

# THE ARMENIAN MIRROR SPECTATOR

SINCE 1932

Volume LXXXIX, NO. 40, Issue 4831

APRIL 27, 2024

\$2.00

## 109<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Armenian Genocide

### Massachusetts State House Commemoration

By Aram Arkun

Mirror-Spectator Staff

BOSTON — The commemoration of the 109th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide took place on April 19 at the Massachusetts State House, with keynote speaker Judge Gabrielle Wolohojian. The event, organized by the Armenian Genocide Commemorative Committee of Massachusetts, was well attended, with estimates of as many as 300 present.

State Rep. David K. Muradian, Jr., from the 9th Worcester District, served as the master of ceremonies.

It began with the procession of the Homenetmen (Armenian General Athletic Union) Boston Scouts, the sergeant-at-arms of the State House, elected offi-



Mary Vartanian acknowledges the standing ovation in the State House (photo David Medzorian)

tion of the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States. Children from St. Stephen's Armenian Elementary School sang the American and Armenian national anthems, after which the audience was welcomed by Representative Muradian. Muradian provided the audience with general information about the Armenian Genocide.

State Rep. Dave Rogers of the 24th Middlesex District recognized guests, elected officials and representatives of community and human rights advocacy groups. Notable was the presence of Consul General of

El Salvador Abelino Chicas Hernández, President and CEO of the Jewish Alliance for Law see STATE HOUSE, page 10



State Sen. William Brownsberger pre-sents a joint resolution to Jeanmarie Papelian, center, and Carolyn Mugar, at right, of the Armenian Tree Project (photo David Medzorian)

cials and Armenian clergy of the greater Boston area, an invocation, and then the recita-

### Armenian Heritage Park Commemoration

By Ken Martin

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

BOSTON — On Sunday, April

21, the Armenian Heritage Park was the site of the second statewide Genocide commemoration in Massachusetts this April; the first being at the State House on Friday, April 19.

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(KEN MARTIN PHOTO)

### Humanitarian, Business Leader, Ruben Vardanyan Demands Immediate And Unconditional Release of All Armenian Prisoners

YEREVAN — On April 19, on the platform formerly known as Twitter, Ruben Vardanyan's family released the following statement, announcing his launching a hunger strike to demand the release of all the Armenian prisoners of war in Azerbaijan:

The family of illegally detained philanthropist, Ruben Vardanyan, announced on April

19 that he had entered into a hunger strike to demand the immediate and unconditional release of himself and the other

Armenian prisoners illegally held in Baku.

The hunger strike began on April 5, 2024, following repeated requests by Vardanyan and counsel to provide a fair and transparent trial in a timely manner in line with international legal standards.

Suspiciously, [since] his hunger strike began, his family's regular phone calls with him have been cut off, in clear violation of all international norms.

The original trial slated for January was extended without cause to May.

see VARDANYAN, page 4



Ruben Vardanyan

## Emotions High as Four Villages in Tavush Province Are Returned to Azerbaijan

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Senior US and European Union diplomats discussed with Armenia's leaders on Monday, April 22, the implementation of their controversial border delimitation agreement with Azerbaijan hailed by Western powers.

The issue was understood to be high on the agenda of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's meeting with Toivo Klaar, the EU's special envoy to the South Caucasus. Ac-

ording to an Armenian government statement, Klaar reaffirmed EU support for "the agreement to launch the delimitation process on the basis of the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration" signed by newly independent former Soviet republics. The latter thus recognized each other's Soviet-era borders.

Following the eighth round of talks between Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan and his Azerbaijani counterpart

Shahin Mustafayev that was held at an undisclosed section of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on April 19 the parties announced a preliminary agreement that the initial stage of the delimitation process will involve sections between four villages in the territory of Armenia's Tavush province and four abandoned villages that used to be part of Azerbaijan's Qazax district in the Soviet times.

see TAVUSH, page 3



Residents of border villages in Tavush province block a highway outside Kirants village, April 20, 2024.

### CALIFORNIA

Promise Institute Hosts Symposium Dedicated To the Late Richard Hovannisian

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Capitol Hill Commemoration Of Genocide Takes Place

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### NEW YORK

An Elegant Capstone to A Celebration Of 125 Years

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ARMENIA

## NEWS from ARMENIA

### Davtyan Wins Gold at Gymnastics World Cup

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — Vahagn Davtyan of the Armenian gymnastics team clinched a gold medal at the Gymnastics World Cup in Doha on April 20.

Davtyan scored a total of 14,833 points in the rings exercise final on Friday to take the top spot on the podium.

The performance also secured his spot at the Summer Olympics.

### Armenia Remains Engaged with CSTO, Chief Says

YEREVAN (Panorama) — Armenia continues to fulfill its obligations as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and all issues on the agenda are settled as needed, CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov told TASS on April 22.

“Relations between the CSTO and Armenia, which is a member state of our organization, are far from being at their best,” he said. “However, Armenia continues with its activities within the CSTO framework and all issues on the agenda are settled in a working order.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated last week that Armenia had not yet defined the zone of responsibility of CSTO on its territory.

### EFJ and UJA Demand Immediate Release of Journalists

YEREVAN (Panorama.am) — The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) joined its affiliate in Armenia, the Union of Journalists of Armenia (UJA), in denouncing the authorities’ misuse of anti-hooliganism legislation to suppress press freedom and freedom of expression. Opposition activists Narek Samsonyan and Vazgen Saghatelyan, co-hosts of the podcast “Imnemimi,” were imprisoned after criticizing Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Saghatelyan and Samsonyan were given two-month pretrial detention on March 22 on charges of hooliganism. If found guilty, they could face up to five years in prison.

Armenia’s Investigative Committee stated in a statement that Saghatelyan and Samsonyan, who is the founder of AntiFake.am outlet, committed hooliganism by “showing an openly contemptuous attitude towards moral norms and swearing at Pashinyan and his cabinet.”

AntiFake.am published footage of Samsonyan’s brutal arrest, on the morning of March 22.

“Even if Samsonyan and Saghatelyan used harsh language in their podcast, this in no way justified police brutality and detention,” said UJA President Satik Seyranyan. “They were not inciting violence but simply expressing their opinion. Equating these events with hooliganism shows the extent to which the authorities are abusing the law.”

# Armenian PM Defends Decision to Give Four Villages to Azerbaijan

By Patrick Wintour

YEREVAN (*Guardian*) — Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian prime minister, facing four days of protests against his decision to hand four villages to Azerbaijan, has urged Armenians to recognize that the way the issue is handled will determine the viability of the future peace process with its neighbor.

In an interview with British journalists in his office, Pashinyan, the leader of Armenia’s velvet revolution in 2018, said the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan “need to convert the theoretical peace agenda into an actual peaceful reality.”

The two countries had been in a decades-long conflict since the 1990s when in September 2023 a lightning military offensive by Azerbaijan saw it take control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region that had been under ethnic Armenian control. Those dramatic events were followed by the speeding up of talks on a peace agreement between the two sides to stabilize relations.

The deal for the villages, a precursor to a wider agreement on borders between the two countries, has been praised by international diplomats as a landmark moment, but Pashinyan knows he risks losing domestic popular support if he makes what his people regard as too many unilateral and unreciprocated concessions.

He said that although the negotiated handover of the villages may be seen as a local matter, “the quality of implementation of these local agreements will increase or decrease trust in the peace agenda and the feasibility of peace.”

Praising the negotiators of the deal, he said: “They’ve tried, molecule by molecule, to build trust, to build confidence, and, if treated delicately and with care, it can develop. And if not treated with care, it may fall apart.”

The potential for the border dispute turning into a wider dispute drawing in Rus-

sia, Iran and Turkey across the Caucasus is real, Pashinyan’s aides acknowledge.

He had warned local villagers the alternative to a deal was war, and he knows in any conflict Armenia faces an overwhelming arms deficit.

The former Soviet republic had been on the military back foot for at least five years when Azerbaijan advanced into Nagorno-Karabakh and it was unable to prevent more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians being forced out of the region.

Russia, which had peacekeepers deployed in the territory, did not intervene to prevent Azerbaijan’s advance and Russian troops are now leaving altogether.

Pashinyan is trying to build alliances with Europe and the US in what he describes as an attempt to diversify foreign and security arrangements.

“The Republic of Armenia is ready to be as close with the European Union as the European Union sees possible,” he said. “At the moment, we seem to be moving in this direction because, very importantly, this is a public process. Transparency is of the utmost importance for us.”

But his drive to protect Armenia by building new alliances and seeking a peace settlement with Azerbaijan may fail if Azerbaijan abandons the lengthy peace talks in favor of land grabs. Azerbaijan has an 80% to 20% military advantage over his country, Pashinyan said.

The current domestic backlash is focused in Armenia’s northern Tavush region, where the government agreed on Friday to return four abandoned villages it had occupied since the 1990s to Azerbaijan as the start of a wider process to agree their mutual borders.

Former residents of two of the villages, Baghanis and Voskepar, have several times blocked the highway that connects Armenia with Georgia, and tried to prevent the removal of landmines.

They resent suddenly being put on the

frontline, but the two countries are committed to delimitation and demarcation of their states based on the borders that existed in 1991 at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Pashinyan, defending his strategy for peace, said Armenia had shown itself to be candid and sincere, and was seeking to defend the territory of Armenia.

“Beyond the internationally recognized borders, Armenia has no aspirations, no claims, and we hope that in the border delimitation process, the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia will be restored,” he said.

He called for realism about what the Armenian armed forces could achieve. “I was approached by a woman who was forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, and she asked how realistic is it that we will have a possibility to go back to Nagorno-Karabakh and she said: please give me a direct and candid answer. I told her given the perceptions that prevail, I do not consider it realistic.

“I cannot lie to you, because if it were realistic, then the displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh would not have happened.”

He said Armenia was doing its best to house and find jobs for the Nagorno-Karabakh refugees, but the cost was estimated at €1.5bn (£1.3bn) over 10 years.

He also revealed his anger that Russia had rendered the regional security pact the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meaningless by repeatedly refusing to prevent Azerbaijan’s invasions into Armenia. He said Russia had in effect admitted the CSTO had “no zone of responsibility” in Armenia.

Armenia has currently frozen its membership of the pact. Pashinyan said: “If things continue the way they are, if the political statements continue, then that line will be crossed, and resuming participation in the CSTO will then be rendered impossible in practice.”

## Azerbaijan Razes Cemetery and Church in Shushi

YEREVAN (Panorama/PanArmenian.net) — Satellite imagery has shown the destruction of two Armenian heritage sites in Shushi, the Ghazanchetsots cemetery and the St. John the Baptist Church.

Images from April 4 show that the destruction of the Ghazanchetsots cemetery in Shushi, in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), is complete, the Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) reported.

“This marks the first destruction of a cemetery since the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Azerbaijan to prevent and punish attacks on Armenian cultural heritage,” CHW posted on the platform formerly known as Twitter on April 20.

Damage to the cemetery began in October 2023, as CHW reported in an alert on November 27.

“We told the story of the historic site and the threat it faced. At that point, it was not too late to stop the destruction. But by December 2023 it was almost gone,” the watchdog said.

In addition, Azerbaijan has demolished the historic Armenian Church of St. John the Baptist (known as Kanach Zham), constructed in 1818, the European Armenian Federation for Justice and Democracy (EAFJD) reveals in a statement.

“Satellite images confirm that the church was razed to the ground in February 2024,” EAFJD said, also sharing satellite imagery.

“This deliberate act by Azerbaijan signifies a systematic erasure of Armenian heritage from their ancestral lands.”



A satellite image showing the destruction of the Shushi cemetery





## ARMENIA

# Four Villages in Tavush Province Returned to Azerbaijan

TAVUSH, from page 1

The deal commits Armenia to making unilateral territorial concessions to Azerbaijan. The four areas used to be occupied by small Azerbaijani villages captured by Armenian forces in 1991-1992. For its part, Azerbaijan had seized at the time large swathes of agricultural land belonging to several Tavush villages. None of that land will be given back to Armenia under the terms of the preliminary border deal reached on April 19.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan defended the deal welcomed by Western powers, saying that it will help to prevent another war with Azerbaijan. However, many residents of the Tavush villages close to the contested border areas are strongly opposed to it, saying that they would lose access to their existing agricultural land, have trouble communicating with the rest of the country and be far more vulnerable to Azerbaijani armed attacks.

The delimitation on the mentioned sections is to be completed by the middle of May, the parties agreed.

The announcement has triggered angry protests by residents of border villages in Armenia's northern Tavush region that will be seriously affected by it. The Armenian opposition has also strongly condemned it.

Residents in the villages of Kirants and Baghanis, in particular, blocked traffic at sections of the road linking their villages to the towns of Ijevan and Noyemberian, respectively.

Some residents of Voskepar, another Armenian village that is going to be affected by the planned border demarcation, claimed, meanwhile, that what was officially announced by the authorities contradicted what Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had said when he held a closed-door meeting with residents in the village earlier this week.



A map showing the section of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border between the Tavush province of Armenia and the Qazax district of Azerbaijan

provided explanations on Friday, addressing some of the concerns of residents of borderline communities.

“For the first time, there will be a demarcated state border between our countries [Armenia and Azerbaijan] in the section of the four villages,” he said, as quoted by Armenia’s state-run Armenpress news agency.

“Let’s note that Azerbaijan is very close to those villages even today and they are under direct fire. Yes, as a result of this process, the border guard service of Azerbaijan will get closer to the villages of Kirants and Voskepar, but their villages and ours

“But this is not the only road for Kirants. The Kirants-Acharkut-Ijevan road will be repaired, maybe rebuilt as well. We mean, Kirants also has an alternative road, and practically there are no major problems,” the premier’s office said.

“It is also important to record that the Commissions agreed that in the entire process of border delimitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, they will rely on the 1991 Alma Ata Declaration, which is recorded as a fundamental principle of the border delimitation process,” it stressed.

Meanwhile, the deal was touted as another success of the government in Azerbaijan.

Armenia via Georgia.

Azerbaijan would gain control of a section of that highway adjacent to the Tavush village of Kirants as a result of the planned Armenian troop withdrawal. Scores of residents of Kirants and several other border communities rallied there early on Saturday in a bid to scuttle the land handover to Baku. They were joined by Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan, the outspoken head of the Tavush Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

“The delimitation process must take place in a comprehensive, package manner, with clear rules and maps, in accordance with Armenia’s laws, through a referendum, and with international guarantees,” Galstanyan insisted on Monday.

The protesters unblocked the road section on Saturday night after Grigoryan agreed to meet with the heads of the village administrations on Monday. They blocked it again the following morning amid reports that the Armenian military is about to start demining the border areas in preparation for their handover to Azerbaijan. The military did not comment on those reports.

“They told us to open the road so that they give us an answer on Monday,” one woman from Kirants told RFE/RL’s Armenian Service. “But they fooled us. We woke up this morning and witnessed another incident. That’s why we don’t trust in their words anymore.”

