maria Manukyan Batlle, Reuben Nakian, Naomi Pridjian, Jean Janssem, Jean Carzou, Edgar Chahine, Martin Barooshian, and Kevork Mourad. Don't forget to renew your membership or join so you don't miss this special event: <https://www.armenianmuseum.org/membership>. To register, <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/856374558357?aff=oddtcreator>

APRIL 6 — Concert by Vahan Artsruni (guitar) and Nelly Manukyan (flute). Premiere performance of works inspired by the poetry of Komitas, complemented by arrangements of Sharakans by Mesrop Mashtots, original songs based on the works of renowned poet Razmik Davoyan (1940-2022). Saturday, 4 p.m. Armenian Cultural Foundation, 441 Mystic St., Arlington. Co-sponsored by The Armenian Music Festival of Rhode Island, Amaras Art Alliance. Donation: \$30 through ACF office (781-646-3090) or by visiting amarasonline.com

APRIL 8 — Saint James Monthly Dinner & Fellowship, Monday, Father and Son Night, with the Knights of Vartan, Guest Speaker, Watertown Chief of Police, Chief Justin Hanrahan, Losh Kebab and Kheyma Dinner, Social hour [mezza] 6:15, Dinner 7:00 p.m. \$20.00 per person 465 Mount Auburn Street, Watertown.

APRIL 11 — LET'S PARTY FOR THE PARK! InterContinental Hotel, 6:30-8:30 p.m. Meet & Greet. Enjoy Chef Didier Montarou's Luscious Signature

Plates. Tutunjian Family Vineyard Wines & Curated Silent Auction, all whole supporting the Park's care. Advance Reservations only. For link to register, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar

APRIL 19 — **SAVE THE DATE:** The 109th anniversary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide at the State House in Boston will take place on Friday, April 19, beginning at 10:30 a.m., organized by the greater Boston community's Armenian Genocide Commemorative Committee.

APRIL 21 — **SAVE THE DATE:** The 109th anniversary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide at Boston's Armenian Heritage Park will take place on Sunday, April 21, starting at 4:00 p.m., organized by the Armenian Genocide Commemoration Committee of Greater Boston.

APRIL 28 — Nora Armani performs in "Mercedes and Zarouhi" play translated into English, cosponsored by the Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter, Armenian Women's Welfare Association, and Armenian International Women's Association, with the Armenian Cultural Foundation, at 441 Mystic St., Arlington. Tickets \$15 through ACF office (781-646-3090) or email armeniancultural.fdn@gmail.com.

APRIL 28 — Remembrance of the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. Divine Liturgy, Reception, and Youth Cultural Program with the participation of the Armenian Churches of the Merrimack Valley. Armenian Church at Hye Pointe, 1280 Boston Rd., Haverhill. Divine Liturgy will begin at 10:00 a.m. Special Sunday School Program for the Youth.

JUNE 5 — Armenian Night at the Pops with pianist Marta Aznavoorian and Boston Pops Orchestra, Keith Lockhart, conductor, Wednesday, 7.30 p.m., Symphony Hall, Boston. Presented by Friends of Armenian Culture Society.

NOVEMBER 16 — St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School will celebrate with a 40th Anniversary Gala. Saturday, 6.30 p.m., Hyatt Regency Cambridge. Details to follow

RHODE ISLAND

APRIL 5 — Commemorating the 155th Anniversary of the Birth of Gomidas Vartabed. Sts. Sahag & Mesrob Armenian Church Cultural Committee, the Armenian Music Festival of RI, Amaras Art Alliance and the Urartu Armenian Association of RI present "Music of Poetry," with singer-songwriter Vahan Artsruni Duo with Nelly Manukyan, on flute. Program to feature St. Mashtots Sharagans Melodies, Songs based on Gomidas Poetry and others. Friday, 7 p.m. Egavian Cultural Center, 70 Jefferson St., Providence. Donation \$20 (\$10 for students). Refreshments

