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Pashinyan Under Fire After Questioning Armenian Genocide

By Ruzanna Stepanian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has provoked a storm of criticism from his political opponents and historians after questioning the 1915 Armenian genocide in Ottoman Turkey and the decades-long Armenian campaign for its international recognition.

“We must also revisit the history of the Armenian genocide,” Pashinyan told a group of Swiss Armenians at the end of his visit to Switzerland late last week. “We must understand what happened and why it happened, how we perceived it and through whom we perceived it. How is it that in 1939 there was no Armenian genocide [recognition] agenda and how is it that in 1950 the Armenian genocide agenda emerged?”

Suren Manukyan, an Armenian scholar specializing in genocide studies, deplored the statement, saying that Pashinyan lacks elementary knowledge of the World War I-era slaughter of an estimated 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians recognized as genocide by dozens of countries and most international historians.

“Semi-literacy is one of the most dangerous things,” Manukyan told RFE/RL’s Armenian Service. “I think the prime minister just needs to read a little.”

One thing Pashinyan will learn, he said, is that the term “genocide” was coined by Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin after 1939, during the Jewish Holocaust, based on the events of 1915.

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Ruben Vardanyan Trial Continues in Baku

YEREVAN (Tert.am/news.am) — The trial of former Artsakh Minister, businessman, philanthropist Ruben Vardanyan, continued in the Baku Military Court on Monday, January 27.

The charges against him are being considered separately from the case against the former military-political leaders of Artsakh.

At the previous court hearing, Vardanyan’s lawyer had petitioned his case to join the case of other leaders and investigated together, but the court rejected that motion.

Azerbaijan has accused him of “torture,” “mercenary activity,” “violation of war laws,” “terrorism” and “terrorism financing.”

The proceedings were official launched on January 17.

Although the hearing is considered open, according to various sources, only reporters from Azerbaijani state media outlets are present at the hearing, who then pass on the respective footage to others.

Information received from Vardanyan’s case is quite scarce at the moment. It is re-



Former Artsakh leader Ruben Vardanyan appears in court in Baku (Photo: AzerTac)

ported that a certain Ahmedov, a “victim” in the case, testified about the events in Khojaly in 1988. Armenia News-NEWS.am asked lawyer Siranush Sahakyan, the

representative of Armenian prisoners of war at the European Court of Human Rights, if she sees any connection here. see TRIAL, page 5

Armenian Diplomat Makes First Syria Visit since Fall of Assad

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — On January 27, in Damascus, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan had a meeting with Asaad al-Shaybani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic.

This was the first visit to Syria by an Armenian diplomat since the fall of the government of Bashar al-Assad in December

as a result of the push by the Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Expressing gratitude for the warm reception, the Deputy Foreign Minister conveyed the commitment of the Government of Armenia to develop bilateral relations with the Syrian side, the foreign ministry said in a readout.

The two exchanged views on potential areas of cooperation.

Kostanyan reiterated the readiness of the Armenian side to provide support in humanitarian area and implementation of



Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan and Asaad al-Shaybani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic

reforms, as well as various other priority programs in Syria.

Both sides emphasized the strong historical ties between the peoples of Armenia and Syria. In this context, they expressed support for the efforts aimed at creating an environment of solidarity and inclusiveness in Syria.

The interlocutors exchanged views on regional developments, stressing the importance of normalizing relations with neighbors.

Al-Shaybani expressed his appreciation for the visit of the Armenian delegation to Damascus.

Paylan Makes Impassioned Plea for Diaspora to Stand Behind Armenia

By Alin K. Gregorian
Mirror-Spectator Staff

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.— Garo Paylan, the former member of parliament in Turkey and outspoken proponent of rights for Armenians and Kurds there, delivered a powerful speech on January 22, at the annual commemorative event held at Harvard University to mark the assassination of Hrant Dink, pleading for the world Armenian community to ensure the safety of Armenia.

The impassioned speech ended with a prolonged standing ovation.

Speaking without notes for almost 45 minutes, Paylan walked a tightrope between honoring the past and facing the future. At times he chastised diasporan Armenians for focusing more on remembering the past than ensuring a

safe future for Armenia, and urged everyone to rally behind the, regardless of how they feel about its current leadership, because it faces mortal peril. He stressed that he was not implying that the quest for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide was unnecessary, just that what was possible was the very dissolution of Armenia.

Memories of Hrant Dink

Ohannes Kilicdagi, the president of the Board of the Friends of Hrant Dink, made brief introductory remarks at the event, which marked the 18th anniversary of the late *Agos* newspaper editor’s anniversary.

Paylan was then introduced by Lorenzo Bondioli, Harvard assistant professor of history, as one of the “foremost advocates for democracy” in Turkey.

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“PAYLAN SAID HE LEFT TURKEY LAST YEAR BECAUSE OF THE MANY ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS AND THREATS.”

NEW YORK

Bishop Mesrop Offers Prayer For Christian Unity

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NEW YORK

The Mysterious Donor Who Fled Communism And Left Millions to The Art World

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GLENDALE

‘Between Borders’ Opens in US Theaters

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ARMENIA

NEWS from ARMENIA

Armenian Airlines to Launch Direct Flights to India

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Starting February 21, Armenian Airlines will launch direct flights from Yerevan to Delhi, marking the first direct aviation connection between Armenia and India, according to the airline's press service.

Flights will operate twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, by Airbus 321-200 aircraft with a capacity of 220 passengers, the company said.

The flight duration will be 4 hours and 40 minutes from Yerevan to Delhi, and 5 hours and 10 minutes on the return route.

Son of Oligarch Tsarukyan Put on Intl Wanted List

YEREVAN /ARKA/ — Armenian law enforcement agencies have put Nver Tsarukyan, son of one of the richest Armenian businessmen Gagik Tsarukyan, on international wanted list, the Armenian Prosecutor General's Office reported on January 23.

On that day, the prosecutor's office referred to the local court the case filed against three of Tsarukyan's bodyguards. They are accused of hooliganism and embezzlement with the use of weapons, committed on October 26, 2024 in a casino in Tsakhkadzor.

According to reports, an argument broke out between Tsarukyan and another group at the casino and shots were fired. He is reportedly in Belarus now.

On January 13, the Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the bodyguards, and on November 2, 2024, against Nver Tsarukyan.

Azerbaijani Minister's Statements Concerning, General Says

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Lt. general Edward Asryan, the Chief of General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces, speaking to reporters at an Army Day commemoration event on January 28, said that despite the relative calm on the border the military is concerned over the belligerent statements made by Azerbaijan.