“We will keep spending nights here,” said another protester. “For a couple of times, police forces came here to try to convince us to reopen the road, but that obviously hasn’t happened.”

There were strong indications of unfolding demining work outside the nearby village of Voskepar on Monday. A group of angry villagers confronted military personnel who appeared to be trying to clear a contested area next to a 7th century Armenian church of landmines. They demanded an immediate halt to the apparent demining. Bishop Galstanyan also arrived at the scene, effectively urging the military to defy Pashinyan’s withdrawal orders.

Riot police cordoned off the church to keep Voskepar residents and other protesters from approaching it and disrupting the mine clearance seen as a preparation for the area’s handover to Azerbaijan. The tense standoff there continued for a few hours, with the protesters eventually being given access to the church.



Angry residents of Voskepar village confront military personnel trying to demine a contested border area, April 22, 2024.

Residents are particularly concerned that the demarcation of the border with Azerbaijan in accordance with the Soviet-era configuration will deprive them of access to their farmlands and complicate their communication with the rest of the country due to the fact that some parts of the road in the area will fall under Azerbaijani control.

Besides, they voice concerns that Armenia’s withdrawal from its current military positions will make the local civilians far more vulnerable to Azerbaijani armed attacks.

The Armenian Prime Minister’s Office

will be separated by a delimited state border. This is a key factor and let’s not forget that the border protection will be carried out by the border guards of the Republic of Armenia. In addition, there are many details of providing security, which will also be discussed and detailed in the near future,” Pashinyan’s Office said.

It acknowledged that “a few hundred meters of the road outline” will have to be changed in the section of the village of Kirants, which it said “is not something difficult and will be implemented within a few months.”

“Armenia has agreed to return four villages under occupation since the early 1990s,” Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Aykhan Hajizada wrote on social media, describing it as a “long-awaited historic event.”

## Protests Held

The Armenian opposition groups have also condemned Pashinyan’s latest concessions to Baku. They argue that the areas in question are strategically located along one of the two main Armenian highways leading to the Georgian border as well as the pipeline supplying Russian natural gas to





## INTERNATIONAL

## INTERNATIONAL

## Henrikh Mkhitaryan Wins Serie A Title with Inter

MILAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Inter are the Champions of Italy for 2023-24 after beating rivals Milan in the Derby della Madonnina, making it their 20th Serie A title, so they can forever more wear two stars. Football-Italia reported on April 22.

In Italian football, a star is a permanent fixture on the jersey for every 10 Serie A titles won and so far only Juventus have been able to wear more than one.

Their sole loss was 2-1 at home to Sassuolo on September 27.

## New Armenian Center Opens in Bulgaria

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — A Bulgarian-Armenian cultural and information center has been opened in Varna, Bulgaria, on April 23, said its founders. The center was blessed by Father Dirair Hadavyan, who is the representative of Archbishop Tatev Agopyan of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church in Bulgaria and Romania.

The center will maintain an event calendar including the activities of all organizations and associations related to the Armenian community in Bulgaria. It will host trainings, lectures, presentations and meetings with personalities related to the Armenian culture, art, education and science, and will develop the relationship between the Bulgarian and Armenian people.

The opening was attended by the Ambassador of Armenia to Bulgaria Armen Edigaryan, Varna Mayor Blagomir Kotsev and various other dignitaries.

## Record Number Of Australian Parliamentarians Attend Armenian Genocide Commemorations

MELBOURNE (Public Radio of Armenia) — The Armenian National Committee of Australia has reported a record number of elected officials were attending the Armenian Genocide commemorations in the country.

The Sydney commemoration, taking place on April 24, at the Chatswood Concourse, was attended by more than 250 official guests including parliamentarians, non-governmental organization representatives, media, civil society bodies and Armenian community organizations.

The attendees included Federal Parliamentarians Jerome Laxale MP – Member for Bennelong, Paul Fletcher MP – Member for Bradfield, Kylea Tink MP – Member for North Sydney, Senator Maria Kovacic – Senator for NSW.

The commemoration in Melbourne took place on April 23 at the Rowville Performing Arts Centre, attended by a historic number of parliamentarians and Federal candidates.

# Growth Rates Set to Slow in Caucasus And Central Asia – World Bank

By Brawley Benson

China's fiscal woes are likely to drag on economies across the Caucasus and Central Asia over the next two years, the World Bank is forecasting.

The Bank's economic update for 2024-25 says the entire area spanning Europe and Central Asia faces "multiple headwinds," including China's "lackluster recovery" and "moderating" commodity prices. "With heightened geopolitical risks and substantial policy uncertainty, investment growth ... could weaken further, especially if progress in advancing structural reforms remains sluggish," according to the Bank.

In the Caucasus, Azerbaijan is set to see a slight uptick in growth during 2024-25, thanks to increasing European demand for its energy exports. The Bank notes that Georgia and Armenia had been among the region's strongest performers in recent years, but are now facing a decline in economic performance.

"Growth is set to ease in Armenia and Georgia reflecting heightened geopolitical risks, moderating exports, and the fading boost to growth from the large inflows of migrants and capital from Russia," the report states. "Growth in Azerbaijan is likely to be stronger as the downturn in the oil industry eases, oil revenues continue to support investment, and amid progress on structural reforms to diversify the economy."

A slowing economy has potentially significant implications for Georgia, which is set to hold parliamentary elections in October. At present, the ruling Georgian Dream coalition is widely expected to retain power, but a sputtering economy could focus attention on policies that, critics contend, are undermining the country's chances of joining the European Union.

A 2022 poll showed that a majority of Georgian respondents favor EU membership, seeing it as a vehicle for strong economic growth. However, Georgian Dream policies, including the recent re-introduction of legislation that has the potential to

curtail basic rights, threaten to derail the country's EU bid.

Asked whether an economic downturn could shake things up ahead of the election, Alex Melikishvili, a country risk expert for the Caucasus and Central Asia, was doubtful. "In the run up to the elections, the ruling Georgian Dream will unveil a slew of generous government spending to curry favor with the electorate and to safeguard political survival," he said. "The Georgian government is positioned quite well for this, as Georgia's sovereign reserves are at [a] record level with [the] central bank recently even buying gold for the first time in post-Soviet history of Georgia."

The World Bank report predicts varying results in Central Asia: it forecasts big drops in Kyrgyz and Tajik growth rates, and marginal increases for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The Bank did not have sufficient data to predict Turkmenistan's economic prospects. Central Asia's poorest states are highly vulnerable to geopolitical factors relating to Russia; a downturn in Russia, for example, can have considerable impact on labor migration, a major source of income for many Kyrgyz and Tajik families. Other significant risks include rising food costs and global warming.

Signs of economic pitfalls are already emerging across the region. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, Russia's war in Ukraine has disrupted supply chains and raised the price of imports; in the Caucasus, Russians who fled conscription at home in 2022 and hurriedly resettled in cities like Tbilisi and Yerevan are now starting to move on to other countries, taking their savings with them.

Even better-off states in the region have reason to worry about the near future. In Kazakhstan's case, the Bank report says that revitalizing economic growth will require a reduction of the government's role in the private sector, alongside "strengthening human capital and policies to support decarbonization."

Melikishvili, the risk analyst, told Eur-

asianet that the World Bank's projections are not necessarily the best metrics to predict trade trends. "China-EU relations, the sanctions environment, the situation in the Red Sea and, more broadly speaking, the growing Iran-Israel conflict in the Middle East are more important factors to consider," he said.

The World Bank report dwells at length on China's struggles, but makes only a couple of fleeting references to the turbulent situation in the Middle East and to Red Sea piracy.

China has been sending confusing signals to international markets in recent months, at times appearing on the cusp of an economic crisis and, at others, outperforming expectations. Some experts believe China is using command-style tactics to solve strategic economic problems, deploying large sums of state funds to produce near-term results without addressing structural flaws. Such an approach, they add, can cover up problems for a while, but not solve them.

Central Asian nations will surely be watching for signals coming from Beijing. Since 2022, countries in the region have revived interest in the development of an East-West trade route known as the Middle Corridor. Such diversification can hedge against troubles with the Chinese or Russian economies, which Central Asian nations have historically been dependent on. But even so, poor economic developments in Beijing can send shockwaves rippling across the route all the way to Europe.

"Lower growth in major trading partners," like China (and Russia), poses a substantial "external" risk for both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the Bank says.

(Brawley Benson is a US-based reporter and recent graduate of the Columbia Journalism School who writes about Russia and the countries around it. Follow him on X at @BrawleyEric. This article originally appeared on [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org) on April 22.)

## Vardanyan Demands Immediate Release of All Armenian Prisoners

VARDANYAN, from page 1

Last September, armed forces of the government of Azerbaijan invaded the Armenian autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, triggering the exodus of the 120,000 inhabitants of the region. During the flight of the refugees, Vardanyan and 7 other former officials were arrested and now face spurious politically-motivated charges. They are all political prisoners.

"I am deeply concerned about the health and well-being of my father," said David Vardanyan, one of Vardanyan's sons. "For nearly 200 days, my family has not seen my father. We have had absolutely no contact with him since he launched his hunger strike on April 5th."

Vardanyan's hunger strike tragically coincides with the 109th anniversary of the Armenian genocide which will occur on April 24, demonstrating how Armenians continue to be targets of ethnic cleansing and are still targeted for persecution around the world.

Ruben Vardanyan is a loving husband and a father of four. He is also an influential Armenian business leader,

social entrepreneur, and philanthropist. Together with his partners from around the world, he has driven more than \$1.5 billion toward advancing economic development, addressing humanitarian challenges, and supporting global education initiatives. A former State Minister of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic from November 2022-February 2023, Vardanyan has been charged with false accusations, held in conditions against international law, and faces a trial that will not be up to international standards, especially regarding access of international observers to the proceedings.

In addition, Vardanyan's case has been separated from the other seven political prisoners, raising questions about whether he in particular is being politically targeted.

"The illegal detention of Ruben and the other former leaders of Artsakh is an egregious abuse of human rights and the international justice system and must be ended," said Paul Polman, Selection Committee member of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative co-founded by Vardanyan. "The irony of this entire situa-

tion is that Azerbaijan has been selected to host COP 29 in a blatant attempt to 'greenwash' their international reputation. COP has a major focus on the interconnectivity of climate change and human rights at a time when they are abusing both in plain sight."

Vardanyan's family demands that: 1. All illegally detained ethnic Armenian prisoners, including Ruben Vardanyan should be released immediately and unconditionally. 2. Should the illegal trials proceed, they must happen before the prisoners' detention orders expire in May, must meet global legal standards, and international observers and media must be allowed to attend. 3. The Azerbaijani government must allow immediate access of the International Red Cross to assess the wellbeing of Ruben and the other prisoners. The family's access to telephone calls with Mr. Vardanyan must be restored. 4. Any peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan must include the release of all ethnic Armenian political prisoners. 5. COP 29 should not proceed in Azerbaijan without these steps occurring.





# Community News

## AIWA Releases Statement on Solidarity with Center for Truth And Justice

LOS ANGELES — The Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA) issued a statement on April 18, stating that it is on a collaborative mission with the Center for Truth and Justice (CFTJ) at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands. CFTJ seeks accountability for the genocide committed by Azerbaijan against Armenians in Armenia, and AIWA is dedicated to ensuring the human rights violations and war crimes perpetrated against ethnic Armenian women by Azerbaijan do not go unnoticed or unpunished.

AIWA's commitment to advocating against all forms of violence towards women and their pursuit of human rights has been a cornerstone of the organization's mission. On January 17, the AIWA Los Angeles affiliate organized a liturgical observance and ecumenical prayer service, drawing attention to Armenians held captive in Azerbaijan and advocating for their immediate release.

Now, AIWA is taking its advocacy to the International Criminal Court at The Hague. Speaking at Los Angeles International Airport before departure, Silva Katchiguiian, president of AIWA, emphasized the significance of directing the world's attention to critical issues, particularly concerning the dignity and rights of women brought to light by the CFTJ's groundbreaking documentation of the crimes.

Katchiguiian stated, "It is time for us to declare it in The Hague and for the world to acknowledge that discussing human rights separately from women's rights is no longer acceptable. The documentation by CFTJ proves extreme gender-specific brutality toward ethnic Armenian women by Azeri soldiers. These heinous acts of violence continue because, for too long, the history of women has been a history of silence. But the women's voices representing the injustices toward Armenia women must be heard loudly and clearly."

She added, "Women's rights are human and universal in times of war and peace. I urge the ambassadors to ensure accountability for conflict-related sexual violence."

The CFTJ, established in November 2020 in response to the Nagorno-Karabakh war, has been collecting first-hand testimonies from the war survivors.

As Katchiguiian stated, "Every new wave of warfare brings with it a rising tide of human tragedy, including new waves of war's oldest, most silenced, and least-condemned crimes, crimes against women."

Furthermore, she emphasized, "Those of us who have the opportunity to be in The Hague have the responsibility to speak for those who could not. As an American and an Armenian, I want to speak for women in my ethnic homeland, Armenia."



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan leads the "Release of Doves" ceremony at New York's St. Vartan Cathedral: a beloved, decades-long Easter Sunday tradition. The godparents of this year's ceremony were Alyssa Keleshian and her family members, parishioners of St. Gregory the Enlightener Church in White Plains, NY. Extensive scaffolding currently surrounds the cathedral as part of a major restoration project of the structure's exterior. (Photo by Harout Barsoumian)

## Easter Services at St. Vartan Cathedral

*A Promise of 'Strength, Hope, and New Beginnings'*

By **Stephan S. Nigohosian**

NEW YORK — The Easter Sunday Divine Liturgy on March 31, at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral was a time for the Armenian Christian family to rejoice in the glorious resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His victory over sin and death. Known in Armenian as Soorp Zadig, Easter is the major feast day of the Christian calendar and represents the promise of salvation for all humanity.

Marking his first Easter badarak since his consecration as a bishop of the church, Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, celebrated the Divine Liturgy before the faithful in the cathedral, as well as to a global audience via the livestream broadcast. Upon entering the sanctuary to the dulcet tones of the choir, Bishop Mesrop bestowed his blessings among the lay people in attendance while a procession of clergy and altar servers elevated a gold cross and colorful liturgical tapestries.

As an expression of purification and spiritual cleanliness, Parsamyan symbolically washed his hands in a small basin and assumed his priestly function at the altar as he turned to the faithful and made the sign of the cross.

Among the clergy and altar servers assisting Bishop Parsamyan throughout the liturgy was Fr. Mamigon Kiledjian.

After the reading of Scripture in Armenian and English by the deacons, prayers and hymns were sung together by the choir and congregation, underscoring the congregation's steadfast conviction as one unified body in Christ. Thereafter, the chalice containing bread and wine representing the Body and Blood of Christ was presented to Bishop Mesrop, who blessed and raised it to the heavens for the faithful to witness and experience the revelation of our Lord and Savior.