APRIL 26 — Sts. Sahag & Mesrob Armenian Church Cultural Committee Armenian Martyrs' Memorial Committee of RI Present Nora Armani in Mono - Theater "Mercedes and Zaruhi," by playwright Anush Aslibekyan, with English adaption by Armani. "Mercedes and Zaruhi" is the story of two sisters from the Diaspora during the post-WW II period of mass migrations (Nerkaght) to Soviet Armenia. Friday, 7.30 p.m., Egavian Cultural Center, 70 Jefferson Street, Providence. Donation \$20 (\$10 for students. Refreshments

Send Calendar Items to the Mirror-Spectator: To send calendar items to the Mirror-Spectator, email alin@mirrorspectator.com or alin.gregorian@gmail.com. You can also visit our website, www.mirrorspectator.com, and find the "calendar" section under the heading "More." You can also mail them to the Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472. All calendar entries must be received by noon on Monday before publication. There is no fee for calendar entries.

Project Save to Launch 'Lens & Libation Thursdays'

WATERTOWN — Project Save Photograph Archive recently announced the launch of "Lens & Libation Thursdays," a semi-regular gathering that will kick off on Thursday, March 21, at the organization's new gallery space.



A newlywed Armenian couple in Havana, Cuba. 1928 Photo courtesy of Project Save Photograph Archive

The event promises a casual evening of community, wine, and photography, providing an opportunity for enthusiasts and supporters to come together. We invite everyone to join us in celebrating the first day of spring and the power of visual storytelling. This is not a sit-down event and all are welcome to stop by anytime between 6 and 9 p.m.

"We're thrilled to introduce Lens & Libation Thursdays as a casual gathering to foster connection within our community," said Arto Vaun, executive director of Project Save. "This event series not only celebrates the art of photography but also emphasizes the importance of preserving visual narratives for future generations."

Attendees can expect an engaging atmosphere where they can mingle while exploring the archive's vast and diverse collection of photographs. Whether you're an avid photography fan, history buff, a cultural enthusiast, or simply looking for an enjoyable evening, Lens & Libation Thursdays offers something for everyone.

Project Save's new location is at 600 Pleasant Street in Watertown.

Please RSVP through Eventbrite at <https://tinyurl.com/2psbjp8v> or projectsave.org. For more info: archives@projectsave.org



An Armenian immigrant in San Francisco. 1915 Photo courtesy of Project Save Photograph Archive



COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN
**MIRROR
SPECTATOR**
— SINCE 1932 —



An ADL Publication

THE FIRST ENGLISH LANGUAGE
ARMENIAN WEEKLY IN THE
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Was There an Alternative Solution For Nagorno-Karabakh?

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Since the end of the first Artsakh war, when negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan began, it became clear that the parties would not be able to agree on the most important issue: the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, no matter how much Azerbaijan tried to appear constructive in the negotiations, it was negotiating on the one hand and preparing for war on the other, having just one purpose in mind, to depopulate and occupy Artsakh once and for all. Actually, Baku never particularly hid its goals, constantly threatening Armenia with a new war, and resorting to all kinds of military provocations against Armenia and Artsakh.

As for Armenia, there was always the discussion that Yerevan should make concessions and soften its positions and go to the final solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as soon as possible. There was a belief that if Armenia makes concessions, the international community would give strong guarantees to the parties when Yerevan and Baku came to a common and final decision. But here the most important question remains: whether Azerbaijan was ready to give anything to Armenia and make compromises, or was it waiting for historical and geopolitical momentum — simply put, the “planetary alignment” which indeed happened in 2020.

It is obvious that what happened in 2020 and was completed in 2023 was a scenario designed by Azerbaijan and Turkey, i.e. to conquer Artsakh without Armenians. In fact, this was the only acceptable, final and complete solution for Azerbaijan and no other option could be tolerable for Baku. Because of that, for years Azerbaijan did not want the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, aggravated the situation and no matter how long parties negotiated, waited for a suitable opportunity to take Artsakh by war and expel the Armenians there. Azerbaijan was not willing to compromise anything.