"We are always concerned over the Azerbaijani defense minister's belligerent statements, but they are a little part in the operative assessment. We are closely following both the situation on the border and the statements," the Lt. general said when asked on Azeri defense minister Zakir Hasanov's recent statements.

Asryan said citizens' concerns are substantiated because the Azeri military still remains deployed in sovereign Armenian territory.

"We are fulfilling our objective, we are proceeding on the path of peace, the path of delimitation and demarcation. And the armed forces continue getting improved, developed and supplemented," he said.

Vardanyan's Lawyer Chides Armenian Government

By Ruzanna Stepanian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — A US human rights lawyer representing Ruben Vardanyan has said that the Armenian government is doing little to try to secure the release of his client and seven other former leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh standing trial in Azerbaijan.

In an interview with the Armenian Report published on Thursday, January 23, Jared Genser pointed to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's public statements on these and other Armenian prisoners whom he described as "hostages."

"It doesn't seem from what I've heard that bringing Ruben or others home is an especially high priority [for Pashinyan's government,]" he said. "That's obviously frustrating and disappointing... because Ruben and the others are simply Armenian citizens. It's the job of a government to help their citizens abroad when they are in harm's way. In this particular case... there is no one but the government of Armenia to actually stand up for them and assist them."

"It should be the Armenian government that's asking governments around the world to secure the release of the political prisoners and POWs, and it doesn't seem



Jared Genser

to be an especially high priority for them," added Genser.

An Azerbaijani military court began the separate trials of Vardanyan and 15 other Karabakh Armenians on January 17. The defendants facing a long list of accusations include three former Karabakh presidents — Arayik Harutyunyan, Bako Sahakian and Arkadi Ghukasyan. They were all captured by Azerbaijan during or shortly after its September 2023 military offensive that forced Karabakh's entire population to flee to Armenia and restored Azerbaijani control over the region. (See story on page 1.)

In contrast with an outpouring of support for the captives voiced by prominent public figures in Armenia and its worldwide Diaspora, the Armenian government has pointedly declined to condemn the trials. Nor has it officially reacted to them otherwise through the prime minister's office or the Foreign Ministry. Armenian government critics have denounced its silence.

Pashinyan described the trials as "concerning" when he answered a question from an opposition member of the parliament on Wednesday. He claimed that a stronger statement "satisfying your patriotic emotions" would only harm the Armenian prisoners. Opposition leaders continued to insist that Pashinyan is simply afraid of angering Baku.

Pashinyan was already accused by his domestic critics last fall of helping Baku legitimize Vardanyan's continuing imprisonment with his scathing comments about the Armenian-born billionaire and philanthropist. Speaking during a news conference

last August, the Armenian premier wondered who had told Vardanyan to renounce Russian citizenship and move to Karabakh in 2022 and "for what purpose."

Pashinyan seemed to echo Azerbaijani leaders' earlier claims that Vardanyan, who briefly served as Karabakh premier in 2022-2023, was dispatched to Karabakh by Moscow to serve Russian interests there. Vardanyan hit back at him in a September statement issued by his family.

In another statement circulated by the family on the eve of his trial, the tycoon rejected 42 charges leveled against him as politically motivated and accused Azerbaijani authorities of attributing false testimony to him.

Genser, who has not been allowed to visit Azerbaijan to see his client, denounced the trials as a travesty of justice, saying that guilty verdicts in them are already "predetermined." He claimed that the new US administration of President Donald Trump will put strong pressure on the Azerbaijani government to free the Armenian captives.

"I do think that if [Azerbaijani President Ilham] Aliyev thinks he is going to just do whatever he wants with no consequence, he is going to find something quite different happening in Washington," the lawyer told The Armenian Report. "We've already started talking to new administration officials about the current situation not just with respect to political prisoners and Ruben's case but a broader situation of ethnic cleansing, the dismantling of the government institutions of Artsakh."

Pashinyan Under Fire After Questioning Armenian Genocide

GENOCIDE, from page 1

In Manukyan's words, Pashinyan hinted that Armenians started calling the 1915 mass massacres a genocide and campaigning for its international recognition at the behest of the Soviet Union. The scholar countered that Soviet Armenia was allowed to mark genocide anniversaries only in 1965, more than a decade after the death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

Armenian opposition leaders went further, accusing Pashinyan of openly denying the genocide on Turkey's orders.

"Armenia is ruled by a collaborationist regime that serves only Turkey and Azerbaijan," said Gegham Manukyan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun), a pan-Armenian party that has for decades been at the forefront of genocide recognition campaigns in the United States and Europe.

"This is an insult to the memory of the victims of the 1915 Armenian Genocide,

one and a half million Armenian martyrs canonized by the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church," read a statement released by Dashnaksutyun's chapter in Armenia on Monday.

Tigran Abrahamyan, an opposition lawmaker representing the Pativ Unem bloc, likewise said that Pashinyan's "denial of the Armenian Genocide" is part of Turkish-Azerbaijani efforts to wipe out the "historical memory of the Armenian people."

Vartan Oskanian, another vocal critic of Pashinyan who had served as foreign minister from 1998-2008, charged that he committed "treason" by "parroting" Ankara's continuing denial of the genocide.

"By hinting that perhaps Armenians themselves are also responsible for what happened, Pashinyan repeats one of the most dangerous theses of genocide denial which has been propagated by the Turkish state for more than a century," Oskanian said in a Facebook post.

Pashinyan was accused by his detractors

of casting doubt on the Armenian genocide even before his latest comments.

In his statement on the 109th anniversary of the genocide commemorated in April 2024, Pashinyan no longer called for its wider international recognition. He also put the emphasis on the Armenian phrase "Meds Yeghern" (Great Crime), rather than the word "genocide."

Earlier in April, a senior Armenian pro-government lawmaker, Andranik Kocharyan, called for "verifying" the number of the genocide victims and ascertaining the circumstances of their deaths. He said Pashinyan wants to "make the entire list of compatriots subjected to genocide more objective." Faced with an uproar from opposition leaders, civil society figures and genocide scholars, Kocharyan claimed the following day that he only expressed his personal opinion.

According to PanArmenian.net, The Genesis Armenia Foundation criticized Pashinyan, stating that his remarks under-mine the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

According to the foundation, these statements lack both scientific and logical basis, threatening They described Pashinyan's remarks as "one of the most ignorant and degrading actions against the Armenian people's political struggle," emphasizing that they harm not only the Armenian nation's pursuit of justice but also values cherished by the civilized world.

The foundation warned that such comments weaken the legal and security foundations of Armenian statehood and jeopardize the principles of genocide recognition within international law. It also accused Pashinyan of failing to explicitly condemn the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey for committing genocide, labeling this as a clear manifestation of revisionism.