The congregation also played an important role in the service by giving and receiving the Kiss of Peace (or Voghchooyin), one of the oldest and most beautiful customs still practiced by the Armenian Church, in which believers share the declaration "Krisdos ee mech mer haydnetsav! Orhnyal eh haydnoutiunun Krisdosee!" (Christ is revealed among us! Blessed is the revelation of Christ!) to express their united bond in Christ.

As is the case each Sunday, the soaring voices of the St. Vartan Cathedral Choir, conducted by Khoren Mekanejian, with accompaniment by organist Florence Avakian, punctuated the centuries-old service and surrounded participants with an aural sense of peace and redemption.

see EASTER, page 9

## Promise Institute Hosts Symposium Dedicated to the Late Richard Hovannisian

LOS ANGELES — The Promise Armenian Institute at UCLA hosted an all-day symposium dedicated to honoring and celebrating the life and legacy of the late UCLA Professor Richard G. Hovannisian on Saturday, April 6, 2at the UCLA Mong Learning Center.

The all-day event featured six separate sessions, with more than 35 speakers and panelists reflecting on Professor Hovannisian's monumental scholarly and educational contributions during his 50-year career as a faculty member at UCLA.

Hovannisian, who passed away in July 2023, was the first holder of the Armenian Educational Foundation Endowed Chair in Modern Armenian History, now named in his honor.

The symposium's sessions focused on Hovannisian's impact on Armenian Genocide research, both as it pertains to documentation and recognition, as well as to survivor testimony collection and archiving; on his scholarship on modern Armenian history, notably the publication of his groundbreaking four-volume series on the First Armenian Republic,



The late Prof. Richard Hovannisian as well as his 15 edited volumes on Historic Armenian Cities/Provinces; on his pioneering Armenian Studies as an academic field and co-founding important scholarly organizations; and on his critical role as a teacher and mentor, influencing the lives and careers of thousands of former students and colleagues.

As noted by Prof. Ann Karagozian, director of the UCLA Promise Armenian Institute, the symposium was designed "not only to honor Professor Hovannisian's memory and legacy, but also to reflect on his impact and how each one of us, irrespective of our fields or backgrounds or even how well we knew Richard or our connections to him, can be inspired by his vision, and can continue, in our own way, his efforts on behalf of the Armenian people."

In addition to reflections by scholars, students, friends and colleagues, biographical videos showcasing Professor Hovannisian's remarkable life and work were created by his daughter, filmmaker Ani Hovannisian Kevorkian.

In opening remarks, writer and filmmaker Garin Hovannisian, one of see SYMPOSIUM, page 12





## COMMUNITY NEWS

# Capitol Hill Holds Genocide Commemoration

WASHINGTON — The 109th commemoration of the Armenian Genocide took place on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, April 17, at the Capitol Visitors Center, in a bipartisan event in collaboration with the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, featuring special guest Astrid Panosyan-Bouvet, member of the National Assembly of France elected in 2022.

While Members of Congress acknowledged the importance of US recognition of the Armenian Genocide and reflected on the watershed moment in Armenian American history, they emphasized the need for increased humanitarian assistance to the Armenian people of Artsakh and protection of Armenia's sovereign borders.

Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA) recalled Azerbaijan's "large-scale attack" against Artsakh that caused a mass exodus of more than 100,000 from the region for fear of ethnic cleansing, and the resulting humanitarian crisis.

"Azerbaijan's hollow promise of a ceasefire and safe return to the area have failed to materialize," he said. "Instead what we are seeing is that Azerbaijan has unlawfully detained prisoners of war, refused to pull back its forces from Armenia's territory, threatened new attacks, and made escalating demands on the Armenian people."

He continued: "To Azerbaijan I say no to surrendering sovereign Armenian lands, that's why I was proud to introduce the bipartisan Senate resolution last night that would require the Biden Administration to report Azerbaijan's human rights practices and human rights violations, such as torture, unlawful killings, ethnic cleansing and destruction of Armenian cultural heritage."

He stated that the US must not stay silent on Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing, and that it should refuse Azerbaijan's demands that Armenia surrender its lands.

Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) recalled the historic moment when President Biden referred to the Armenian Genocide as indeed "Genocide," noting that it was due to



Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA)



Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI)

the dedication and commitment of the Armenian American community.

"It's a message of citizen participation that you can change the course of events, and together we changed the course of events," he said, acknowledging his own background as a descendant of a family of refugees from Cuba. Despite the success of Armenian Genocide affirmation, he stated that Azerbaijan's attacks on Artsakh were "deplorable."

Menendez called for the end of the Section 907 waiver to prevent "providing arms to the Azeri government." He also noted that USAID's assistance to the displaced Armenian people of Artsakh has been "paltry" and "more must be done."

Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI), who was in Armenia during the attack on Lachin Corridor in September 2023 and subsequent mass displacement of the Armenian people of Artsakh, highlighted the "unacceptable ethnic cleansing" and his frustration that the "world community did not call this out for the outrage that it was and it is."

Peters, who spearheaded the unanimous passing of the Armenian Protection Act in 2023, continued: "Azerbaijan should not get US assistance," and that there should be



Participants from across the country in Washington, DC as part of the Assembly's Advocacy Summit

consequences for Azerbaijan's actions.

"The US stands up for freedom, for liberty, and we stand up against ethnic cleansing, and if people violate those tenets, we will make sure those folks pay a price."

Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ), Armenian Caucus co-chair, said that the only way the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues can protect Armenia is "by having a strong Armenia, not only economically but also militarily," and to push the State Department to stop waiving Section 907.

"Of course we want to see a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but that may not happen until Azerbaijan knows that Armenia is strong and can repel an attack, and has the allies to repel an attack," he said, emphasizing that there must be more humanitarian assistance for the Armenian people. "We know that a strong Armenia is the only way to protect the Armenian people."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), Armenian Caucus co-chair, reflected on the atrocities of the Armenian Genocide and how "entire families were wiped out in the most brutal and heartbreaking ways," and that despite overwhelming evidence, "Turkey has engaged in a long and dangerous campaign to deny the Armenian Genocide," which has proved to be unsuccessful, however "much work remains to be done."

"These wounds are still open," continued Rep. Schiff. "They have not yet healed, and in tragic ways they've grown larger," as Azerbaijan attacked Artsakh in 2020, blockaded the Lachin Corridor for 10 months in 2023, and ethnically cleansed Artsakh's indigenous Armenian population.

"The time for strong statements by the Administration have long passed," he said stating his support to always stand with the Armenian community. "Condemnation should be followed by real consequences, and crimes against humanity cannot go unanswered."

Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), Armenian Caucus co-chair, emphasized that human rights violations are inexcusable and that everyone has a "duty and responsibility" to continue to fight for the Armenian people.

Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-CA) said that the faith of the Armenian people is what has "carried us through the dark days and better days." She remembered the momentous day in 1919 "when we ended over 100 years of silence of the Armenian Genocide."

"It's up to us and the faith we have in each other, and the faith in justice and in decency, to understand that these are ungodlike actions, and it's up to us to address them."



Talin Yacoubian, Esq. co-chair elect and Board Member of the Armenian Assembly of America

Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA), who has traveled to Artsakh and Armenia, pointed out there are "those who want to erase history and claim this genocide never happened, and brush it aside, which is why the fight for Armenian Genocide recognition is crucial."

She reflected on survivor stories from her constituents that stayed with her throughout her time in Congress, particularly when supporting Armenian Genocide resolutions.

"We can't be complacent [however] because threats facing the Armenian people have been emboldened," said Chu. "When I had the honor of visiting Artsakh I saw such incredible people in a thriving community, and it makes me heartbroken to think they've been driven from [their homes] so that's why I continue to work with Armenian Caucus colleagues to hold Azerbaijan accountable for this inexcusable aggression."

Rep. Jim Costa (D-CA) shared that he grew up with Armenian Americans in his hometown of Fresno, California, and the importance of passing the torch to a new generation of Armenian Americans.

"Your passion, and tenacious and heartfelt efforts paid off," he said. "More work needs to be done as ethnic cleansing continues to take place in Artsakh, and Azerbaijan and Turkey must be held accountable."

He concluded by paying tribute and honoring the 1.5 million Armenian martyrs who lost their lives in the Armenian Genocide.



Astrid Panosyan-Bouvet

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA) stated that while genocide denial is the last step of genocide, genocide denial is also the first step in the next genocide "because it inspires tyrants to believe they can get away with it."

"We are told that Turkey is a strategic ally," he said. "What kind of relation would [the US] have with today's Germany if there was a Germany that demanded we forget the Holocaust?"

Sherman continued: "We can have a relationship with Turkey when it's a true democratic country and when it comes to grips with its Ottoman past."

He noted the repetition of the Armenian Genocide as Azerbaijan ethnically cleansed Armenians in Artsakh, and emphasized that Section 907 should no longer be waived.

"We have to show there are consequences for what happened," he concluded. "We have to make sure Armenia is safe, and we have to impose sanctions on Azerbaijan."

*continued on next page*





COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) shared his prior experience in Baku when he met with Aliyev and reprimanded what he was doing to his people.

“Oil should not cause people to look the other way for his atrocities,” he said. “When [Aliyev] was using food as a weapon, I convened an emergency hearing.”

“We need to raise these issues so the press cannot ignore and trivialize by their lack of coverage what has happened in the past and present,” said Smith. “We pray for the people of Armenia, we stand in solidarity with them, and we need policies that have their back 1000%.”

Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV) said that the US and the international community “needs to stand up and condemn” Azerbaijan.

“We can’t mince words,” she said, citing the need to provide additional humanitarian aid to the displaced Armenians of Artsakh. “We have to call out ethnic cleansing with genocidal intent and put a stop to it with every means we have.”

Titus reflected on the fight she led to get The Library of Congress to change wording to recognize the Armenian Genocide, and looking forward, the importance of placing sanctions on Azerbaijan.

Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) said that Armenians still face the threat of extermination and “continue to live the consequences of the Armenian Genocide.”

“These conflicts demand our engagement for a peaceful resolution,” he said. “We can draw hope from the survivors, those Armenians who came to my office who I listened to over the years, and I’m here because of those righteous calls.”

He highlighted Armenian Americans who have contributed to the US and “made our country a richer and a better and a more diverse place. He thanked the Armenian American community for their advocacy and civic engagement because that is “crucial to holding this Con-



Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ), Dina Titus (D-NV), Sanford Bishop (D-GA), and Seth Moulton (D-MA)

gress accountable and inspiring our country to live up to its lofty ideals.”

Rep. Seth Moulton (D-MA) stated that “the truth will always win,” and that it “serves as a reminder to oppressors everywhere that they cannot eliminate the truth.”

He noted that the suffering of the Armenian people has not ended and that the “Armenian people were plunged into bloodshed after Azerbaijan’s attacks.”

“Just as they did after the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian people will rebuild,” concluded Rep. Moulton. “They will tell the truth and they will prosper, and the US



Representatives Anna Eshoo (D-CA), Brad Sherman (D-CA), Jim Costa (D-CA), and Judy Chu (D-CA)



Armenian Caucus Co-Chairs Representatives Frank Pallone, Jr (D-NJ), Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), and Adam Schiff (D-CA)

and this Congress will stand with them.”

Rep. Gabe Amo (D-RI) stated that we there cannot be silence in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s “brutal ethnic cleansing campaign.”

“We must denounce the destabilizing threat that the Azeri government poses,” he said. “I am your ally in our fight to preserve and protect Armenia.”

Amo said that he will make sure military assistance does not “flow in that direction” and that “our support for Armenia is an essential part of our foreign policy.”

Rep. Tom McClintock (R-CA) said that the wounds of the Armenian Genocide “will never heal,” but because of the survivors and their descendants, “their stories will never be forgotten.” He noted that the Armenian diaspora has enhanced the countries it has inhabited, and the atrocities of the Armenian Genocide, and “the lessons they teach” will continue on.

Rep. Jamal Bowman (D-NY) emphasized the importance of US recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and encouraged the Armenian American community to stay in touch and share in conversations with him so he knows what issues are most important to push forward.

Astrid Panosyan-Bouvet, a member of the French National Assembly and member of the France-Armenia Parliamentary Friendship Group, elaborated on the strong and positive relationship between France and Armenia and highlighted the latter’s “bold move towards further democratization, rule of law, fight against corruption and anchoring via the West.”



Lorig Charkoudian, Maryland State Delegate, and Rev. Fr. Sarkis Aktavoukian, pastor of Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda, MD

She stated that France was the first major country to recognize the Armenian Genocide 23 years ago, and that France “will not leave Armenia alone.” She cited modernizing the Armenian army and increasing its defense capabilities as steps France has taken to assist Armenia.

Panosyan-Bouvet also highlighted the vulnerable Syunik region of Armenia and the upcoming opening of a French Consulate there, envisioning a “French flag waving right across the Azeri border.”

She requested the US make similar efforts as France has in Armenia, “in the name of the contribution of Armenian Americans to this nation, and in the name of American interests aimed at stability and territorial integrity.”

Panosyan-Bouvet noted that the “strategic partnership between France and Armenia is reinforced” with business and cultural ties that are displayed at the central and executive levels, and in Parliament, which has resulted in the advancement of the “Armenian Cause [that] is now supported by people who have no Armenian roots.”

Talin Yacoubian, co-chair elect and Board Member of the Armenian Assembly of America, thanked the participation of all the speakers and attendees and urged the need to “stop putting weapons in the hands of Azerbaijan,” and put an end to the Section 907 waiver.

“We cannot do it alone, and that’s why we are here today,” she said. “We thank our friends who have helped, and we ask you to do more to help the Armenian population live safely in Armenia, as that safety is very much under the threat of invasion.”

Lorig Charkoudian, Maryland State Delegate, served as master of ceremonies, and remarks were also given by Aram Hamparian, Executive Director of the ANCA, Natalie Matossian, Board Member of the Congressional Armenian Staff Association (CASA), and Peter Chalabyan, Member of CASA. Others in attendance included former US Ambassador to Armenia John Evans, former Member of Turkey’s Grand National Assembly Garo Paylan, former Permanent Representative of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to the US Robert Avetisyan, and coalition partner at In Defense of Christians William Roberts. Rev. Sarkis Aktavoukian, pastor of Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda, MD, delivered the invocation.



## COMMUNITY NEWS

# An Elegant Capstone to a Celebration of 125 Years

NEW YORK — In a glittering evening of celebration, the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America marked the 125th Anniversary of the Armenian Church's "Diocese of America" in memorable fashion at the New York Botanical Garden.

The gala banquet on Saturday, April 6, was the capstone to a yearlong celebration of the 125th Anniversary milestone, which included a rich variety of liturgical, cultural, and charitable events. Guests from around the Diocese enjoyed the beauty of the setting, with its magnificent floral exhibits, and the festive atmosphere that combined respect for the honored past with hopeful optimism for the future.

Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan presided over the evening, and addressed the large gathering at its close. Attendees at the sold-out evening included a large proportion of younger members of the Armenian Church community — and indeed many aspects of the gala highlighted the gifts and promise of the rising generation of Armenian Americans.