In 2020 the long-awaited opportunity finally arose. By saying that, I mean the international political processes, tense Russia-West relations, Russian-Turkish neighborly relations, tense relations between Armenia and Russia, and the increasing role and importance of Turkey in the region. Moscow, while planning its own war in Ukraine, tried to position Turkey as a state that would

not interfere with its plans, and Azerbaijan as a state that would allow Russia to export energy resources through their pipelines and avoid sanctions. It was obvious that Russia, having Ukraine as its top priority and its most difficult task, had to make concessions itself. Unfortunately, the price demanded by Baku and Ankara was Artsakh, without Armenians. Last but not least, in 2018 a leadership team was brought to power in Armenia, for which Artsakh did not represent any value, without mentioning its other mortal “sins.” So, seeing this historical momentum in September 2020, when the presidential campaign in the US was at its most active phase and Trump administration did not care about anything else but reelection, Baku and Ankara attacked, since nobody could stop them.

Taking into account the foregoing, it would be naïve to think that Azerbaijan would ever give up even one meter of Artsakh. It was also naïve to think that Azerbaijan could accept Artsakh with a single Armenian there. As much as Armenia was not ready to give up Artsakh until 2018, in the same way, Azerbaijan was not ready to hand over Artsakh.

Within recent years, it became clear that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has no peaceful solution. The theses that have been circulating in Armenia for years that if Armenia works for a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the international community will give all the necessary guarantees so that there will be no war. However, we saw that there can be no international guarantees because global players have their own plans regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh problem as well as the future of the South Caucasus region at large and these plans are completely different from each other.

Let me be clear in my conclusions. Azerbaijan wanted Artsakh completely without any concessions, and naturally without any Armenians, in order to consider this issue completely and finally solved. Of course the war was inevitable, but its consequences could have been avoided if Armenia had wiser leadership, to put it mildly.

(Suren Sargsyan is an expert on US foreign policy, researcher and author. He is a graduate of Yerevan State University, American University of Armenia and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Suren Sargsyan is a founder of the Armenian Center for American Studies, a research center based in Yerevan.)

Armenia–Turkey Normalization Process: A Road to Nowhere?

By Benjamin Poghosyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Armenia and Turkey started a new phase of normalization at the end of 2021, appointing special representatives to draw up recommendations. From the beginning, Turkey stated that the process should be carried out without any preconditions. However, in the last two years Ankara has put forward various preconditions and failed to take steps agreed upon during negotiations.

Armenia–Turkey relations have always been a significant factor impacting regional geopolitics in the South Caucasus. In the period between the first and the second Nagorno-Karabakh wars, many viewed normalization of Armenia–Turkey relations as having the power to help settle the conflict. Another significant factor influencing the process was the West’s perception that Armenia–Turkey normalization might enable Armenia to reduce its dependence on Russia, as “without fear of Turkey, Armenia will need Russia less.”

Several initiatives have been launched to normalize relations between the two countries on track 2, track 1.5, and track 1 levels, such as the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission in 2001–2004 and “Football Diplomacy” in 2008–2009. However, these did not bring any tangible results, as Turkey repeatedly imposed preconditions, including the “de-occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh,” and abandonment of the Armenian state policy of supporting

international recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

When, after the second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, Armenia and Turkey embarked upon a new process of normalization it was supported by both the West and Russia. The West’s motives were the same: Armenia–Turkey normalization would make Armenia less afraid of Turkey, enabling Yerevan to take tangible steps to move away from Russia. As Armenia–Russia relations began to deteriorate in 2022, the potential benefits of Armenia–Turkey normalization as a tool to pull Armenia away from Russia became more substantial.

Russia, on the other hand, was interested in Armenia–Turkey normalization as an essential step in stabilizing the South Caucasus and opening new communication routes to connect Russia with Turkey via Azerbaijan and Armenia. This task has become more pressing for Russia since the start of the Russia–Ukraine War, as Moscow is looking for alternative supply routes.