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan meets a group of diasporan Armenians in Zurich, January 24, 2025



INTERNATIONAL

Belarus Leader Slams Pashinyan

By Shoghik Galstian

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Risking another diplomatic spat with Yerevan, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has blamed Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh and accused him of “destroying” Armenia with his bid to join the European Union.

Lukashenko attacked Pashinyan as he secured his seventh term in office in a weekend presidential election that EU leaders have denounced as a “sham.”

“Armenia’s leadership is to blame for what happened,” he told journalists on January 27, referring to Azerbaijan’s recapture of Karabakh in September 2023. “They recognized Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert as part of Azerbaijan. We, I and [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, were amazed.”

“Pashinyan himself abandoned Kara-

bakh, even though [Azerbaijani President Ilham] Aliyev was ready at that point to agree that it’s a territory where Armenians should have serious influence. But there was the gift [to Azerbaijan.] Who wouldn’t take it?”

The Belarusian strongman, in power since 1994, went on to slam Pashinyan for “flirting” with the EU.

“It’s a dangerous game,” he said. Calm him down.”

Neither Pashinyan’s office nor the Armenian Foreign Ministry reacted to the verbal attacks as of the evening of January 27.

Armenian Parliament Speaker Alen Simonyan, a key Pashinyan ally, said Lukashenko is trying to justify his earlier admission that he “supported and participated in the large-scale killing of Armenians in Karabakh.” He did not exclude that Armenia will downgrade or even sever diplomatic relations with Belarus.

“I think that can be discussed,” Simonyan told journalists. “I don’t want to express my opinion.”

Yerevan already recalled its ambassador from Minsk last summer as tensions between the two nominal ex-Soviet allies rose after Lukashenko made fresh pro-Azerbaijani statements during a visit to Azerbaijan. He said there that he had approved Baku’s plans to try to reconquer Karabakh by force during his meetings with Aliyev held before the 2020 war. Pashinyan declared at the time that no Armenian official will visit Belarus as long as Lukashenko remains in power.

The two leaders publicly traded barbs last month during a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) summit in Saint Petersburg which Pashinyan attended via video link.

Lukashenko has a long history of supporting Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia. He had an uneasy relationship with Armenia’s former leadership as well.

Erdogan’s Son-in-law Buys Italian Aerospace Company to Bypass Embargo

By Levent Kenez

STOCKHOLM (Nordic Monitor) — The Turkish firm Baykar, a defense contractor owned by the son-in-law of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, signed a preliminary agreement to acquire Italy’s Piaggio Aerospace on January 27, marking a significant step in its international expansion. The deal, approved by Italy’s Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy in December 2024, involves the transfer of Piaggio Aero Industries and Piaggio Aviation’s business operations to Baykar. Pending additional approvals, including from the Italian Council of Ministers, the transaction is expected to conclude by spring.

According to an analysis by Turkey’s state-run Anadolu news agency, Baykar’s acquisition of Piaggio Aerospace represents a strategic response to long-standing trade and export barriers faced by Turkey in the defense sector. Unlike conventional industries, the defense industry requires navigating complex regulatory frameworks and diplomatic relationships, often influenced by geopolitical considerations.

Anadolu reported that Turkey has frequently encountered embargoes which restrict the export of its defense products, even when such products are developed domestically. One significant hurdle has been the insistence of some countries on local manufacturing as a precondition for procurement. By acquiring an EU-based company like Piaggio Aerospace, Baykar aims to bypass these restrictions. Defense products manufactured in Italy can be more readily integrated into European markets, eliminating legal and logistical obstacles tied to non-EU imports.

This acquisition also aligns with Turkey’s broader strategy of overcoming embargoes through domestic innovation and international partnerships. While Turkey has successfully built a self-sufficient defense industry, this deal allows Baykar to complement its production capabilities with improved access to European customers.

Nordic Monitor previously reported that Erdogan tied the Turkish parliament’s approval of Sweden’s NATO membership to Canada lifting its arms embargo on Turkey. Speaking to pro-government journalists during his return trip from Hungary on December 19, 2023, Erdogan said US President Joe Biden had suggested resolving congressional reluctance to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey in exchange for Swe-



Selçuk Bayraktar, left, with Recep Tayyip Erdogan

den’s NATO accession. However, Erdogan added another condition: the removal of Canada’s restrictions on defense-related exports to Turkey, including crucial optical equipment used by Baykar.

The Canadian government had imposed an arms embargo on Turkey in 2021 following the use of Turkish-made military drones in the 2020 conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The embargo included the WESCAM MX-15D EO/IR FLIR system, a critical component for Baykar’s Bayraktar TB2 drones. Bayraktar had previously claimed that they no longer needed these Canadian products. However, Baykar had resorted to methods such as having the required components supplied by the country purchasing the drones and assembling them locally in order to circumvent the embargoes.

The Turkish government has long claimed that restrictions and sanctions imposed by NATO allies, particularly the United States and Germany, on Turkey’s arms purchases have hindered the country’s ability to meet the alliance’s defense spending target. During a press conference on July 8, 2023, ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius, President Erdogan expressed frus-

tration with these embargoes, saying they were preventing Turkey from meeting the 2 percent defense spending goal. Erdogan pointed out that Turkey’s defense spending had decreased from 2 percent in 2019 to around 1.30 percent since some NATO allies were imposing restrictions.

Bayraktar recently appeared on Forbes’ latest billionaire list, one of the 27 Turkish billionaires who made it onto the prestigious list. Bayraktar’s net worth stands at \$1.2 billion, securing him the 2,465th spot on the list. His brother, Haluk, who serves as CEO of Baykar, follows closely behind, ranking 2,619th with a net worth of \$1.1 billion.

Established by their father Özdemir Bayraktar in 1984 to manufacture parts for the Turkish automotive industry, Baykar has seen significant growth. In 2022 the company recorded sales of \$1.4 billion, and by 2023, its exports had soared to \$1.8 billion, primarily driven by contracts secured with various militaries across Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Baykar’s drones have been exported to over 30 countries and were used in conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in 2020 as well as in Libya and Ukraine. Many credit the company’s success to the support of President Erdogan, who often promotes Baykar drones during his diplomatic visits abroad, resulting in multimillion-dollar agreements.

Selçuk Bayraktar has been married to Erdogan’s daughter, Sümeyye, since 2016.

There is a strong public belief that the rapid increase in the wealth of the Bayraktar brothers and their attaining billionaire status at such a young age was greatly influenced by their familial ties to Erdogan. However, according to pro-government groups, Selçuk Bayraktar is regarded as a national hero.

He said on a television program in 2022 that Turkey’s drone and unmanned aircraft projects would fail if there were no political backing, putting his support behind the current government before elections in 2023.