This was especially evident in the Masters of Ceremonies for the evening's program, Aram Sethian and Kristina Ayanian.



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan

Aram Sethian, an investment analyst at One68 Global Capital, proved a witty and engaging host, offering thoughtful observations of Armenian community life.

Kristina Ayanian — pioneering host of Nasdaq's "Live from MarketSite" series — employed her talent as an interviewer of top business figures to elicit spontaneous, heartfelt testimonials from individual banquet guests.

Both MCs kept the program moving at a brisk pace, through remarks, musical interludes, and a video presentation.

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian, the Diocesan Legate and Ecumenical Director, delivered an invocation to bless the people gath-



Keynote speaker Peter Balakian spoke on the enduring powers of creative and spiritual energy that have allowed Armenians to overcome struggles, connect with each other, and build throughout their history. (Photo by Diran Jebejian)

ered, and the souls of those who built faith communities in locales across the Diocese over the past 125 years.

Bryan and Maria Stepanian, the co-chairs of the 125th Anniversary Year, offered a warm-hearted toast to the Armenian Church in America and its inspirational figures of the past, present, and future. They extolled Bishop Mesrop for the encouragement and trust he placed in them throughout the year, and graciously thanked the attendees, the many committee volunteers, and the co-chairs of the gala banquet, Karen Nargizian and Nancy Zoraian.

Diocesan Council chair Richard Papalian spoke about the legacy of building that has characterized the history of the Diocese, culminating in the ambitious project to restore St. Vartan Cathedral, which is going on currently.

## Bedrock of the Armenian Story

The proceedings were punctuated by exciting performances by Andre, the popular singer from Armenia, who thrilled the crowd with his remarkable vocal ability. At times, as he wove energetically among the tables in the banquet hall, listeners could not resist rising to dance along with Andre's uplifting melodies.

Keynote speaker Peter Balakian — author of *Black Dog of Fate* and *The Burning Tigris*, and a world-renowned advocate for the Armenian cause — gave a wide-ranging talk on the enduring powers of creative and spiritual energy that have allowed Armenians to overcome struggles, connect with each other, and build throughout their history.

"Few ethnic groups can affirm a continuous history that extends across millennia," Balakian said. "But Armenians can. And the

church has been the bedrock of our story."

With a poet's eye for detail and mastery of expression, he testified to the wonder he felt standing among ancient Armenian holy places, and reflected on the unique meaning of the Cross of Christ in Armenian spirituality. Peter Balakian also referred warmly to his experience growing up in the Diocese, and later collaborating with its clergy and lay leaders.

A deeply touching video presentation, titled "Letter from Home," brought the words and blessings of the Catholicos who first established the Diocese of America in 1898 — the great Khrimian Hayrig — back to life for the modern descendants of the founding generation of faithful. The video combined historic film footage from the past with Khrimian Hayrig's inspirational,

## Embodiment of a Dream

Parsamyan concluded the gala with his remarks and blessing, expressing thanks to all the program participants. The Primate paid special tribute to Bryan and Maria Stepanian, for leading the entire anniversary celebration. "A year ago, I approached them with the request to serve as co-chairs," he said. "I knew it would be a major undertaking, and demanding on their time. But they were so generous in accepting, and poured all of their energy and creativity into the effort. They wanted to honor the past; but they were also determined to aim high in realizing what this celebration could be. And working with a team of devoted people, their vision became a reality."

He also offered gratitude to the attendees, and the faithful parish communities they represent. "You are the heart and soul of our Diocese," he said, "the people who bring the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ to life in our local communities. And I give thanks for you all."

Finally, the bishop reflected on the meaning the Diocese has held in his own ministry. "From my earliest days," he said, "as I have strived to answer God's call in my life, I have envisioned a church that honors the past, but also embraces the future with courage and hope. Here in America, I have seen the embodiment of that dream for our church. And I am blessed to be a part of it, among all of you."

Earlier events during the 125th anniversary year included an Inaugural Worship Service (on July 2, 2023), Bishop Mesrop's Return Badarak (October 14, 2023), An Ecumenical Prayer for Christian Unity (January 25, 2024), the splendid Candlelight Concert in the Cathedral (January 13,



The gala banquet on Saturday, April 6, was the capstone to a yearlong celebration of the 125th Anniversary milestone. Picture (l to r): Gala Masters of Ceremonies Aram Sethian and Kristina Ayanian; 125th Anniversary Year co-chairs Maria and Bryan Stepanian; Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan; Diocesan Legate Archbishop Vicken Aykazian; Diocesan Council chair Richard Papalian and Dawn Papalian. (Photo by Diran Jebejian)

prophetic message to the fledgling Armenian American community of 125 years ago. The final words in the video came from Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop, who promised that the proud history of the Diocese is "only the beginning" of the Armenian story on these shores.

Along with the video, gala guests received a finely-designed commemorative booklet, which included congratulatory letters, recognition of generous donors to the 125th anniversary celebration, and an illustrated timeline of events that shaped the Armenian Church in America over the past century and a quarter. Both the video and the booklet were produced by Christopher Zakian, Artur Petrosyan and Karine Abalyan.

2024), and an uplifting Children's Day at St. Vartan Cathedral (February 3, 2024). While centered around the New York region and St. Vartan Cathedral, all of these events drew participants from the far reaches of the Diocese.

A special ongoing project titled "125 Acts of Kindness" inspired charitable outreach at local parishes across the Diocese.

The Gala Banquet was the culminating event of the celebratory year. Banquet co-chairs Karen Toufayan Nargizian and Nancy Zoraian led a committee that included Adi Abdo, Suzanne Akian, Nadine Ariyan, Rosette Arslanian, Sonya Bekarian, Alysia Keleshian Bonomo, Kristine Toufayan Casali, Maral Jebejian, Seta Paskalian Kantardjian and Meline Toufayan.



The 125th Anniversary Gala was punctuated by exciting performances by Andre, the popular singer from Armenia, who thrilled the crowd with his remarkable vocal ability. (Photo by Diran Jebejian)





COMMUNITY NEWS

# Easter Services at St. Vartan Cathedral

EASTER, from page 5

Following the Holy Eucharist, Bishop Mesrop delivered his Easter Sunday homily with passion and fervor to inspire all who listened.

“We all stand as witnesses to the Glory of Our Lord’s Resurrection,” he began, “for in His mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.”

Citing the words of the Apostle Peter, one of the first to witness the resurrection of Christ with his own eyes, Srpazan emphasized that Christ’s Resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. “It’s a beacon that illuminates life in the darkest of times, and is the divine assurance that there is always

is alive and at work in each of us every day.”

### Doves Take Flight on the Plaza

At the conclusion of the service, a procession of clergy and the faithful exited the cathedral to gather outside on the plaza for the “Release of Doves” ceremony, symbolizing Christ’s sending out his apostles into the world to preach the gospel. The special ceremony, a beloved, decades-long Easter tradition at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral, was restored last year after being suspended during the pandemic.

The godparents of this year’s ceremony were Alyssa Keleshian and her family members, parishioners of St. Gregory the Enlightener Church in White Plains, NY.

From the plaza, extensive scaffolding surrounding the cathedral was visible, part of a major restoration project of the structure’s exterior and interior. The work will repair and refurbish the considerable damage that time and the elements have inflicted upon our Mother Cathedral for nearly 60 years.

The Easter Sunday service marked two of the Armenian Church’s days of note: the culmination of Holy Week, the sacred commemoration of the events leading to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the beginning of Eastertide, the 50-day period known as Heenoonk in Armenian,

that lasts from Easter to Pentecost.

Holy Week services took place at the cathedral in the days prior to Easter Sunday, with Bishop Mesrop presiding over the Holy Thursday “Vodunluva” (Washing of Feet) ceremony.

As in previous years, the viewing audience for St. Vartan Cathedral’s Easter Sunday liturgy included thousands of people from across the Diocese and around the world, sharing in the service as it was broadcast over the internet. The small, dedicated production team included Yervant Keshishian, who directed the program, cameraman Mano Baghjajian, and host and narrator Christopher Zakian.



Worshippers receive Holy Communion. (Photo by Harout Barsoumian)

the promise of renewal and redemption, no matter what we face in life,” he said.

Bishop Mesrop further expounded on Peter’s words by pointing out that they spoke to the very heart of the Easter message. “Through the resurrection, Our Lord, Jesus Christ not only defeated death, He opened the door for us to experience a relationship with our Heavenly Father. God saw us in our struggle, our pain and our brokenness, and He said: ‘You are My creation. I love you and will never abandon you.’”

Parsamyan added: “We all see how hard life can be and we face trials that will shake our faith. Yet, the incredible message of Easter remains: the same power that raised Jesus



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## COMMUNITY NEWS



# 109<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Armenian Genocide

## Massachusetts State House Commemoration

STATE HOUSE, from page 1

and Social Action Cindy Rowe, American Jewish Committee New England Regional Director Robert Leikind, the Grand Commander of the Knights of Vartan Hunan Arshakian and members of his executive, and the Director of the National Cinema Center of Armenia Shushanik Mirzakhanyan. State Reps. Priscilla Sousa and Carmine Gentile were also present, along with the Belmont, Mass., Select Board Chair Roy Epstein and Vice Chair Elizabeth Dionne.

After mentioning the new Massachusetts genocide education law, Rep. Kate Lipper-Garabedian of the 32nd Middlesex District presented the proclamation from Gov. Maura Healey declaring April 24, 2024 Armenian Genocide Commemoration Day in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

State Sen. Will Brownsberger of the Suffolk and Middlesex District presented a joint resolution of the Massachusetts House and Senate commending 109-year-old Mary Vartanian, one of the last surviving Armenians who lived through the years of the Armenian Genocide, for her decades-long contributions to the Armenian-American community. Born in Aintab, she turns 110 this August. (See the October 2022 *Mirror-Spectator* article about her, interviewed when she was 108.)

Vartanian stood up to acknowledge the standing ovation of the audience. She had been accompanied from her home at the Armenian Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Jamaica Plain to the State House by a special police escort.

Rep. Brownsberger then presented another joint resolution recognizing the work of the Armenian Tree Project, soon to celebrate its 30th anniversary of efforts to help



The Pledge of Allegiance (photo David Medzorian)

the environment, which has planted over eight million trees in Armenia. Founder Carolyn Mugar and Executive Director Jeanmarie Papelian were present to accept the commendation.

Muradian introduced Cultural Advisor to the Embassy of Armenia to the United States Vicki Shoghag Hovanessian, who read a brief statement of Amb. Lilit Makunts about the significance of the Armenian Genocide as the first documented modern-day attempt to exterminate a people and the importance of official US recognition by President Joe Biden in 2021 of this tragic event for combatting its denial — as well as for relieving the US of a major burden on its conscience.

Representative Rogers introduced the niece of the late Speaker George Keveryan (1931-2009), Lisann Dillon, who in turn presented the George Keveryan Public Service Scholarship recipients. Keveryan had established the annual commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in the State House in 1985. He had served as speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1985



Rep. Dave Rogers at the podium (photo Ken Martin)

to 1991. The scholarship annually rewards one student selected by Everett High School and one student of Armenian background selected by the Armenian Students' Association (ASA). Tina Kurkjian, executive assistant of the ASA, appeared on behalf of the latter scholarship recipient, doctoral student Armine Poghosyan at Virginia Tech.

Rep. Lipper-Gar-



Rep. Kate Lipper-Garabedian holds up Gov. Maura Healey's proclamation (photo Jirair Hovsepian)



Master of ceremonies Rep. Dave Muradian (photo David Medzorian)

abedian introduced keynote speaker Judge Wolohojian of the Massachusetts Appeals Court, who would shortly be sworn into her new position on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. She will be the first person of Armenian heritage to ever sit on that court and the first woman of Armenian heritage to ever sit on any US state supreme court.

Wolohojian spoke about how Armenians largely remained outside of the political power structures of the empires in which they lived in the early modern era and gave the example of her Armenian ancestors who fell victim to genocide. In fact, her mother's grandfather was one of the Armenian intellectuals and leaders rounded up in Constantinople on April 24, 1915.

She stressed that descendants of genocide survivors have a particular obligation to be in public service and to promote and protect the rule of law. Their experiences can

*continued on next page*



Judge Gabrielle Wolohojian (photo Ken Martin)



Cultural Advisor to the Embassy of Armenia to the United States Vicki Shoghag Hovanessian shakes hands with Rep. Will Brownsberger (photo David Medzorian)



Procession of Armenian priests leaving the State House with scouts on both sides (photo Jirair Hovsepian)





COMMUNITY NEWS

from previous page

give them special insight into its value and the tragic consequences of its absence. She observed that Armenians like her great-grandfather had no recourse to law against the arbitrary exercise of power.

Wolohojian called on more Armenian-American lawyers to become judges. In 2007 when she was appointed to the bench, there was only one other Armenian-American active judge in her home state, whereas today there are six, but she said that Armenians can do better.

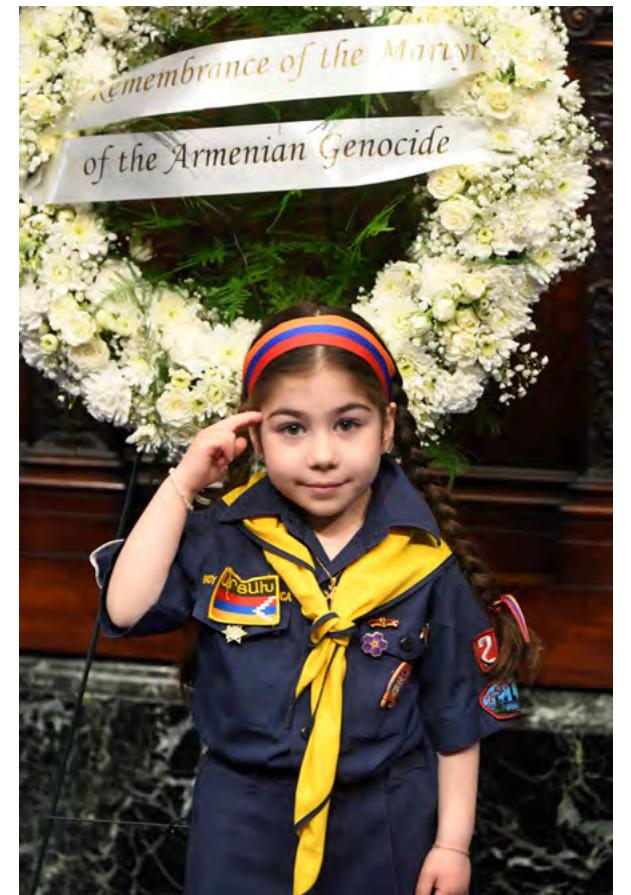
Sen. Brownsberger introduced the musical interlude. A young student from Lexington, Mass., Victoria Stepanyan, who trains with Victoria Avetisyan, sang two moving Armenian-language songs, *Longing for the Mountain Breeze* and *Armenia*.