Armenia and Turkey officially started the new normalization process in January 2022 when their respective special representatives met in Moscow. A second meeting took place in Vienna in February 2022, and a third, again in Vienna, in May 2022. After each of these meetings, the parties confirmed that the goal of the negotiations was to achieve full normalization between Armenia and Turkey and reiterated their agreement to continue the process with-

out preconditions. It seemed that the process was gaining momentum in July 2022, when after their fourth meeting in Vienna, Armenia and Turkey agreed to enable the crossing of the land border between Armenia and Turkey for third-country citizens visiting Armenia and Turkey, respectively, and to inaugurate direct air cargo trade between Armenia and Turkey.

The Armenia–Turkey normalization process was parallel to active Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations mediated by the European Union. After April, May, and August 2022 meetings in Brussels, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a joint statement in Prague in October 2022 together with the president of France and the president of the European Council, and hopes were high that Armenia and Azerbaijan might conclude an agreement by the end of 2022, despite Azerbaijan’s large-scale September 2022 attack against Armenia. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had also met with Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Prague in October 2022 to boost the normalization process. As a goodwill gesture, Armenia sent humanitarian assistance to Turkey after the February 2023 earthquake. The Armenian foreign affairs minister visited Ankara the same month, and Prime Minister Pashinyan attended the inauguration ceremony of Turkish President Erdoğan in June 2023.

However, 20 months after Armenia and Turkey reached an agreement to open the border for citizens of third countries, and see NORMALIZATION, page 20



COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Hollywood Proposed to Make Propaganda Films on Aliyev and Erdogan for a Price

A team of investigative journalists from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that a Hollywood producer planned to make propaganda films that would glorify several authoritarian leaders for a payment of millions of dollars.

Igor Lopatonok, a native of Ukraine who is now a US citizen, in collaboration with Oscar-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone, initially produced two documentaries on Ukraine which were described as “pro-Kremlin propaganda” and a highly flattering eight-part mini-series on Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

In addition, Lopatonok planned to make several propaganda documentaries casting a positive light on the autocratic leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkey, among others. However, it is not clear if Stone would have been involved in any of these proposed projects. None of these documentaries were made.

OCCRP stated that Aliyev, Putin and Lukashenko “have all been accused of horrific crimes against the citizens of the countries they rule.... But where the world sees brutal dictators, Igor Lopatonok sees opportunity [to make money].” Since these authoritarian leaders were to pay for their propaganda documentaries, no mention would have been made of their brutal rule.

“One of Lopatonok’s glossy pitches, ‘Untitled Oliver Stone Documentary’ or ‘About Ilham Aliyev and Azerbaijan’, promises that Stone would ‘sit face to face’ with the Azerbaijani strongman [Aliyev] and cover not only ‘emerging of leader to the head of state rank, but all questions of colorful and fascinating history of Azerbaijan,’” OCCRP reported.

“Lopatonok seemed to have hit upon a promising formula. He had assembled a small team of screenwriters and producers who churned out film ideas to pitch to dictators, making an enticing offer: copious screen time with a world-famous director [Oliver Stone]. The key to ‘monetizing’ the process was simple, said an insider who worked on the team, and agreed to speak with reporters on condition of anonymity. Lopatonok had figured out how to offer powerful people something they couldn’t resist: Legitimacy on the world stage,” OCCRP wrote.

“In his pitch to Aliyev for the ‘Oliver Stone documentary,’ Lopatonok underscores that the planned film would ‘have a unique positive impact on publicity of the president and Azerbaijan.’ Although it’s unclear if Aliyev ever engaged with the pitch, an expert on Eurasia said it would be in line with the strongman’s previous efforts to present his regime as a dynamic, modernizing influence in the region. ‘I do see it as in line with all of these potential vectors of image washing -- culture, sports, those are the big ones, and global events, global conferences,’ said Alexander Cooley, a political science professor at New York’s Barnard College and an expert on Eurasian transnational networks.”

It is obvious that a documentary made by Hollywood filmmakers touting the greatness of Aliyev would have much more credibility than the cheap pro-

paganda produced in Azerbaijan.