INTERNATIONAL

French MP Urges Response to Azerbaijani Aggression

PARIS (Armenpress) — French MP François-Xavier Bellamy has called on French authorities to take action in response to Baku’s steps, as he believes Azerbaijan is openly attacking France’s territorial integrity.

“Azerbaijan is now organizing a congress in Nouméa to ‘decolonize’ New Caledonia, calling for a ‘fight’ around the world, and insulting our law enforcement,” French MP François-Xavier Bellamy posted on X on January 27.

“A criminal regime is publicly attacking the integrity of France. When will the state finally respond?” he added.

New Caledonia is a French territory in the South Pacific. Envoy

Iran Summons Azerbaijan’s Envoy

TEHRAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Iran’s Foreign Ministry summoned Azerbaijan’s ambassador, Ali Alizadeh, to deliver a formal protest note regarding “immoral actions” allegedly carried out by certain Azerbaijani officials against Iranian students, the state news agency IRNA reported on January 24.

During the meeting, Mojtaba Demirchilou, head of the Eurasian Affairs Department at Iran’s Foreign Ministry, described these actions as “harmful” and stressed the importance of holding the organizers and perpetrators of such negative actions accountable, RFE/RL reported.

He also emphasized the need for a firm response to “any insult to religious figures.”

According to the report, the Azerbaijani ambassador expressed regret over certain negative statements and actions, promising to convey the matter to his country’s authorities.

According to the Azerbaijani Turan agency, 10 Iranian students were recently expelled from Azerbaijan Medical University on allegations of “immoral behavior.” No further details are available.

Ambassador Participates in Genocide Commemoration in Belgium

BRUSSELS (Public Radio of Armenia) — On January 24 Ambassador Tigran Balayan participated in a commemoration ceremony at the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. The event follows the resolution adopted by the Chamber in December 2020, which established a national day of remembrance for officially recognized genocides.

Belgium officially recognizes five genocides: the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the genocide in Cambodia, the Srebrenica massacre and the Rwandan genocide.

The ceremony featured addresses by Peter De Roover, president of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, among others.



INTERNATIONAL

German Ambassador Visits Genocide Memorial

YEREVAN (Arminfo) — The German Ambassador to Armenia, Claudia Busch, visited the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, located on the territory of the memorial complex in Tsitsernakaberd, on January 27, the German Embassy in Armenia announced.

“Tsitsernakaberd. Remembering the history of mass massacres, ethnic cleansings, deportations and genocides. This historical memory continues to be a common issue for generations in both Germany and Armenia,” as stated in a publication by the German Embassy in Armenia, accompanied by photos of Ambassador Busch’s visit to the museum-institute.



Ambassador Claudia Busch at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute

Tbilisi Actors Breathe New Life into Georgia’s Resistance Movement

By Ailis Halligan

TBILISI (Intellinews) — The Vaso Abashidze Theatre in Tbilisi’s Marjanishvili district staged a powerful protest performance on the evening of January 23, the 57th consecutive day of Georgia’s ongoing anti-government, pro-EU civil resistance movement.

Through a series of poignant speeches, emotional spoken word pieces and choreographed dance numbers, actors, artists and directors in bright costumes presented their new protest manifesto, titled “This country is mine!”, to cheering crowds filling the wide street in front of the theatre building.

From a brightly lit stage the troupe announced a plan to tour Georgia’s regions, engage directly with the public and confront mounting propaganda and repression by the contested Georgian Dream (GD) government.

“We will travel to the provinces, be everywhere, talk to everyone, and let them [the authorities] try to catch us ... you will see what the theatre can do ... Everyone will join us,” Davit Doiashvili, artistic director of the Vaso Abashidze Theatre, told the crowd, who appeared moved and inspired by the actors’ defiant performance.

The show, which lasted several hours, was a rare instance of coordination and concrete, organised action in Georgia’s latest wave of dissent, which looks on the verge of stalling as protesters battle an ever more hostile environment of arrests, attacks and crackdowns by increasingly authoritarian Georgian Dream party.

“When the lights go out in the country, the stage lights up,” Doiashvili said on the eve of the performance.

Thousands of demonstrators in the Georgian capital have taken to the streets for over 55 consecutive nights in a display of commitment to their country’s Euro-Atlantic integration and opposition to a return to Russia’s sphere of influence.

Unrest broke out following the disputed parliamentary election of October 26, which GD is widely accused of rigging,

and intensified on November 28 following an announcement by the newly re-formed GD government that Georgia would be suspending its EU membership bid until 2028.

The Vaso Abashidze Theatre has been on strike for over 50 days in solidarity with 28-year-old resident actor, Andro Chichinadze, who was one of hundreds arrested in early December during brutal police crackdowns pro-EU street protests.

Chichinadze, who is being held on criminal charges of “participating in group vi-



Actors and directors staged a protest performance outside the Vaso Abashidze Theatre in Tbilisi, cheered on by thousands of pro-EU, anti-government demonstrators (photo Ailis Halligan)

olence” and faces up to six years in prison, was remanded in custody during a pre-trial hearing on January 10 along with 10 others. According to his colleagues at the Vaso Abashidze Theatre, Chichinadze was “unlawfully detained by the [GD] regime without evidence”.

A banner displaying a photo of the imprisoned actor has hung from the roof of the theatre building for over 50 days and was joined on the evening of the protest performance by huge Georgian and EU flags.

At one particularly moving stage in the performance, artists read out the names of all those detained at protests who are now in pre-trial detention. “Along with these [illegally detained] people, Georgian cul-

ture is also imprisoned ... that is why we are gathering again today in front of this theatre, again in this city,” Doiashvili told the thousands who gathered outside the theatre.

On January 11, members of the Vaso Abashidze Theatre demanded the release of both Chichinadze and others by January 20, warning that, if ignored, they would “move from passive resistance to action” and demonstrate “the true power of art in reality”.

More than 50 individuals, which pro-

Aliyev Again Demands Corridor Through Armenia

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev continued to demand on Tuesday, January 28, that Armenia open a land corridor that would connect Azerbaijan to its Nakhichevan exclave.

“Armenia must fulfill its obligations and ensure unhindered passage from Azerbaijan to Azerbaijan,” he said during a meeting with Azerbaijani government officials.

Aliyev accused Yerevan of not complying with a relevant provision of a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement that stopped the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The clause commits Armenia to opening rail and road links between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan through Syunik, the only Armenian province bordering Iran. It says that Russian border guards will “control” the movement of people, vehicles and goods.