Muradian offered the closing remarks, calling for justice not just for the 1915 Genocide, which he called a still-bleeding wound, but also for the heinous crimes that have taken place in Artsakh, in the hopes that the repetition of

such crimes can be prevented in the future.

After the Armenian clergy present conducted a special order of intercessory prayer to conclude the formal event, the audience was treated to an informal reception in the Great Hall of Flags of the State House that was catered by Jana Grill and Bakery of Watertown. Buses were provided by the Knights of Vartan Ararat Lodge No. 1 to facilitate travel to and from the State House.

The commemoration this year received coverage by local television stations, including CBS and ABC affiliates,

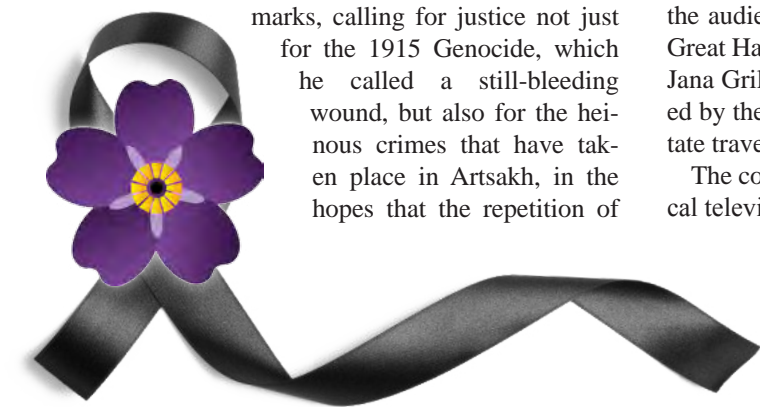


A scout under a wreath in remembrance of the Armenian Genocide (photo Ken Martin)

and the Boston Globe and Boston Herald newspapers, with Mary Vartanian a primary focus of media attention.



109-year-old Mary Vartanian is photographed with state and Boston police after the formal event (photo David Medzorian)



## Armenian Heritage Park Commemoration

PARK, from page 1

A substantial audience of Armenians and friends from throughout New England gathered at the Park near the Genocide monument as master of ceremonies Hagop Toghramadjian introduced speakers, clergy, vocalists, who express a message of continued survival and positivity for the Armenian world.

A color guard of marching Homenetmen Scouts brought the meeting to order followed by prayers from the Boston area



Members of the clergy from Armenian churches in the greater Boston area were present. (Ken Martin photo)

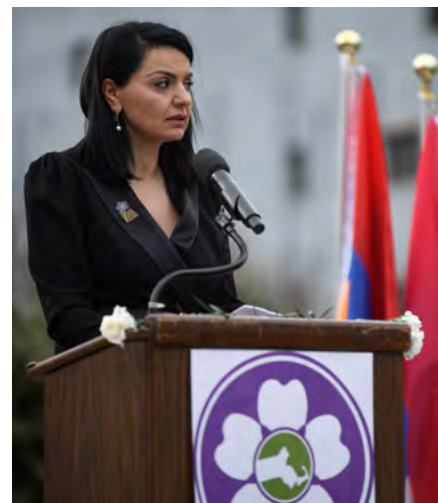
main active and positive about the future and work for a brighter future despite all that is happening in the world lately and in and around Armenia.

Vocalist Angelina Nazarian, a student at Berklee School of Music, and a former contestant on NBC's competition show, "The Voice," captured the audience's attention singing in Armenian and English including heartfelt renditions of *Sareri Hovin Mernem* and *Yesterday* by Charles Aznavour.

Special guest and keynote speaker was Siranush Sargsyan, a historian and journalist who was living and reporting from the scene in Stepanakert and Artsakh during the September 2023 attack by Azerbaijan, escaping in the caravan of vehicles through the mountains to Armenia.

Sargsyan holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from Artsakh State University and a Master's Degree in Political Science from the Public Administration Academy in Yerevan, Armenia, and is currently a Tavitian Scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Sargsyan addressed the audience as descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and introduced herself

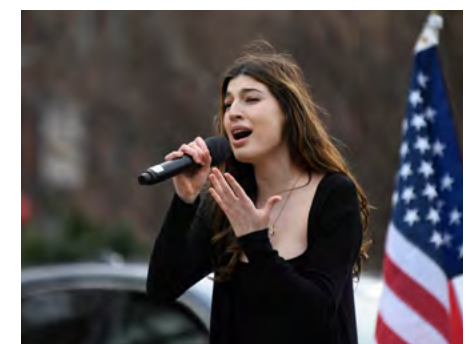


Keynote speaker Siranush Sargsyan (Ken Martin photo)

as a survivor of yet another Armenian Genocide, this time in the ancient Armenian land of Artsakh, commemorating the atrocities committed against their compatriots over a century ago. She told the people that "the Genocide left unprevented, inadequately condemned, and devoid of reparations, has led to further massacres and ethnic cleansing of our indigenous Armenian populations." She said because

of this the Armenian Genocide cycle had not been broken in Artsakh, her birthplace. "The target and the goal remain the same – to destroy, eliminate, and ethnically cleanse us as a nation."

Sargsyan said that over her recent years as a journalist she has shared the stories of the forgotten people of Artsakh, "who were besieged, faced starvation, and lived through terror." She told heart rending stories including of a 9-year-old



Singer Angelina Nazarian (Ken Martin photo)

boy, Areg, from Horatagh village, who on September 19, 2023, when Azerbaijan attacked, asked his mother while the sound of bombs exploding was heard if he would still be alive after the war. Sargsyan said he was killed a few minutes later with his grandmother.

"The triangle of our nation — Armenia, Diaspora, and Artsakh — has been shattered," Sargsyan said. "With Artsakh lost and Armenia's future in jeopardy, the Diaspora, represented by you, becomes the heart of Armenia and the people of Artsakh in turn, we are the essence of the Diaspora."

She still has hope and strength that, "We, the people of Artsakh, will endure, and we must secure the right to return to our homeland with a guarantee of safety. That together Armenians are capable of enduring and more so thriving to ensure the future generations of our nation is stronger and more resilient."

Nazarian closed the commemoration with an unforgettable performance of *Rise Up*.



Master of Ceremonies Hagop Toghramadjian (Ken Martin photo)

clergy. The Meghedi Ensemble sang the national anthems of the United States and the Republic of Armenia.

An integral portion of the event was dedicated to the ethnic cleansing — called by many the second genocide of the Armenians — of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) by Azerbaijani military forces last September, and the hardships of those who fled to Armenia.

Peter Koutoujian, Sheriff of Middlesex County, spoke warmly about the people of Artsakh and the time he shared with them during his visit to the capital, Stepanakert. Koutoujian said that now was not the time to feel down, but that everyone must re-





COMMUNITY NEWS

# Promise Institute Hosts Symposium Dedicated to the Late Richard Hovannisian

SYMPOSIUM, from page 5

Hovannisian’s grandsons, noted that his grandfather’s history, “in between” that of his Genocide-survivor parents and his children who saw realization of the dream of an independent Armenia, was, in fact, the most dramatic history of them all. “All alone, out of context, and without precedent...he decides to stand against the tides of history, and believed that [through his scholarly efforts and advocacy] he could reverse the tides of history, inventing the field of Armenian History [in the U.S.]”

Later in the program, Ani Hovannisian Kevorkian shared, “I am overcome with emotion, and love, and gratitude to the Promise Armenian Institute, to Papa, and to you because I realize that he is in all of you and all of us. And I know that Papa is smiling, very humbly and beautifully ... not because this is about him and not because we are applauding all that he has done, but because we are carrying on what he gave us.”

The event was enhanced by a musical performance of historic Western Armenian pieces by renowned folk singer Hasmik Harutyunyan, *kamancha* player Vardan Baghdasaryan, and UCLA graduate student and *duduk* player Armen Adamian.

Written tributes to Hovannisian were also sent by UCLA Chancellor Gene Block, UCLA’s Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Darnell Hunt, and by Cindy Fan, UCLA’s vice provost for International Studies and Global Engagement. In addition, a pre-recorded video tribute was offered by Dr. Eric Esraïlian, chief of the Vatche and Tamar Manoukian Division of Digestive Diseases at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and benefactor of the Promise Armenian Institute.

Among the many heartfelt reflections shared by former students, panelist and Glendale city Councilmember Ardy Kassakian noted, “What Professor Hovannisian taught me besides our people’s history was how to be unapologetically Armenian and how to be excellent in your pursuit... we were fortunate to have Richard in all our lives, so we have a roadmap to follow and a standard that was set, not just as it pertains to academia but in how to be an



Participants of the Promise Armenian Institute Symposium dedicated to the late Prof. Richard Hovannisian

Armenian, an unapologetic pioneer.”

In closing remarks, one of Hovannisian’s sons, attorney Armen Hovannisian, reflected, “At the same time that he documented the past, his greatest success was in ensuring the prosperity and the progress of each of you here today and so many who are not here today... he is going to be known for not only memorializing what brought us here but also allowing us to have more clarity and confidence as to where we will be going.”

More than 250 people were in attendance at the Symposium, including former students and distinguished colleagues of Professor Hovannisian, Hovannisian family members and friends, UCLA students, faculty and staff, and members of the larger Southern California Armenian-American community.

“Remembering Professor Richard G. Hovannisian:

Looking Back, Moving Forward“ is now available for post-event viewing on the Promise Armenian Institute YouTube Channel.

This symposium was co-sponsored by the UCLA Richard Hovannisian Endowed Chair in Modern Armenian History, the UCLA Narekatsi Chair in Armenian Studies, the UCLA Armenian Music Program, the Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA School of Law, the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies, the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR), the Society for Armenian Studies, the UC Irvine Center for Armenian Studies, the CSU Fresno Armenian Studies Program, the USC Institute of Armenian Studies, the Ararat-Eskijian Museum and the USC Shoah Foundation.



## Tekeyan Cultural Association Sponsor a Teacher in Armenia

**Since its inception in 2001, the Tekeyan Cultural Association (TCA) Sponsor a Teacher Program has raised 838,700 dollars and reached out to 7,386 teachers and school staff in Armenia and Artsakh. This year the program continues to support school teachers in Tekeyan Schools in Armenia, as well as teachers who had to flee Artsakh but continue teaching in Armenia’s schools, as they educate new generations of children, our future leaders.**

**YES, I would like to sponsor TCA school teacher(s) in Armenia, as well as teachers who fled Artsakh and continue teaching in Armenia schools, in order to continue helping them work and educate the children, our future leaders. I would like to have the sponsored teacher/s’ name(s) and address(es).**

\$240    \$480    \$700    other \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

**Make check payable to: Tekeyan Cultural Association**  
**Memo: Sponsor a Teacher**  
**Mail your check to:**  
**TCA Sponsor a Teacher**  
**5326 Val Verde, Houston, TX 77056**

**Your donation is tax deductible.**





# Arts & Culture

## ‘Mercedes and Zaruhi’ Come to the Armenian Cultural Foundation

ARLINGTON, Mass. — Yearning for their homeland lost to the Soviet takeover of the Republic of Armenia on November 29, 1920, drove close to a 100,000 Armenians scattered throughout the world, mainly from the Middle East and Europe, to respond to the call of Soviet Armenian authorities in 1946, to repatriate their ancestral homeland. This historic scheme, launched about 80 years ago (1946-1949) known as the Great Repatriation (Mets Hayrenadardzut’iun) or simply *nergaght* (in-migration) proved to be a major disappointment and disillusionment resulting in demoralized masses, broken families, devastation and loss of innocent lives.

On Sunday, April 28, at 4 p.m., the Armenian Cultural Foundation will present “Mercedes and Zaruhi,” a solo play by Nora Armani, based on a story written by playwright Anush Aslibekyan. Based on true events, “Mercedes and Zaruhi” is the story of two Armenian sisters from Greece, whose decisions — Mercedes’ to stay in Greece and Zaruhi’s to repatriate to her beloved Armenia — shaped their destinies.

The program is co-sponsored by the Tekeyan Cultural Association, the Armenian International Women’s Association and the Armenian Women’s Welfare Association.

Mercedes and Zaruhi explores the theme of repatriation to Soviet Armenia from the late 1940s to the early 1990s through a series of letters exchanged between two sisters. Mercedes’ letters are shared through voiceover in Armenian, although she never appears on stage. The play highlights the social, political and cultural distance and differences separating the two siblings as well as heart-breaking and disillusionment, which proved not to be unique to Zaruhi, but tens and thousands of repatriates.

Aslibekyan first created the story in 2012 and before turning it into a full play and subsequently a monologue. Originally, a full multi-actor play was presented in Armenia by Nora Armani, in the Armenian original. Subsequently, the English language translation was provided by Nora Armani. “This is a wonderful opportunity to bring the work of Anush Aslibekyan to an English-speaking audience,” Armani stated. “My work entailed translating the solo play and adapting it by adding some material, to make it clearer to a non-initiated, non-Armenian audience.” Armani also recorded her own voice in Western Armenian in the recorded segments meant to be Mercedes.

Reflecting on the play, Marvin Carlson, Distinguished Professor of Theatre and Performance at the City University of New York praised Armani’s performance and the monodrama as “... [Nora Armani] tells a great story--suspenseful, warm, human, and funny, with great characters, and [her] depiction of the slowly aging protagonist was deeply moving; especially the final scene. A memorable evening in the theatre.”

This play is currently on the see MERCEDES, page 17



An Armenian stamp honoring Sergei Parajanov

## Sergei Parajanov at 100 *The Triumph of Imagination and Beauty*

By Haykaram Nahapetyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

This year marks the 100th anniversary of one of the most respected film directors in the world, Sergei Parajanov. His art is highly visual, and his movies resemble colorful paintings brought to life. Prominent Italian critic Ugo Casiraghi created a new term in the Italian language to describe Parajanov’s professional title: *vizzionario* instead of a movie director. The French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard noted, “In the temple of cinema, there are images, light, and reality. Sergei Parajanov was the master of that temple.”

In cinema, Parajanov became the most internationally acclaimed Armenian name, as Aram Khachaturian was in the field of music and Aivazovski in painting.

An ethnic Armenian, Sergei Parajanov was born in 1924 in Tiflis (modern Tbilisi), then the capital of the Georgian Soviet Republic, to father Iosif (Hovsep) Parajanov, and mother Siranush Bezhanova. Hovsep was buying and selling antique merchandise.

Los Angeles-based Armenian moviemaker Aleksander Atanesian provided some insights about Parajanov. Before coming to the United States, Atanesian lived in Georgia and Armenia, worked with Parajanov on many projects, and helped him in his household. “He was very educated. He could cite extensive passages from books he had read,” Atanesian noted in a recent Zoom-based interview.