“When authoritarian leaders get a Hollywood glow-up, it often comes at the expense of the people they rule over, said Casey Michel, head of the Human Rights Foundation’s Combating Kleptocracy Program. The foundation has spent years campaigning for Hollywood stars to stop working with dictatorial regimes. ‘I can’t imagine how dispiriting it must be for citizens in places like Kazakhstan ... to watch this American director come and turn into a propaganda mouthpiece for their dictators,’ Michel said. These people know how horrific these regimes truly are -- and then they watch this American parachute in, and gobble up all of the dictators’ talking points, without even bothering to push back,” OCCRP stated.

The funding to produce these documentaries is to be provided by the dictators “or people close to them.” In 2019, when Stone and Lopatonok produced the documentary “Qazaq: History of the Golden Man,” about Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, a charitable foundation controlled by him paid the duo at least \$5 million,” OCCRP reported.

Documents obtained by OCCRP reporters revealed that Lopatonok’s “team prepared synopses of potential films about at least six other authoritarian governments, including China, the United Arab Emirates, and the Russian republic of Tatarstan, alongside the pitches to Aliyev and Lukashenko, promising that Stone would interview their leaders and help tell their ‘true story.’”

Lopatonok’s team proposed that during his interview with Aliyev, Stone discuss “the country’s ‘success’ under the ‘dynastic rule’ of the Aliyev family, and its ongoing conflict with ‘an Armenia that is losing its stability and teetering on the edge of an abyss.’ A summary of the proposed film makes clear the tenor of Lopatonok’s approach: It describes Aliyev as a ‘true successor’ to his father, the previous president, who had taught him to be a ‘wise leader.’” The pitch asked: “Can you really call the existing state system in Azerbaijan a ‘Cult of Personality’? Or is it just a tribute of people’s respect to a leader who was able to turn the country from poverty into one of the developed, prosperous countries?” The film about Aliyev would cost \$15 million, according to OCCRP.

Lopatonok told the Azeri media during his visit to Baku in 2021: “This country [Azerbaijan] has a very rich and colorful culture. When I was here in 2012-2013, I learned to distinguish the Karabakh carpets from all others, identifying [them] by their ornament. I would make a good film about Azerbaijan.”

There was another synopsis for a film on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “offering him a chance to tout his defense of Turkish interests.” Here is what the synopsis said: “Erdogan is a Turk and hardly needs to be basing his actions on the interests of other countries. But what interests does he have? Can he restore the Great Silk Road? And does he really have expansionist plans? What is Erdogan trying to achieve? He should answer these questions himself. And only himself. We should not try to divine [Erdogan’s plans] from coffee grounds, even if it is magnificent Turkish coffee that they know how to make only in Istanbul.”

“In a 2018 interview, Ibrahim Kalin, then the spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, confirmed that they had received a pitch for a documentary about Erdogan around the same time Stone was in Turkey. ‘We are looking at it, we are evaluating it,’ he said,” OCCRP reported.

LETTERS

Armenians Need to Find Their Way Back To God

To the Editor:

Many anticipate big church crowds over the Easter holidays but sadly, it seems those days are over. In part, traditions are losing ground and overall, many have lost their faith. Armenian churches of all denominations strategize, reorganize, and brainstorm ways to corral congregants in and maintain operations.

At least one church has hired an outside church growth agency and, after a year, is still losing congregants. Social programs, special events, and entertainment will bring folks to the building but will never translate into worshippers, true seekers of God.

The church is on life support; only radical intervention will save it. There is nothing wrong with social and cultural fellowship but they must be the outpour from living faith. The Bible states that Christ is the Head of the church and we are His Body in this world. Living faith can only come forth when we, the Body of Christ, truly connect and submit to Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. We need to cry out to God in private and congregational prayer and wait upon Him. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice.” Do we believe He speaks today, in our hearts and through the Scriptures?

A true church could hardly testify that golf tourna-

ments, bazaars, or picnics yield true believers. While it is wonderful to gather, true believers are those with hearts stirred by the Holy Spirit. The church is not a business run by a board but a living entity where either Christ sits as Head or He is not there at all. He is resurrected, He is alive, and He wants to govern over His people. Pastors and priests have told me, “No one will show up for a prayer meeting.” Even if true, it is inconsequential. “God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” and “The fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Alone at the altar with Sovereign God is a powerful meeting.