The Armenian government maintains that the truce accord calls for only conventional transport links between Armenia and Azerbaijan and does not exempt people and cargo transported to and from Nakhichevan from Armenian border checks. The government’s Crossroads of Peace project regularly promoted by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stipulates that the two South Caucasus states should have full control of transport infrastructure inside each other’s territory.

Aliyev shrugged off the project, saying Baku has repeatedly made clear to Yerevan that it is “not worth a penny.” He accused the Armenian side of misleading the international community with various “manipulations.”

Pashinyan insisted on the project in response to Aliyev’s January 7 threats to forcibly open the “Zangezur corridor.” He said Yerevan is still awaiting Baku’s reply to its “very concrete proposal” on the issue made after his most recent talks with the Azerbaijani leader held in October.

Armenian officials said earlier in 2024 that Azerbaijan may be planning to launch another military aggression against Armenia after hosting the COP29 climate summit in November. Pashinyan’s domestic critics as well as some analysts have portrayed Aliyev’s threats as a further indication of Baku’s war preparations.



INTERNATIONAL

Baku Reveals Ban on USAID Activity in Country

Prior to last year's US presidential election, Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev openly rooted for Donald Trump's return to the White House. Aliyev may have got what he wanted, but that still likely won't be enough to ease rancorous US-Azerbaijani diplomatic relations anytime soon.

Baku earlier this month signaled that a reset of fractured bilateral relations was not in the offing when Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov announced the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had been barred from conducting activities in Azerbaijan since June 1 of last year. He then proceeded to air grievances with the Biden administration for imposing penalties on Azerbaijan for what he characterized as the country's "restoring its sovereignty."

Specifically, Bayramov criticized US officials for following provisions outlined in Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, thus preventing Baku from directly receiving any kind of assistance from the US government. Washington took such action ostensibly to punish Azerbaijan for its actions during the reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijani forces gained full control of the territory in late 2023, forcing an estimated

100,000 Armenian residents to flee.

Since the 9/11 terrorist tragedy, Azerbaijan had received a waiver for Section 907's provisions. But a bill introduced in Congress in early 2024, known as the Armenian Protection Act, specifically sought to "repeal Freedom Support Act section 907 waiver authority with respect to assistance to Azerbaijan." Although the bill has not been enacted by Congress, the Biden administration had, in effect, adhered to Section 907 penalties on Baku.

"After Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity in 2023, our country began to be subjected to groundless pressure by the United States. ... The Biden administration wanted to punish us by depriving Azerbaijan of aid," said Bayramov, speaking at a news conference January 16 with his Georgian counterpart, Maka Borchorishvili.

Soon after the introduction of the Armenian Protection Act, the Azerbaijani government ordered a review of indirect US aid activity in Azerbaijan. That review led to Azerbaijani officials' questioning the utility of USAID's presence in the country. "When we analyzed the USAID framework document and its activities in the country in recent years, we realized that its works are not in line with Azerbaijan's interests and wishes but rather serve the US agenda," Bayramov said.

Top US officials, including former Secretary of State Antony Blinken, protested Baku's initial effort in early 2024 to terminate USAID presence in Azerbaijan, according to Bayramov. Negotiations did not yield any change in the Azerbaijani stance, and USAID was eventually ordered to cease operations at the end of May.

Bayramov never elaborated on what USAID activities supposedly went against Azerbaijani national interests. A USAID statement quoted by RFE/RL's Azeri-language service asserted that the government's portrayal of its activities was unfair. "For more than three decades, USAID has worked with the people of Azerbai-

jan to promote economic opportunity, strengthen local health systems, and engage citizens more actively in public life," the statement reads. "We are committed to supporting the people of Azerbaijan and working toward regional peace and economic integration."

Aliyev himself offered pointed criticism of USAID and the Biden administration more broadly, during a December 18 television interview with Dmitry Kiselev, who for years has been viewed as the Kremlin's chief propagandist. "They [the United States] have this agency called USAID, which wants to help, but for some reason, it helps in the wrong places," Aliyev said during the interview.

Azerbaijan does not appear inclined to soften its current stance even though there is a new administration in Washington. But it may not be much of an issue with Trump, who signed an executive order temporarily suspending all US foreign assistance programs for 90 days pending reviews to determine whether they are aligned with his administration's policy goals.

In an early January interview with Azerbaijani media outlets, Aliyev expressed a desire for better bilateral relations with Washington, noting that during Trump's first stint in the White House "there was no issue in US-Azerbaijan relations." He went on to say that "the main mistake of the Biden administration regarding Azerbaijan was that [it] sacrificed US-Azerbaijan relations for US-Armenia relations."

Whether the US stance vis-à-vis Azerbaijan will shift under Trump is uncertain, even though Trump personally has demonstrated a fondness for the strongman-style of leadership pursued by Aliyev. Both Trump and his Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, have voiced strong support for "Armenian Christians." Rubio has also been a vocal critic of the Aliyev administration's crackdown on internal political opponents and dissenters.

(This story originally appeared on the website www.eurasianet.org on January 23.)

Turkey Praises Armenia for Extraditions

YEREVAN (Azatutyun) — Turkey praised Armenia for extraditing over the previous weekend two men described by it as members of a Turkish organized crime group.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry on January 20 said they were handed over to Ankara "in response to a request from Interpol under its Red Notice."

"Turkiye appreciates the cooperation demonstrated in this matter by Armenia," it said in a statement.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry reported the extraditions earlier on Sunday. It also cited an Interpol arrest warrant for the two men who are apparently Turkish nationals.

Citing the Turkish Interior Ministry, the state-owned Anadolu news agency identified them as "organized crime ringleader Ercan Yilmaz and his accomplice Ibrahim Kaymak." It said Yilmaz has been wanted in Turkey for the past 15 years. The ministry also released a short video of masked Turkish police officers escorting the two men on board a plane bound for Turkey.

The Armenian statement did not clarify when and how the two men entered Arme-

nia. They were extradited just over a month after Armenia's National Security Service (NSS) reported a "possible attempt" to illegally enter the country from Turkey.

Russian border guards alerted the NSS about the suspected illegal border crossing on December 11. They spotted damage caused to barbed wire protecting a section of the Armenian-Turkish border and footprints leading from there towards a nearby Armenian village.

The NSS said on December 12 that it is taking "necessary operational-intelligence measures" in connection with the alert. It has not yet been clarified whether someone actually crossed the border and was detained as a result.

EU Suspends Visa-Free Regime for Georgian Diplomats

TBILISI (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Permanent representatives of the European Union's 27 member states decided on Friday, January 24, to temporarily suspend the visa-free regime for holders of Georgian diplomatic passports, TASS reported citing a source from one of the EU Council delegations.