When Parajanov was a schoolboy, Joseph Stalin’s top police officer, Lavrenti Beria, wanted his son Sergo to be friends with him, as Parajanov’s talents were apparent at a very young age: he sang songs and drew paintings from early childhood. After graduating from school, Parajanov worked at a toy factory. During World War II, Parajanov performed for wounded soldiers at hospitals.

In October of 1948, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police (led by Lavrenti Beria by this time), arrested Georgian artists for allegedly backtracking from existing ideological principles. Parajanov was one of the persecuted artists, although officially, he was charged with homosexuality. He was convicted to five years in prison but was released soon after.

see PARAJANOV, page 16



Alexander Atanesian at left, with Sergei Parajanov

## Fresh Lavash And Armenian Delights at Gyumri in Watertown

By Cristopher Patvakian

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

WATERTOWN — On the corner of Waverly Avenue and Orchard Street, Hasmik Avetisyan and Hovhannes Melikyan are bringing the sights, sounds and smells of Gyumri to Watertown. The couple recently opened Gyumri Bakery, which specializes in providing fresh lavash and a range of Armenian products straight from the homeland.

Avetisyan and Melikyan, who are both originally from Gyumri, Armenia, had the idea to start the business in 2019, since there were limited options for buying fresh lavash in Massachusetts. When they baked lavash with their own recipe in 2020 and shared it with their friends and family, they received an overwhelmingly positive reaction. That was when the couple decided they would try to open their own store to serve the community on a larger scale. The official opening of Gyumri Bakery was



Hasmik Avetisyan and Hovhannes Melikyan, owners of Gyumri Bakery.

in September 2023, and almost half a year later, they are slowly growing into a local staple.

Interestingly, their journey into entrepreneurship was not fueled by a background in baking or business. “We had no prior experience... and couldn’t imagine what we were getting into,” Avetisyan admitted. “My husband just wanted to get a place within the Armenian community and try to see if it would work. And so far, the response has been great.”

Their mission at the outset was clear — to provide fresh, delicious Armenian products to the local community. Hasmik explained that they use a family recipe taken from her grandmother to prepare the lavash, and the special oven used in the bakery is actually imported from Armenia. “Bringing the machinery was probably one of the biggest challenges we had, but it helps us make sure that the lavash is authentic in its taste

see LAVASH, page 14





ARTS & CULTURE

# Fresh Lavash and Armenian Delights at Gyumri Bakery

LAVASH, from page 13 and production... just like how you'd taste it in Armenia," Melikyan explained.

Beyond the oven, getting the space renovated to support both a kitchen and store took many years to achieve, as the former business layout of their location needed to be completely changed and renovated. But for them, putting their location in Watertown was very important, and worth the investment to be at the center of the Armenian community. In addition to selling bread, they also donate and support local Armenian organizations, like the Armenian churches in Watertown and the Greater Boston Area.

Gyumri Bakery's impact has grown beyond Massachusetts, as they've started drawing in customers from Armenian communities in neighboring states. Though their initial idea was just to provide Watertown and its surrounding cities, word of mouth has helped spread their influence. The store itself does not ship the bread or their products, but has been selling their lavash to families who come from all across New England and the Northeast. The customers are willing to make the trek just to have freshly baked Armenian goods, which are often not as readily available outside of Massachusetts. As of right now, they do not provide bread to other stores, but may consider it if demand arises.

After starting with lavash, the couple expanded their offerings to include a vari-



Joseph Chavushyan and Ani Saghyan enjoying a lavash sample hot out of the oven

ety of Armenian products sourced directly from the country. This includes jams, juices, compotes, baked goods, teas, and oth-

er forms of fruit and vegetable preserves. As for future additions to their offerings, Avetisyan says, "We're working on providing a wider variety of baked goods. We will add two types of Armenian-style bread, *matnakash* and *pouri*, and are planning to provide sweets."

During the mornings and early afternoons, the aroma of the freshly baked, in-house lavash fills the store, and the decor such as posters and figurines of "Frunzik" Mher Mkrtychyan, transport customers thousands of miles away to northern Ar-

menia. If you understand Armenian, you'll also hear Hasmik and Hovhannes speaking with the Gyumri dialect.

With each piece of lavash, classic Gyumri joke and decoration from their city, Hasmik and Hovhannes strive to be the bridge between Gyumri and Watertown. For them Gyumri Bakery represents not just a business, but a labor of love and a commitment to preserving their culture.

To learn more about Gyumri Bakery, check out their website: <https://www.gyumriarmenianbakery.com/>



A fresh piece of dough makes its way on the conveyor belt of the lavash oven imported from Armenia



A fully baked lavash is removed from the conveyor belt of the lavash oven imported from Armenia

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HAIG OURISHIAN

ARTHUR ABOUSEFIAN





## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Recipe Corner



by Christine  
Vartanian Datian



## Mrs. Bezjian's Swiss Chard and Tahini Bureks - Armenian Turnovers

LOS ANGELES - Celebrated chef and author Alice Bezjian was born in 1913 in Cairo, Egypt of Armenian parents. Her grandparents left Turkey before the Armenian Genocide. The family moved to Syria before finally settling down in Beirut. Alice came from generations of gifted cooks and culinary experts. At an early age, she was introduced to the joy of food and cooking by her maternal grandfather. Her grandfather often traveled the world at a time when traveling was neither easy nor fashionable. He then returned home with new recipes, and cooked large dinners for his family. He said cooking was exciting, but the greatest pleasure was sharing one's new and creative dishes with an appreciative family and friends.

Alice attended Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, and studied with international culinary teachers in Beirut, and later in Beverly Hills. In 1964, Alice and her family moved to Los Angeles where she, her husband Hagop, and their son Jack created Bezjian's Grocery and Bakery near Vermont on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood.

"The market was successful and eventually became a landmark for gourmet cooks, chefs, and Middle Eastern food lovers throughout Southern California. Bezjian's Grocery and Bakery was the first Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Persian, and especially Indian supermarket of its kind in Los Angeles," says Jack. Customers came from great distances to purchase specialty foods, spices, and herbs, and to congregate, share knowledge, exchange recipes, and to visit with Alice and her family. One customer summed it up at the time by saying "If It's Bezjian's, You Know It's Good!"



Their son Jack holds a tray of his family's "homemade" lahmajun and fresh matnakash (leavened traditional Armenian bread) that was made at the bakery. There is also Persian cracker bread (for "breaking bread"), vinyl records from the bakery's extensive ethnic music section, and various cookbooks.

In the 1970s photo above, Hagop Bezjian holds a tray of his famous baklava made with ghee (clarified butter prepared at their bakery) and real sugar, not corn syrup. Alice is shown serving her celebrated Armenian coffee that the couple introduced to Los Angeles. It was a special blend of Armenian coffee from Central America that the Bezjians had prepared to their specific requirements. It came in three blends that became known as B1, B2, and B3 (B standing for Bezjians). This coffee is the one sold in most Armenian markets today, known as the best for "Armenian Coffee" (known as Middle Eastern light, medium and dark roast).

"Mrs. Bezjian and her family brought years of experience and background in the Middle Eastern food business, and enough capital to start over," said the Armenian International Magazine in 1993. "The Bezjian Grocery sold retail goods to the public, wholesale markets, had a bakery, and did very well."\* Her family says that Alice was always at her store, graciously and proudly dispensing recipe tips and culinary expertise with her friends and appreciative customers. Sunset Magazine and New West wrote stories about the grocery store, and her recipes were published in several magazines. Jack remembers his mother meeting with her old customers and exchanging stories and Armenian recipes before she passed away in 2003.

Since 1966, Jack has been baking bread and owns Bejian Bakery (home of the Los Angeles sourdough) in Santa Monica. He has been one of the most influential vendors at the famed Santa Monica Farmers Market for many years. His acclaimed gourmet wild yeast breads have been sold for almost 55 years at the bakery, and for over 32 years at Southern California farmers markets (including Pasadena and Hollywood). His ground breaking baking techniques and nutritional discoveries have made his sourdough products an essential part of the community. Jack is a wellspring of information about the history and benefits of true, slowly-raised, fermented, wild yeast sourdough. He also took most of the photos in his mother's bestselling cookbook, and the entire family prepared and tested each recipe over a four-year period before the cookbook was published.

Alice Bezjian has long since elevated Middle Eastern cooking to a level of haute cuisine, all the while adapting her easy to follow recipes to the contemporary kitchen. This recipe is featured in her bestselling *The Complete Armenian Cookbook: Including Favorite International Recipes*, originally published in 1983. Beurek is a staple in many Armenian households, and is considered the Armenian version of the Greek tiropita and spanakopita. In Armenia, byorek (բյորեկ) or borek (բորեկ) consists of dough, or filo dough, folded into triangles and often stuffed with spinach (or other vegetable), onions and feta cheese or ground beef. It is from a family of pastries or pies also found in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia. Her Swiss chard turnovers are versatile; they can be served warm or at room temperature, as a brunch/lunch dish, snack, or part of a large buffet. If you love tahini, you will love this combo: tahini and Swiss chard are a perfect match.

### DOUGH:

- 1 tablespoon active dry yeast
- 1/4 cup warm water (105 degrees to 115 degrees)
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon salt

### Filling:

- 6 cups Swiss chard (or rainbow chard)\*\*
- 4 tablespoons salt (to taste)
- 3 onions, minced
- 1 cup olive oil
- 3/4 cups chopped walnuts
- 1 cup fresh chopped parsley
- 2 ounces tomato paste
- 6 tablespoons lemon juice
- 5 cloves garlic, pressed
- 1 tablespoon fresh chopped mint
- 1 teaspoon hot red pepper
- Salt to taste
- 1/2 pound jar tahini (8 ounces)
- 1 egg, beaten, for giving a shine to the dough (optional)

### PREPARATION:

In a large bowl sprinkle the yeast into the warm water with the sugar and one tablespoon of flour. Let stand for 2 or 3 minutes, then stir to dissolve the yeast completely. Stir in the flour, oil, one cup water and salt until well blended. Knead for about 2 minutes until a smooth and elastic dough is formed. (If you feel the dough is not soft enough, knead a few minutes more adding more oil.) Cover the dough with a towel and let it rise in a warm place for 2 or 3 hours or until doubled in bulk.

Meanwhile, prepare the filling. Wash and slice the green part of the Swiss chard to measure 6 cups. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of the salt. Set aside for 30 minutes. Sprinkle the other 2 tablespoons salt on the onions and set aside for 30 minutes. Rinse the Swiss chard and onions separately with running cold water, drain and squeeze out any remaining moisture with your hands. In a skillet, heat the oil and sauté the onions for 3 or 4 minutes. Remove from heat. Stir in all other filling ingredients, except the tahini. Cool. Add the tahini, mixing well, and taste. Add more pepper and lemon juice, if desired.

Form the dough into 20 small balls. On a lightly floured surface, roll each ball out into a circle about 1/4-inch thick. Spread the filling over half the circle and fold the other half over to form a half moon. Seal the edges either by crimping or pressing with the tines of a fork. Repeat this process with the other balls of dough. Brush with the beaten egg. Place on lightly greased baking sheets. Bake at 350°F for 20 to 25 minutes, or until golden brown.

Yield: 20 beureks



# Sergei Parajanov at 100

PARAJANOV, from page 13

His first films were in line with existing Soviet cinematography's visions and standards. Later, Parajanov himself denounced those movies as "worthless." The big change took place in the early 1960s. In 1962, Russian moviemaker Andrey Tarkovsky released his classic film, "Ivan's Childhood," more commonly known as "My Name Is Ivan," outside the USSR. Tarkovsky was one of the first directors to look at the human cost of war in World War II instead of merely glorifying the combat experience as had been common before. Extensive scenes of Russian nature appeared in his film, making it more visual and less action-based.

As Parajanov acknowledged later, if not for this motion picture by Tarkovsky, there would be no Parajanov in the way we know him. Tarkovsky's impact was tremendous, but Atanesian cautioned me about this: "It was not that Parajanov learned from Tarkovsky how to make movies. Rather, he saw that the existing norms of Soviet cinematography could be disregarded or could be modified profoundly. He understood that change was possible. And he did it, but did it his way."

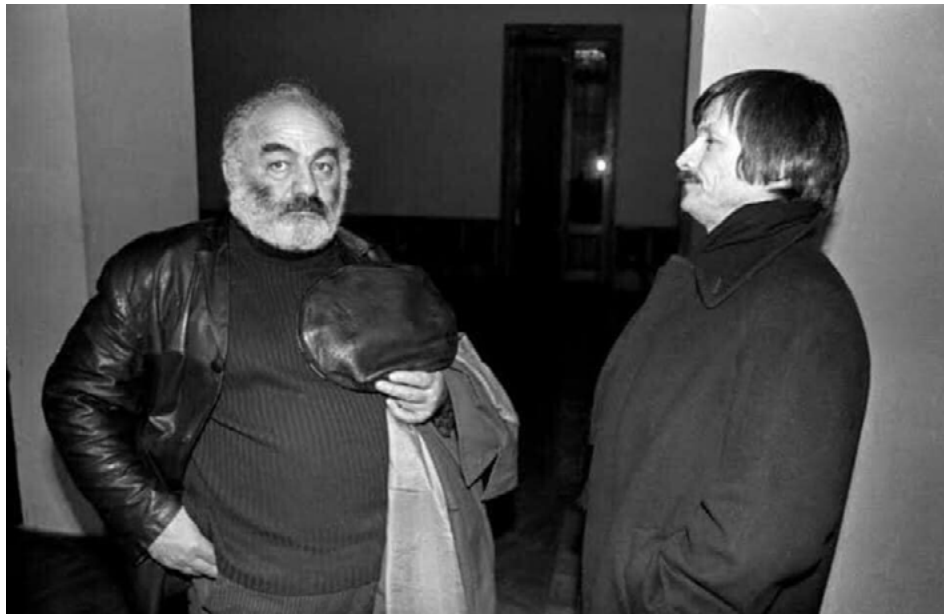
In 1964, Parajanov released "Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors." Also known as "Wild Horses of Fire" in the West, the film made Parajanov both highly recognized internationally and a target for attacks domestically. In 1965, at Argentina's Mar Del Plata International Festival, the film was awarded the special jury prize for best pro-

18th-century poet and bard.

In 1962, Sayat Nova's 250th anniversary was celebrated in Armenia; an avenue was named after him in a central part of Yerevan. Armenfilm studio commissioned a film on Sayat Nova from Parajanov, released in 1969 under two names: "Sayat Nova" and "The Color of Pomegranates." According to the British Film Institute, the film "represents a fine entry point into a world to be luxuriated rather than rationally understood."

In this film, Parajanov gravitated even farther from an ordinary movie-plot that commonly exists in almost any film. "He didn't like plots," remembers Atanesian. In the opening part of the film, a textual disclaimer says: "The film does not attempt to tell the life story of a poet. Rather, the filmmaker tried to create the poet's inner world." "Far from a typical biographical telling, the film recreates Sayat-Nova's inner torments through dreamlike compositions and medieval allegories," noted the British Institute. References to Sayat Nova exist in Madonna's *Bedtime Story*, Juno Reactor's *God is God*, and Lady Gaga's *911*.