“Whoever is faithful with little will be faithful with much.”

A small group of true believers are of great value to the Lord, even as He launched the Gospel into the world through twelve men. They did not have money, did not form committees, nor did they hire consultants. If we engage in prayer with expectant hearts, we will hear from the Lord. A right relationship with the Lord is the foundation for partaking in His work, “...the people who know their God will be strong and take action.” The greatest joy, the most alluring life, is “working in the fields with the Father.”

Implicit and explicit throughout the Bible is God’s heart toward the suffering of His people. Der Vasken and Yn Arpi Kouzouian, from Holy Trinity Armenian Church of Cambridge, recently went forth to Armenia as the Body of Christ. As “His hands and feet,” they delivered 3,500 pounds of winter clothing to our people, those who lost all in Artsakh. More than giving warm coats, they ministered and prayed with the heartbroken and lost.

Is it too radical to send a mission team of Armenian youths to Armenia? We may not be efficient in building a house but touching those who suffer has eternal value. Christ remembers, “You visited Me...you clothed Me...you cared for Me...” Those who minister to God’s suffering people will inherit the Kingdom.

Nothing fuels the fire of faith more than the Holy Spirit working through our lives. But as King David declared after the battle, ‘those who stayed with the supplies will share in the victory as those who went into battle’.

The Armenian Youth Federation raised \$26,000 for the Lorik Fund, providing housing for one family, including livestock and appliances.

God may not stop the wicked acts of men nor does He interfere with the destructive course of this world as it spins towards His coming judgment. For those who abide in Him however, He confounds the works of darkness, taking what ‘was meant for evil and turning it for good’, giving “beauty for ashes.” Christ Himself abided in the Father, communed in prayer, and fulfilled the Father’s will. “A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” the Lord confounded the murderous powers of darkness by rising up from the grave, a triumphant victory over sin and death. By turning to the Lord, abiding in Him through prayer, we can walk with resurrection power as the Body of Christ in this world, fulfilling God’s purposes, ministering hope and new life. We will be the church, the light and beacon through which the Lord reigns.

Lisa Stepanian
New York, NY

A Reflection on Berlin: A City of Remembrance

By Ismail Akbulut
Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Excitement filled the air as I embarked on a journey to Berlin, the cosmopolitan capital of Germany, with eager anticipation and curiosity. With its amazing historical sites, vibrant diaspora communities, including the Turkish diaspora, and rich cultural tapestry, Berlin promised an unforgettable adventure that resonated deeply with my personal heritage. As my family had migrated from Turkey to Germany in the 1970s, this journey held a special significance, igniting a sense of connection and excitement for the exploration that lay ahead.

Nestled in the heart of the city, close to Checkpoint Charlie — the iconic symbol of division between East and West Berlin — I was struck by the remnants of a tumultuous past that still echo through its streets. From the vantage point of their apartments, Berliners gazed across the wall, catching glimpses of the lives their loved ones led on the other side, a poignant reminder of the separation endured by the city’s inhabitants.

Berlin, once divided by the Cold War, bears witness to the scars of history etched into its landscape. The sight of Stolpersteine, small brass plaques embedded in the pavement to commemorate Jewish victims of the Holocaust, served as a touching reminder of the city’s dark past.

As I traversed the city, I encountered numerous memorials dedicated to the millions of innocent lives lost during World War II. The Holocaust Memorial, with its stark, somber concrete blocks, stood as a powerful testament to the atrocities of the past, evoking a sense of profound sadness and reflection.

Amidst this backdrop of remembrance, I witnessed a city grappling with the weight of its history. From demonstrations advocating for ceasefire in Gaza to solemn candlelit vigils outside the synagogue for the hostages held by Hamas, Berlin exemplified a city deeply committed to acknowledging and honoring the past while striving for a better future globally.

It was truly a humbling experience surfing through the streets of Berlin. Every corner of the city echoed with the resolute refrain: “Never again.”

One particularly moving moment occurred during an evening stroll with friends.