"Yes, permanent representatives reached an agreement this morning to suspend the visa-free regime for Georgian diplomatic passports," the source said.

According to the diplomat, the decision must still be formally approved by the EU Council, which could happen at the upcoming meeting of the 27 foreign ministers scheduled for January 27.

On December 20, the European Commission officially proposed suspending the visa-free regime for Georgian officials and diplomats, citing increasing diplomatic setbacks in the country.

MP Arusyak Julhakyan Elected PACE Vice-President

YEREVAN (Public Radio of Armenia) — Armenian MP Arusyak Julhakyan was elected Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, on January 27.

Nineteen Vice-Presidents are elected annually at the beginning of an ordinary session and remain in office until the opening of the next session.

PACE winter session kicked off in Strasbourg on Monday, January 27, and ran through January 31.

Debates on the humanitarian crisis concerning women, children and the hostages in Gaza; and on the need for a renewed rules-based international order — with a statement by Marko Bošnjak, President of the European Court of Human Rights — are among the highlights of the winter plenary session.

The Assembly will also hold urgent debates on the "Opinion on a draft convention for the protection of the profession of lawyer," "The urgent need for free and fair elections in Belarus" and the "European commitment to a just and lasting peace in



Arusyak Julhakyan

Ukraine."

The Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Luc Frieden, addressed the parliamentarians and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, Xavier Bettel, will present his communication to the Assembly and take questions from members in the framework of Luxembourg's Presidency.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew also addressed the Assembly.

Ruben Vardanyan Trial Continues in Baku

TRIAL, from page 1

"I have already noted that these trumped-up trials are also notable for numerous absurdities, fabricated stories, and made-up testimonies. This episode once again proves that the charges brought have political motives. Leaving aside the Azerbaijani narratives about the events of Khojaly, which are refuted by the testimonies of former Azerbaijani President [Ayaz] Mutalibov himself, it is obvious that during the 1.5-year-long investigation, the [Azerbaijani] prosecutors did not even 'bother' to at least 'correspond' the charges with the life stories of the political prisoners. For example, it becomes clear from Ruben Vardanyan's life story that he studied at Moscow State University in those years, which he graduated from in 1992," noted Sahakyan.

Other members of Karabakh's leadership were also arrested and held in Azerbaijan. They are former Presidents Arayik Harutyunyan, Bako Sahakyan, former chairman of the National Assembly David Manukyan and former Foreign Minister David Babayan, former commander of the Defense Army Levon Mnat-sakanyan were standing in front of the court. Persons, Vasily Beglaryan, Erik Ghazaryan, David Alaverdyan, Gurgun Stepanyan, Levon Balayan, Madat Babayan, Garik Martirosyan, Melikset Pashayan.



Community News

Armenian Community Responds to Eaton Wildfire

By Eddie Rivera

PASADENA, Calif. (PasadenaNow.com) — Given the sheer number of homes, families and lives affected by the Eaton Fire, which is now close to containment, the Eaton Fire has drawn a community response clearly as strong as the fire itself.

In the Southern California Armenian community, the second-largest in the world, response to those in need has been overwhelming, as more than 100 Armenian families lost their homes.

The Sahag-Mesrob Armenian Christian School in Altadena was completely destroyed on the first night of the fire, except for its *khachkar* / cross stone. In fact, the feeling is strong within the Armenian community that the same type of *khachkar* / cross stone at the Tekeyan Cultural Association (TCA) Beshgeturian Center — which was dedicated in June—protected that building.

The Sahag-Mesrob school has relocated temporarily to the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Pasadena.

“About 16 of our families have lost their homes,” said Sahag-Mesrob Principal Maral Aroyan-Boyadjian. “A lot of them are still evacuated. And so I think students are just looking forward to coming back and seeing their friends at least, so they have some normalcy in the midst of this chaos.”

Gary Manjikian of the St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church also noted that since the outbreak of the fire, their church has served as a donation center.

“We have been collecting donations from people that can give,” he said, recently, “and we have been passing them out to people in need and they have been rolling through here very heavily as needed and we’ve been trying to help everybody out as much as possible and everybody’s been going great.”

“We’ve just been a little overwhelmed and drained from that process,” he added, noting that the church has had about 15 to 20 volunteers coming in daily to help out.

“It’s families, moms, kids, whoever can contribute and we’re doing whatever we can,” he said. “It’s a major devastation.”

As Manjikian reflected, “It’s a very sad situation. We know of many, many families, not only in our community but overall that have lost their home or have been displaced due to major smoke damage and fire damage.”

“So we’re doing whatever we can where besides our regular life, we’re probably putting in an additional six to eight hours of our days here to help people. And thank God God’s given us the energy and the power to be able to do it.”

AGBU President Sam Simonian expressed the sentiments of concern see WILDFIRE, page 9



California Armenian Legislative Caucus Requests Montebello Genocide Monument Designation as Historical Landmark

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A January 23 letter signed by 36 members of the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation, all members of the California State Legislature, strongly requests of the California State Historical Resources Commission in Sacramento that the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument in Montebello be officially designated as a California State Historical Landmark.

The text of the letter follows.

Dear Honorable Commissioners,

The California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation (“Armenian Caucus”) strongly requests that the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument in Montebello be officially designated as a California State Historical Landmark.

The Armenian Caucus believes that the Martyrs Monument meets the criteria for recognition as a State Historical Landmark. Its design, a modern sculptural interpretation of traditional Armenian Church architecture, made it the first major monument in the United States dedicated to the Armenian Genocide and the first Armenian monument built on public land. The Armenian American community’s efforts to bring this monument to life not only reflect the strength and resilience of the diaspora but also make it a symbol of pride, especially for those residing in California.

The Martyrs Monument in Montebello was unveiled in April 1968 to honor the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government from 1915 through 1923, as well as to honor all victims of crimes against humanity. Since 1968, the Monument has served as a cultural landmark in the community and as a place where the diaspora of California Armenian Americans gather.

We kindly urge you to consider establishing the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument as a California State Historical Landmark.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please contact Natalie Bruton-Yenovkian at (916) 396-9738.