In "Sayat Nova" and other films, Parajanov used allegories and symbols to replace scenes that otherwise could contain violence. In "Sayat Nova," an arrow fired from a bow of a Muslim soldier hits a Christian icon that falls. In his later film, "The Legend of Suram Fortress," a massive escape of hundreds of panic-stricken sheep on the slopes of Georgian moun-



Sergei Parajanov, left, with Andrey Tarkovsky (courtesy RadioVan)

duction. It was screened at San Francisco's film festival as well as at New York's Film Festival, where the flyer described it as "an avantgarde extravagant, sumptuous saga in color."

When in 2021, Ukraine's National Cinema Center released the list of the top 100 Ukrainian movies and "Shadows" came on top. Per Parajanov, in the 1960s, the Soviet authorities didn't like that an Armenian producer produced a film on a Ukrainian national topic. When his next movie on the Ukrainian subject, "Kyiv Frescoes," was banned, he moved to Armenia.

His first film on Armenian subject was the motion picture "Children to Komitas," which Parajanov prepared for the United Nations International Committee Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). According to American author James Steffen, the movie focused on the pictures drawn by children and was dedicated to Komitas Vartabed, the famous Armenian priest and musicologist arrested on April 24, 1915. The two other Armenian films of Parajanov bore Georgian-Armenian influence: one told the story of Hakob Hovnatanian, a 19th-century, Tiflis-based artist, and the other one focused on Sayat Nova, the

tains serves as a precursor for an expected clash between soldiers in that area. One of the movie's characters says that war is the greatest of all disasters. Parajanov's philosophy was against violence; therefore, he applied picturesque and visually attractive symbols whenever he needed to include battles in his motion pictures. Parajanov's famous statement, "I will avenge the world with love," summarizes his way of thinking that was against destruction.

Between the 1960s and early 1980s, along with the international recognition, the internal pressure against Parajanov intensified. In 1973, Kyiv's regional court convicted Parajanov to five years of imprisonment for alleged homosexual relations but set him free after four years. French poet Lois Aragon personally asked Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to release the director free. As Parajanov noted later, the fabricated charges against him were so ridiculous that an immigrant Russian artist promised to use the judge's verdict in one of his comedy shows at the Comédie-Française theater in Paris. In 1988, in one of his last interviews with Russian and Armenian reporters in France, he claimed that the help of French, Georgian, and Ar-



Sergei Parajanov holding up a fragment of his father Hovsep Parajanov's photo

menian people made his early release possible.

In 1982 Parajanov was arrested again, though he was set free soon after. As a result of state persecution, Parajanov did not create any new films in the 1970s and early 1980s. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Parajanov's motion pictures were finally returned to Soviet viewers. He was awarded a car and some other compensation. His last film, "Confession," remained unfinished. Shortly before that, as if foreseeing his imminent demise, Parajanov noted that the years spent in prisons shattered his health, and every morning he woke up alive, he was happy.

"However, the years spent in prison were my best years," added Parajanov. I became the priest of the prison. The convicted criminals came to me for confession, and I memorized many stories that could serve as features for a film."

By the late 1980s, Zaven Sargsyan, a friend of Parajanov, got some funds from

the government of Soviet Armenia to buy the artifacts created by Parajanov and began transferring those pieces of art to Armenia. Sargsyan, a former government employee, also convinced the Soviet Armenian leaders to build a house for Parajanov. Overlooking the beautiful Hrazdan gorge in Yerevan, the house was still under construction when Parajanov passed away in 1990. The building became not the house but the museum of Parajanov. Sargsyan was its founder and director.

Sergey Parajanov was buried in the Komitas Pantheon, next to the graves of Aram Khachaturian, William Saroyan, and other notable figures. Atanesian says Sargsyan's role in resettling Sergey Parajanov in Armenia and establishing a museum as it is now cannot be overestimated.

An accompanying video segment at mirrorspectator.com includes an interview with Atanesian, a small segment of the interview with Parajanov, and Tarkovsky's statement about Parajanov.



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Tekeyan Cultural Association  
Metro Los Angeles Chapter

Հայաստան - Միայնակ Բարդ: Դարեր ի վեր անհաղթելի  
Armenia - The Lone Stone: Invincible Through the Ages

Գլխավոր բանախօս, հեղինակ եւ լուսանկարիչ  
Դավիթ Բարամյան

DAVID KARAMIAN

Keynote speaker, author and photographer



ARMENIA - THE LONE STONE



Հայաստան - Միայնակ Բարդ  
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Երեկոյեան ժամը 7:30-ին

ԹՄՄ Պէշկեօթիւրեան սրահին մէջ:

1901 N. Allen Avenue, Altadena, CA 91001

info@tekeyanla.org





## ARTS &amp; 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

**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](mailto: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.

**MAY 4** — CELEBRATE PUBLIC ART! Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston. Welcome at 12:45 p.m. Meet in front of the Abstract Sculpture that annually reconfigures to create a new sculptural shape. Welcome. Theodore Touloukian, FAIA, Boston Society of Architects Board of Directors; Public Art. Marguerite Wynter, Now+There. At 1pm participate in World Labyrinth Day: Walk as One in Peace & Harmony joining all ages in cities, including Gyumri, and towns worldwide. Reception follows. RSVP appreciated [hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org](mailto:hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org)

**MAY 5** — The Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter invites members of the greater community to its Hampartsum Luncheon. Enjoy a special menu and celebrate Armenian traditions. Expect entertainment, raffle, gifts and more. 1.30 p.m., Baikar Building, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown. Use Norseman Avenue side entrance. \$40/adult, \$25/student and free for those 10 and younger. RSVP [bostontca@gmail.com](mailto:bostontca@gmail.com) or call Sossy at 617-281-1647.

**MAY 6** — Monday St. James Men's Club Monthly Dinner & Fellowship. Guest speaker will be Robert Zorian "My Baseball Journey" Founder of "Zorian Bat Company" in 2003. Robert founded and currently serves as Director of the Board for the Weatherford Eagles Hall of fame, and Boston's Inter-city League Baseball Hall of fame. Social Hour [mezza] 6.15 p.m., Dinner 7 p.m., Losh Kebab and Kheyma. \$20. per person. 465 Mount Auburn Street, Watertown.

**MAY 8** — 38th Annual Membership Meeting of the Cambridge-Yerevan Sister City Association (CYSCA) with guest speaker Ani Babaian, Library Curator at NAASR, and Art Researcher and Conservator, speaking on "Identity through Colors: Exploring Armenian Painting." Guest speaker at 6:30 PM, brief annual business meeting at 7:15 p.m., followed by a reception. Free and open to the public. In the Community Room of the Cambridge Public Library, 449 Broadway, Cambridge. Metered parking is available in the garage under the library, accessible from Broadway. To RSVP (requested but not required) or for more info, please email [info@cambridgeyerevan.org](mailto:info@cambridgeyerevan.org).

**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.

**JUNE 9** — Armenian Cultural Foundation: Mirak Chamber Music Series Presents Alan Hovhanness Tribute Concert, 3 p.m., Arlington Town Hall, 730 Mass. Ave., Arlington. Works by Hindemith, Hovhanness, Khachaturian, Tassone. Performers: Wei Zhao, Yelena Beriyeva, Knarik Nerkararian, Jing-Huey Wei, Sylvie Zakarian, Aaron Larget-Caplan, Michael Peipman, Arlington-Belmont Chamber Chorus, The Menotomy Chamber Orchestra. More details to follow.

**JUNE 13** — Under the Strawberry Moon. Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston at 8:15 p.m. Meet & Greet. Chocolate Dipped Strawberries hosted by Ovenbird Cafe. RSVP [hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org](mailto:hello@ArmenianHeritagePark.org)

Armenian Heritage Park ongoing Programs:

**MOVEMENT & WALKING MEDITATION. LABYRINTH WELLNESS WALKS TOGETHER** through October. Tuesdays at 5:30 p.m. Series is offered in collaboration with the Boston Health Commission and The Greenway Conservancy Fitness program. For details, [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**CELEBRATING WHAT UNITES US!** Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway, Boston Each month highlights the country of origin of many living and working in the City of Boston and beyond. Series is offered in collaboration with Age-Friendly Boston. For dates and details, [ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar](http://ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar)

**JUNE 16** — Boston Tekeyan Cultural Association is hosting a Father's Day Bar-B-Q. Sunday, 2 p.m. at the Baikar Building, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown (Use Norseman Street side door). \$40 per person. Khorovadz, pilaf, salad and more. Special raffle. RSVP [bostontca@gmail.com](mailto:bostontca@gmail.com) or call Sossy at 617-281-1647.

**OCTOBER 25-27** — Save the date! Sanctuary consecration of the Armenian Apostolic Church at Hye Pointe. Presided over by Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern). 1280 Boston Road, Haverhill. Details to follow. **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

## NEW YORK

**APRIL 27** — Genocide Prevention, upholding United Nations' Human Rights Declaration, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., Fordham University at Lincoln Center, SL-11. Speakers will include Alison Dobrick, director, William Paterson University Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies; Aida Zilelian-Silak, author; Dr. Ani Kalayjian, president, ATOP Meaningful World; Prof. Takooshian, Fordham University and Ayda Erbal, New York University. Cosponsored by Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) Meaningful world, ACRPC and AGBU.

## RHODE ISLAND

**APRIL 28** — Sunday, the 109th Anniversary of the 1915 Armenian Genocide at the Martyrs' Monument, North Burial Ground, Providence starting at 12:15pm. A service in remembrance of the Holy Martyrs will be held with the participation of clergy and deacons from Sts. Sahag and Mesrob Armenian Church, Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church. Guest speaker will be Alin K. Gregorian, editor of the Armenian Mirror-Spectator. In the event of inclement weather, the commemoration will be held in the sanctuary of the Armenian Evangelical Church located at 180 Oaklawn Avenue in Cranston, Rhode Island.

Send Calendar Items to the Mirror-Spectator: To send calendar items to the Mirror-Spectator, email [alin@mirrorspectator.com](mailto:alin@mirrorspectator.com) or [alin.gregorian@gmail.com](mailto:alin.gregorian@gmail.com). You can also visit our website, [www.mirrorspectator.com](http://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.

## 'Mercedes and Zaruhi' Come to the Armenian Cultural Foundation

MERCEDES, from page 13  
syllabus for Modern Armenian Literature for 10th graders in Armenia and serves as an important educational resource of post-Genocide Armenian history. The production features music composed by Vahan Arzruni.

Armani is an award-winning actor/filmmaker with extensive international stage and screen credits. Recently, she filmed "Absolute Dominion," a feature film by Lexi Alexander, for Netflix. She has appeared Off-Broadway in "Six Characters in Search of an Author" by Luigi Pirandello, "Terrorism" by the Presnyakov Brothers, "Measure for Measure" by Shakespeare (in Cairo), "La Fête Virile" (in Paris) and "Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising" (in London). Her TV and film credits include, "Blacklist," "Redemption," "Golden Boy," "Casualty" (BBC), "The Friends" (EG TV), and

more. For her full bio and filmography, visit [www.noraarmani.net](http://www.noraarmani.net) or [www.IMDb.me/noraarmani](http://www.IMDb.me/noraarmani). Armani was recently awarded the Cinema Achievement Award at the 38th Alexandria Film Festival, Egypt. Her most recent feature film roles are in "The Last Wish" (2023-completed) and "Jukebox" (2024-in post-production); both are Finnish-Spanish co-productions filmed in Spain and directed by Rax Rinnekangas.

An Armenian playwright, dramatist born in Armenia, Aslibekyan has been a member of the Association of Armenian Writers since 2012. She is the author of five books. Many of her works have been translated into different languages, including Polish, German, Greek and Russian. Anush was the founder and senior editor at *Arvest Art Magazine* (2000-2005), head of the literature department at Hamazgayin

State Theatre (2008-2009), and a TV anchor, reporter, commentator at Ararat TV of Public Television Company of Armenia (2008-2010). Since 2006, she has been a researcher at the Art Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and she teaches theatre history, literature and dramaturgy courses. Her plays have been performed in Armenia and internationally in more than 20 festivals, winning awards. Aslibekyan wrote and runs the "Two in Search of an Author" program on Noah's Ark channel, dedicated to contemporary literature and art.

The event is open to the public. Tickets (\$15) will be available for purchase at the door or by contacting the ACF or by email: [armeniancultural.fdn@gmail.com](mailto:armeniancultural.fdn@gmail.com). Seating limited. A reception will follow immediately after the play.



Anush Aslibekyan





An ADL Publication

THE FIRST ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
ARMENIAN WEEKLY IN THE  
UNITED STATES

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The Armenian Mirror-Spectator is published weekly, except two weeks in July and the first week of the year, by: Baikar Association, Inc. 755 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472-1509 Telephone: 617-924-4420 FAX: 617-924-2887 www.mirrorspectator.com

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**SUBSCRIPTION RATES**

U.S.A.	\$80 one year
Canada	\$125 one year
Other Countries	\$200 one year

© 2014 The Armenian Mirror-Spectator  
Periodical Class Postage Paid at Boston,  
MA and additional mailing offices.

ISSN 0004-234X

Postmaster: Send address changes to The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472

Other than the Editorial, views and opinions expressed in this newspaper do not necessarily reflect the policies of the publisher.

# Reflections in April 2024

## *Strengthening Armenian Nationalistic Resistance Within Armenia and Diaspora Is a Priority*

By Dr. Arshavir Gundjian, C.M.

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

Just as we regularly celebrate the start of the new year, Christmas or Easter, the Armenian people systematically commemorate every year the genocide. We strive to honor the memory of one and a half million of our martyrs, who have been canonized as saints, through various church and political events, while we, with decreasing effectiveness, also continue increasingly feeble efforts to demand justice and compensation from the criminal state of Turkey and the world at large for the unimaginable losses suffered by our nation over a century ago.

This year, however, I write to sound a very strong alarm and underline that the political situation of the Armenian people is now incomparably more serious and worrying than ever before in the century after the genocide. In other words, just continuing our traditional efforts in April concerning the Armenian Genocide under the current conditions which threaten the very existence of the Armenian state and people would indicate a terrible lack of appropriate purpose and seriousness concerning our national cause.

It is clear that recently, especially during the last year, the factors contributing to national resistance, whether in Armenia or its diaspora, are rapidly weakening, and if extraordinary efforts are not made to counter this, it will end in an irreversible general national debilitation.

First of all, the situation in the homeland itself is extremely troubling.

Significant developments taking place domestically and in foreign politics, due to emigration, cause additional weakening of the already fragile homeland's ability of resistance. The responsibility falls mainly on the shoulders of the current government. Here I would like to stress that I make this observation unconnected to any short-sighted partisan intent to compete with or struggle against any particular individual or organization. The existential crisis of the Republic of Armenia today is certainly at a level far removed from any such considerations.