WHILE BERLIN GRAPPLES WITH ITS PAST AND STRIVES FOR RECONCILIATION, THE SAME CANNOT BE SAID FOR TURKEY, WHERE STREETS STILL BEAR THE NAMES OF PERPETRATORS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE SUCH AS TALAAT PASHA.

As we walked through the city streets, my friend Olin, who is of Latino and Jewish descent, recounted his experience in Paris on April 24, the day of remembrance for the Armenian Genocide. He vividly described how the city fell into solemn darkness, a profound gesture of remembrance for the victims of one of history’s darkest chapters. Inspired by his narrative, I recalled the significance of Berlin in the context of the Armenian Genocide and shared this insight with my companions.

In Berlin, the legacy of the Armenian Genocide is intertwined with its own history. The city served as the stage for the assassination of Talaat Pasha, a key orchestrator of the Armenian Genocide. The subsequent trial, where the perpetrator was acquitted, prompted the Jewish lawyer and academic, Raphael Lemkin, to coin the term “genocide” to describe the systematic extermination of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

While Berlin grapples with its past and strives for reconciliation, the same cannot be said for Turkey, where streets still bear the names of perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide such as Talaat Pasha. Armenians living in Turkey are confronted daily with reminders of their painful history, while other ethnic and religious minorities continue to face persecution and oppression. The continued persecution and oppression of various groups in Turkey remains a pressing concern. Notably, prominent Armenian journalist Hayko Bagdat resides in exile in Berlin, a stark reminder of the challenges faced by individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, Kurds and other indigenous ethnic groups are hindered in their ability to freely express their language and cultural heritage. Furthermore, individuals associated with the Hizmet movement, also known as the Gulen Movement, are subject to systemic persecution and torture, highlighting ongoing human rights violations within Turkey.

As I reflect on my time in Berlin, I am reminded of the importance of confronting the past and striving for justice and reconciliation. I hope and pray that one day, Turkey will follow Berlin’s example and transform its cities into places of remembrance, honoring all those who have suffered at the hands of oppression and injustice.

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Armenia–Turkey Normalization Process: A Road to Nowhere?

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even though Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers reconfirmed that agreement in February 2023, Turkey has done nothing toward that end. Meanwhile, during that period, Turkey has continued to provide full support to Azerbaijan, including during the September 2023 military takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan and the forced displacement of Armenians from their homeland. While after every meeting between special representatives Turkey states that the process should continue without any preconditions, Ankara continues to put forward preconditions, insisting that nothing should happen between Armenia and Turkey as long as there is no agreement signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan and claiming that Turkey closely coordinates the Armenia–Turkey normalization process with Azerbaijan. When Armenia renovated the Margara border crossing-point to facilitate the implementation of the July 2022 agreement, almost nothing was done from the Turkish side.

Thus, more than two years after the start of the new phase of the Armenia–Turkey normalization process, Turkey continues to reject the implementation of any agreements already reached between the two sides, to put forward preconditions, and to directly connect the Armenia–Turkey process with Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations.

Analysis of Ankara’s policy leads to the conclusion that Turkey has no intention of normalizing relations with Armenia. It is taking part in the negotiations for show only and using them as a bargaining chip and image improvement tool in its relations with the West. Simultaneously, Turkey is using the process as leverage against Armenia, putting additional pressure on Yerevan to accept Azerbaijani ultimatums, such as the establishment of an extraterritorial corridor via Armenia, changing the Armenian constitution and other laws, and agreeing to give the so-called enclaves to Azerbaijan.

In the current environment, instead of participating in the Antalya diplomatic forum and contributing to Turkey’s mimicry of a normalization process, Armenia should make clear that Turkey is undermining the normalization process and playing a negative role by increasing tension in the South Caucasus. Armenia should state openly that Turkey is only taking part in the process for show, and that there is no sense in new discussions and meetings with the Turkish side as long as Ankara continues to renege on previous agreements.

(Benyamin Poghosyan is chairman of the Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies in Yerevan, and Senior Research Fellow at the Applied Policy Research Institute (APRI) of Armenia.)



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