Sincerely,

Assemblymember John Harabedian, Caucus Chair; Senator Bob Archuleta; Senator Megan Dahle; Senator María Elena Durazo; Senator Caroline Menjivar; Senator Sasha Renée Pérez; Senator Laura Richardson; Senator Susan Rubio; Assemblymember Patrick Ahrens; Assemblymember Juan Alanis; Assemblymember Lisa Calderon; Assemblymember Jessica Caloza; Assemblymember Mike Fong; Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel; Assemblymember Jeff Gonzalez; Assemblymember Mark Gonzalez; Assemblymember Heather Hadwick; Assemblymember Matt Haney; Assemblymember Alexandra Macedo; Assemblymember Stephanie Nguyen; Assemblymember Liz Ortega; Assemblymember Blanca Pacheco; Assemblymember Diane Papan; Assemblymember Darshana Patel; Assemblymember Cottie Petrie-Norris; Assemblymember Celeste Rodriguez; Assemblymember Michelle Rodriguez; Assemblymember Chris Rogers; Assemblymember Pilar Schiavo; Assemblymember Nick Schultz; Assemblymember José Luis Solache; Assemblymember Catherine Stefani; Assemblymember Tri Ta; Assemblymember David Tangipa; Assemblymember Avelino Valencia; Assemblymember Rick Chavez Zbur.

Talar Chahinian to Speak on Language Politics and Literary Creation in the Armenian Diaspora’s

FRESNO — UC Irvine Professor Dr. Talar Chahinian will present a talk on “Language Politics and Literary Creation in the Armenian Diaspora’s Formative Years” at 7:00PM on Friday, February 7, in the Grosse Industrial Technology Building, Room 101, on the Fresno State campus. Chahinian’s presentation is part of the Armenian Studies Program Spring Lecture.



Chahinian’s new book, *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile*, focuses on two key moments and places of Western Armenian literary history, post-WWI Paris and post-WWII Beirut, to examine how a stateless language sustained itself in a diasporic setting. In it, by analyzing the public debates, critical writings, and the creative works of writers gathered around the journal *Menk* and writers gathered around the Writers’ Association of Syria and Lebanon (WASL), she comparatively interrogates competing models of literary production and their intersection with Western Armenian’s prolonged linguistic vitality.

This presentation works backward and takes the 1991 establishment of the Republic of Armenia as a departure point to ask: What is the politics of language that emerged as a result of Eastern Armenian being sanctioned by a state? In examining the cultural impact of independence on an exilic, post-genocide linguistic form, it traces language standardization efforts in the Middle East, where intellectuals and writers positioned Western Armenian against Soviet Armenia and developed a national rubric for language and literature in exile. Chahinian argues that while the adoption of the “national” category as the organizing logic of literary production had short-term generative effects, it proved detrimental to the long-term survival of this stateless language, for it ignored the multifarious composition of diaspora communities.

Chahinian holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from UCLA and lectures in the Program for Armenian Studies at UC Irvine, where she is also Visiting Faculty in the Department of Comparative Literature. She is the author of the award-winning *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile* (Syracuse University Press, 2023) and co-editor, along with Tsolin Nalbantian and Sossie Kasbarian, of *The Armenian Diaspora and Stateless Power: Collective Identity in the Transnational 20th Century* (Bloomsbury Press, 2023). She co-edits *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* and contributes regularly to the literary magazine *Pakin*.

The lecture is free and open to the public and will also be live-streamed on YouTube.



COMMUNITY NEWS

Bishop Mesrop Offers a Prayer for Christian Unity

NEW YORK — Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan, Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, was among the church leaders from throughout New York City who gathered for the city's annual "Prayer Service for Christian Unity."

The service went forward on Sunday, January 19, amid the soaring, Gothic vaults of the city's Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine. This year's gathering — part of the international "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity"—marked the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, and laid special emphasis on the Nicene Creed.

As the evening's host, Episcopal Bishop of New York Matthew Heyd warmly welcomed the clergy and worshippers from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions, noting the unifying role of the Creed among the various Christian denominations. "The Creed joins us together," he said, "and always makes us new."

The Creed also served as the liturgical centerpiece of the evening, rendered by the St. John the Divine Choir in a new musical setting. While composer Daniel Ficari based his work on an English text of the Creed, specific clauses were sung in Ar-



The Jan. 19 "Prayer Service for Christian Unity" took place amid the soaring, Gothic vaults of the city's Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine. As part of the international "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," this year's service marked the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, and laid special emphasis on the Nicene Creed.

nian, Syriac and Latin.

Parsamyan was one of several church

leaders who offered formal prayers for Christian unity during the service. He spoke on behalf of the Armenian Church and all its sister Oriental Orthodox churches.

"Increase in us the gifts of faith, hope and love, Lord, that we may walk in harmony as one body, living according to your will and shining as lights in the world," he said. "Give us the strength to shine your light into the dark places of our world, where our brothers and sisters endure persecution, injustice, and war. Bless them, Lord; inspire their hearts with hope, their spirits with resolve. For their sake, help us to bear witness to the Good News of Christ, in our words, in our actions, and in the spirit of our lives."

Also offering special prayers were Bishop James Massa (of the Roman Catholic Church), Bishop Paul Egensteiner (Evangelical Lutheran Church, on behalf of the Protestant churches), Fr. Chrysostomos Gilbert (Greek Orthodox Church, on behalf of the Eastern Orthodox churches), and Bishop Daniel Allotey (Anglican Church,

on behalf of the Anglican Communion).

Delivering the homily was Rev. Adriene Thorne, senior pastor of the city's Riverside Church. Fr. Patrick Malloy, dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, directed the service.

Diocesan Vicar Fr. Simeon Odabashian accompanied the Primate during the service, joining brother and sister clergy from the broad range of Christian traditions in the metropolitan area.

The 2025 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity drew its theme from a verse in St. John's Gospel: "Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:26). It occurs in the dramatic exchange between Jesus and his follower Martha, before the tomb of her dead brother Lazarus. Jesus says: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Do you believe this?" And Martha responds: "I do believe, Lord."

As a profound personal statement of faith in Jesus Christ, that Gospel passage resonates deeply with the meaning of the Creed, and its opening words "We believe," or "Havadamk" in Armenian.



Diocesan Primate Bishop Mesrop Parsamyan was among the distinguished church leaders from throughout New York City, who gathered for the annual "Prayer Service for Christian Unity," at the city's Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Jan. 19, 2025.

Mayor Bass Swears in Councilmember Adrin Nazarian Before Overflow Crowd

LOS ANGELES — Despite heavy rain, an overflow crowd packed Monarch Hall auditorium at L.A. Valley College to see Adrin Nazarian sworn in as a member of the Los Angeles City Council, on Sunday, January 26.

Mayor Karen Bass administered the oath to Councilmember Nazarian with his wife and children at his side.

"You know when I commit myself to doing something, I see it through," said Councilmember Nazarian, who served for ten years in the State Assembly before running for City Council. Nazarian credits his life experience with instilling this value of persistence.

His family fled war-torn Iran when he was a child, and it took several years for the family to reunite and rebuild their lives in Los Angeles. "That goes a long way towards making me who I am today, understanding the plight of others and making sure that everyone has an opportunity for a second chance to pursue their dream, while bettering the community and the society they live in," said Councilmember Nazarian.