Since I have already discussed this topic repeatedly in the press, I only will enumerate some of the most important points in summary.

Domestically, the series of anti-national proposals put forward recently at the highest levels by the authorities, under obvious Turkish-Azerbaijani pressure, such as the proposal to remove the national sacred symbol Mount Ararat from the coat of arms, are completely unacceptable and condemnable, along with proposals to eliminate the bold expression of nationalism in textbooks and traditional demands from the Constitution and other official venues.

On the foreign front, Armenia's weakened, defeatist policy is even more worrying.

Indeed, the government, under the indisputably noble pretext of pursuing peace, in practice has adopted the destructive and futile policy of obediently and unilaterally acceding to all the territorial demands of its hostile neighbor. The biggest victim of this policy was the loss of all of Artsakh in a few hours last year. This policy is destructive, especially because it is obvious that there is no end to the demands of the implacable Ilham Aliyev. More precisely, their true goal is the complete elimination of the Republic of Armenia.

Next, with deep concern, I must note that the latest short-sighted and unprepared initiative of Armenia's foreign policy was the grand performance at the Brussels summit on April 5. The serious and worrying consequences behind the supposed great results are revealed a little more each day.

Indeed, the government made a 180-degree turn to the West, apparently without preparing for the serious military, diplomatic and economic consequences that would result. Both the authorities and the people of Armenia, unfortunately, will quickly find out that the support of several hundred million dollars and the

laudatory statements and promises made in Brussels in favor of Armenia can only remain as deceptions because no guarantees of military and geostrategic support or direct protection were given to Armenia.

Taking all this into consideration, today more than ever, Armenia needs to develop a policy of national salvation with the participation of all its possible forces and to put into place a highly modernized and unassailable army and military defense system for the protection of the borders of Armenia. Only afterwards can Armenia permit itself various bold and unfettered diplomatic endeavors.

My thoughts in April also concern the other pole of the Armenian world, which we superficially and so easily refer to as the diaspora. We often forget that this multimillion largest part of our people, referred to by this one word, is literally dispersed over almost the entire surface of the planet. Therefore, it is completely unrealistic when individuals who are often in important positions talk about "diaspora attitude," "diaspora thinking" or "diaspora expectations" as an important national unitary factor that should support the implementation of national demands in various ways.

Dear compatriots, in these days of April, it is time to finally seriously and realistically adopt such an attitude in the diaspora that the diaspora becomes a truly important national factor that can bring its great benefit to the homeland and the nation's struggle for survival.

The diaspora, made up of millions of individuals, is truly rich in individual potential and who have achieved exceptional success. The Armenian diaspora, during the last century or so, has been able to create within itself important political, cultural, philanthropic and ecclesiastical organizations. However, while there are some coordinating or unifying connections between its different parts, in its entirety the Armenian diaspora remains

largely dispersed and collectively unorganized, and therefore demonstrates very little capability on the world stage.

We experienced the hard fact of this inability in particular during recent months and years. While Armenia and Artsakh lived through one of the most tragic periods in our history under the indifferent eyes of the whole so-called civilized world, the diaspora, which we considered so important, could not exert enough influence to prevent or even alleviate that tragedy. I discussed this extremely important issue months ago, calling on all leadership circles of the diaspora to demonstrate the courage to initiate the creation of a united diaspora-Armenia political structure, which would possess financial, intellectual, legal and other today easily attainable resources.

The ultimate goal is that this overarching Armenia-diaspora coordinated structure will form a powerful system of pan-Armenian resistance, necessary for Armenia to successfully resist all forthcoming foreseeable attacks through its media, diplomacy, economy and military.

This is a very simple and logical conclusion to our thoughts in April, though I am certainly aware that its implementation, being unprecedented, is very difficult in reality.

However, as we emphasized above, if the Armenian world remains satisfied with merely the classic April commemorations, today's government, opposition, political party, church or intellectual leadership will collectively be held responsible for all the sad consequences of the existential and tragic calamities expected.

Instead, those who have pretensions to leadership in the homeland or in the diaspora must overcome all foreseeable obstacles with the utmost of efforts. In that way, if not perfectly, then at least with a fair amount of success we can face this great challenge to ensure the honorable survival of Armenian statehood and truly fulfill our duty, while honoring the memory of our countless holy martyrs.

(This article is a translation of the original Armenian published in Baikar and other Armenian Democratic Liberal Party publications.)

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## COMMENTARY

## MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

## What Will Pashinyan Do Next, Demolish the Genocide Museum?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his equally incompetent underlings have been making for months anti-Armenian statements. He started with denigrating Mount Ararat and then went on to criticize Republic of Armenia's constitutionally-protected official symbols: the national anthem and coat of arms.

Pashinyan also suggested that Armenia needs to adopt a new Constitution deleting its references to Artsakh and the Armenian Genocide which are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. He repeatedly makes the artificial distinction between "Historical Armenia" and what he calls "Real Armenia," meaning today's Republic of Armenia, which is a small part of the Armenian Homeland.

Pashinyan has also been obsessed with begging for peace from hostile Azerbaijan which has no interest in making peace with Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev's only goal is the total destruction of Armenia, a country whose existence he rejects, calling it "Western Azerbaijan." Regrettably, Pashinyan makes the excuse for all of his defeatist and compromising statements, using the scare tactic that if Armenia doesn't comply with Azerbaijan's demands, it would start a new war!

Through one of his obedient servants, Pashinyan is now questioning the veracity of the Armenian Genocide, under the guise of confirming the real facts of the genocide. The latest scandal began with a highly questionable statement by Andranik Kocharyan, Chairman of the Parliament's Defense and Security Committee and senior member of Pashinyan's ruling Civil Contract party. Delving into subjects that are unrelated to his office, Kocharyan cast doubt about the facts of the Armenian Genocide. Naturally, the Azeri and Turkish media were extremely pleased with his statement.

In an interview with Radio Free Europe Armenian Service on April 14, Kocharyan said that Pashinyan's goal is to build "real foundations" related to the Genocide and to "make the list of compatriots subjected to genocide more objective." Furthermore, he stressed that it is necessary to have the names of all Armenians subjected to genocide and verify "where, how and under what conditions" they were killed. Insisting on his misguided statement, the very next day he repeated it during a press briefing in parliament.

Nevertheless, after coming under harsh criticism, Kocharyan claimed that he was expressing his personal views, not those of his political party, thus shielding Pashinyan from his irresponsible words. However, it is clear that Kocharyan would not have dared to make such a controversial statement without the prior approval of his boss, the Prime Minister, who single-handedly makes all governmental decisions. Besides, Kocharyan himself referenced Pashinyan in his statement about the Genocide.

"This is a simple goal for us to know the addresses and locations of each

of our 1.5 million compatriots. It is very important for the building of our relations [with Turkey] in the future as well," Kocharyan said. "April 24 is approaching. Was it 1.5 million, 2 million or less? It should be strictly addressed. But if we don't record it, the other side [Turkey] can always say that no such thing happened. And till today that have been saying so," he added.

This is a very dangerous statement to be made by a high-ranking Armenian official. It is nothing less than parroting the Turkish denialist thesis which has for decades minimized the number of Armenian victims, saying that it is far fewer than 1.5 million and cynically asking, where are the bodies of the dead? Now comes a member of Armenia's ruling party giving credence to the Turkish denials.

Seeking to verify the number of Armenian Genocide victims is problematic for other reasons. One hundred and nine years after the genocide, Kocharyan has come up with the 'brilliant' idea of counting the number of the victims. It is impossible for anyone to go back in time and document the names and locations of all 1.5 million Armenian victims. There are no graves and no traces of the victims. Entire families with all their relatives were wiped out.

Secondly, if Kocharyan goes ahead with his shortsighted suggestion, I doubt that it would be possible to come up with more than a couple of hundred thousand names of victims. This will be the greatest gift anyone can give to denialist Turks. The minute that relatively small number of victims is collected and announced, Turkish denialists will declare that Armenians just proved that there was no genocide and nowhere close to 1.5 million victims. The Turkish government will tell the world that it has been saying for a century that the genocide is a big lie and Armenians finally proved it.

Neither Kocharyan nor denialist Turks have the slightest notion about the United Nations' definition of genocide which is based on the intent to kill a particular group of people, "in whole or in part," without specifying the minimum number of victims. So the whole exercise is not only a waste of time, but also counterproductive.

I have a better idea. I wrote a column years ago suggesting that Armenians set up a "Wall of Shame" and list on it all those who have denied the Armenian Genocide since 1915, including denialist Turks and non-Turks, including some Armenians.

To make matters worse, Zareh Sinanyan, Armenia's "Chief Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs," in a TV interview last week, shockingly welcomed Kocharyan's unwise words, stating that he "likes the idea very much." We should not be too surprised that, contrary to his title, Sinanyan has made several statements which are contrary to Armenia's and Diaspora's interests.

If Pashinyan continues making his anti-Armenian statements, what will he announce next? The outlawing of the burning of the Turkish flag on April 24 in Yerevan or closing down the Genocide Monument and Museum, using his usual scare tactic that otherwise Turkey will attack?

It is sad that on the eve of the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, we have to deal with Armenians who are serving the cause of Turkish genocide denialists rather than advancing our just demands from Turkey.

# Turning Towards Russia?

By Suren Sargsyan

*Special to the Mirror-Spectator*

Before the Armenian authorities announced the transfer of four Tavush villages to Azerbaijan, causing a significant commotion, a major point of discussion in Armenia was whether Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would participate in Russian President Vladimir Putin's inauguration ceremony on May 7 in Moscow. The probable answer is yes. Since Pashinyan attended Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's inauguration, it would be quite challenging to skip Putin's inauguration. Not going would raise numerous questions in Armenia and internationally. Of course this assumption follows a normal logical chain, not the unpredictability that often guides the Armenian leader.

It's worth noting that Pashinyan is likely invited to the May 9 parade in Moscow commemorating the 79th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (what in the West is called World War II). In the context of outside sanctions, only leaders from friendly countries are typically invited to the Russian president's inauguration, with many likely participating in the victory parade a couple of days later. This serves as a message from

Russia to the West, especially given recent events like the US Congress approving additional aid to Ukraine days before. Interestingly, the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, will visit Moscow on April 22 for a meeting with Putin, suggesting that he may not return for the inauguration and parade in Moscow, although it remains a possibility.

After recent meetings with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Armenia received financial support but no commitments regarding EU or NATO membership or any type of security guarantees. This in-

## PASHINYAN'S UPCOMING VISIT TO RUSSIA COULD BE CRUCIAL FOR ARMENIA, GIVEN THE COUNTRY'S LACK OF SECURITY GUARANTEES, WHICH POTENTIALLY NECESSITATES A REESTABLISHMENT OF TIES WITH MOSCOW.

dicates Armenia may shift away from the West, leaving Yerevan without security assurances from anyone. This is creating a significant security gap that contributes to issues like those in Tavush region of Armenia. With the West unable to offer security guarantees, Armenia must seek such assurances elsewhere.

However, finding a sponsor state willing to support Armenia amid its challenges is very difficult. If we take the example of Iran and Russia as regional players, they

are currently facing their own challenges, making it difficult for them to take on additional burdens. Pashinyan's upcoming visit to Russia could be crucial for Armenia, given the country's lack of security guarantees, which potentially necessitates a reestablishment of ties with Moscow. Taking into consideration the upcoming Putin-Aliyev and Putin-Pashinyan meetings, it may seem that Russia is attempting to assume the role of a mediator by establishing a trilateral platform similar to the one following the 2020 war.

Furthermore, Secretary Blinken recently approved the agreement between parties on the transfer of four Armenian villages to Azerbaijan, indicating that the US is endorsing the process despite it being outside American mediation as these agreements were reached between two parties. The US ambassador to Armenia also mentioned that Armenia is open to any mediator for the peace process, which could benefit Washington even if the mediator is not the United States.

This move may indicate that Washington believes Armenia's best option for security guarantees is to turn to Moscow, as suggested in a recent article by the RAND Corporation. Everybody understands that the absence of security assurances compels Armenia to make unilateral concessions rather than addressing internal issues, as Armenia is consistently required to relinquish something to prevent a war. And as this reality is widely understood, everyone acts based on their national interests, without accepting any obligation towards Armenia or evincing the desire to assist it.

(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.)





# US Congress Is Preparing Bill On Sanctions Against Group of Azerbaijani Government Officials

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan and bicameral group of lawmakers led by Congresswoman Dina Titus (D-NV) is planning to introduce the first-ever Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act this week, Azerbaijani media’s Washington correspondent has learned from Congressional sources.

The draft bill would lead to the sanctioning of over 40 Azeri officials who have played an active and chief role in undermining the rule of law and human rights in the country.

The bill would require the Biden administration to determine within 180 days of its passage whether a list of Azeri officials included in the bill qualify for sanctions under existing U.S. legislations including the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, as well as the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

The “Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act of 2024” highlights the Aliyev government’s brutal repression of domestic political opposition as “grave concern” for the human rights of Azerbaijanis.

“The detention and subsequent torture and ill-treatment of opposition leaders, activists, and critics of the Aliyev government like Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, a prominent scholar who taught in the United States, raises fundamental concerns about due process and the integrity of the legal proceedings against him and others who express political dissent in Azerbaijan,” reads the draft bill.

The authors go on to highlight that on March 6, 2024, Azerbaijani authorities detained six journalists in Baku and accused them of unfounded smuggling charges as part of an ongoing crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan

The bill also speaks about Armenian prisoners, noting that Azerbaijan’s “continued detainment, torture, extrajudicial execution, and other serious human rights violations against prisoners of war and captured civilians calls into serious question their commitment to human rights and ability to negotiate an equitable, lasting peace settlement.”

The list of Azerbaijani high-ranking officials to be sanctioned in the bill includes a cross-section of government ministers, judges and prosecutors at all levels responsible for the ongoing political persecution of Azerbaijan’s pro-democracy activists.



Ambassador Kristina Kvien, left, at the Armenian Genocide Memorial on April 23

## US Ambassador Visits Genocide Monument

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — US Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien and US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations committee member Hannah Thoburn on April 23 visited the Armenian Genocide Memorial.

Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Edita Gzoyan accompanied the guests to the Armenian Genocide Memorial, providing insights into the history of the creation of the memorial.

Gzoyan also mentioned the three khachkars (cross-stones) placed within the territory of Tsitsernakaberd in memory of Armenians who perished in massacres organized by the Azerbaijani government in Sumgait, Kirovabad (Gandzak), and Baku at the end of the last century. Additionally, she highlighted the stories of the five freedom fighters laid to rest in front of Hushapat during the Artsakh war, emphasizing the connection between these events and the Armenian Genocide.

Gzoyan also addressed the historical and legal aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, highlighting Azerbaijan’s anti-Armenian actions and propaganda.

They laid a wreath at the memorial to the victims of the Armenian Genocide. Subsequently, they placed flowers near the Eternal Flame and observed a minute of silence to honor the innocent victims of the Armenian Genocide.

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