"Councilman Nazarian has hit the ground running as Councilmember for the Second District, introducing new

legislation to make L.A. more affordable and working to make sure that housing is available here for the next generation of Angelenos," said Mayor Karen Bass. "Especially now in the face of crisis, collaborative leadership is vital. I know Councilman Nazarian shares a vision for a new Los Angeles where we continue to break from the status quo and move away from the old ways of doing things, especially as we unite and work together to rebuild and recover fully from the recent fires."

Nazarian took the oath in a restrained but celebratory event following weeks of heartbreak and anxiety over the windstorm and wildfires that have ravaged the Greater Los Angeles area. He led the audience in a moment of silence for victims of the fires and offered warm praise for the firefighters, police and City workers who have fought the fires, protected lives and property, and restored power after the gale-force windstorm.

In addition to Bass, Nazarian was joined onstage by Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Ca), City Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson, and David Huerta, President of SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West. The Master of ceremo-



From left, Councilmember Adrin Nazarian, Mayor Karen Bass, Mark DeCarlo, David Huerta, Rep. Brad Sherman

nies for the program was Mark DeCarlo, Emmy-winning host of ABC's "Windy City LIVE" and "A Taste of America" on the Travel Channel.

Joining over 400 supporters in the packed auditorium were L.A. City

Council members Bob Blumenfield, Nithya Raman, Curren Price, Heather Hutt, John Lee, Imelda Padilla and Hugo Soto-Martinez, along with City Attorney Hydee Feldstein-Soto and LAPD Chief Jim McDonnell.

COMMUNITY NEWS

SOAR 20th Anniversary Gala to Be Held Saturday, March 1

NEWTOWN SQUARE, Penn. — The Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR) was founded in 2005 to provide humanitarian relief to orphaned children and adults with disabilities in Armenia, Javakhk and Lebanon. For nearly two decades, SOAR has played a critical role in addressing child protection issues and the needs of the most vulnerable in the Armenian community. Today, SOAR boasts more than 600 volunteers in 145 Chapters worldwide, supports 35 institutions, including

several of its own Centers in Armenia, and has funded \$11.6 million in distributions to Armenia, Artsakh, Javakhk and Lebanon since its inception.

Week-long SOAR anniversary festivities will begin on February 24, as the staff from Armenia visits the US. On Thursday, February 27, SOAR will host a kickoff cocktail reception for Chapter Meetings where many of volunteers will meet each other, and the staff and board members for the first time. Chapter Meetings will take place

Friday and Saturday at the Hilton Hotel in Newtown Square. There will be a forum for chapters, the SOAR Executive Board and Trustees, SOAR staff and invited speakers to exchange ideas and initiatives and explore areas of opportunity for cross cooperation and collaboration.

On March 1, SOAR's 20th anniversary gala will be held at The Ivy at Ellis Preserve in Newtown Square. An extravagant evening is planned! Master of ceremonies will be attorney Mark Geragos, with music

from the Harout Bedrossian Band.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit <https://my.onecause.com/event/organizations/09b2b5a2-ff41-4d41-8d8b-1dec3db12ce0/events/event:4c8b-c6ee-7e65-42a2-9dde-54a1b9c8cba4/home/story>.

If you have any questions about the night's festivities, or how you can support SOAR's efforts, contact George S. Yacoubian, Jr., at gyacoubian@soar-us.org or visit www.soar-us.org.

OBITUARY

Marien (Der Bagdasarian) Samuelian Adventurous Traveler, Dedicated to Church and Family

WALTHAM, Mass. — Marien (Der Bagdasarian) Samuelian "Mimi", 93, of Waltham passed away peacefully on Monday, January 13, with her family by her side.

She was born October 11, 1931 in Boston, to Luciper "Lucy" (Der Stepanian) and Missak Der Bagdasarian.

Raised in Watertown, the middle of 3 children, she attended the Lowell School, West Middle School and Watertown High School, graduating in 1949. She went on to graduate from Burdett College in Boston's Back Bay.

She began her career as a professional secretary until her marriage to Kourken "Cookie" Samuelian in 1954, whom she

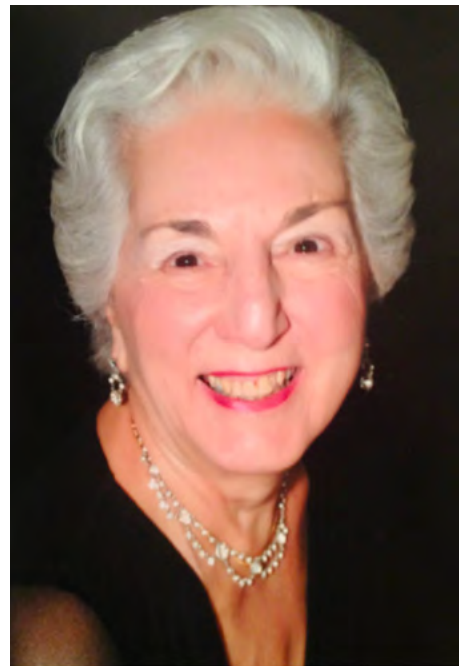
met while singing together in the St. James Armenian Apostolic Church choir.

They moved to Waltham and raised two sons, Kenneth Arsen and Michael Missak.

She resumed her professional career when her boys grew up and was an executive secretary at Puritan Fashions Corporation for many years, also serving as the company's board room fashion model. Additionally, she enjoyed runway modeling for Yolanda Fashions.

Later, after a passing conversation with the founder of Charter One Airlines, she became the Boston ambassador for the airline on their one day trips to Atlantic City and Paradise Island.

Throughout her life, she served St. James



and their families on many world adventures. Mimi additionally loved her weekly card games with close girlfriends and water aerobics with the Waltham ladies.

She was predeceased by her husband Kourken, her parents Missak and Lucy Der Bagdasarian, her brother Diran "Dee" and Rosemarie Bagdasarian and sister and confidant Louise "Lulu" and Sarkes Missakian. She leaves her sons, Kenneth and his wife Diane Samuelian and Michael M. Samuelian and his husband Sean Murray, granddaughter Julia Samuelian, grandson Michael K. Samuelian, nieces Sandra Missakian and Donna Bagdasarian, first cousins Robert Bagdasarian and his wife Marilyn and family, Edward Paul and family and Gloria (Paul) Voce and family and many loving cousins and friends throughout the Boston area, New England and California.

In lieu of flowers gifts can be made to the Kourken and Marien Samuelian permanent fund at St. James Armenian Apostolic Church.

Funeral arrangements were held at St. James Armenian Apostolic Church, Watertown, on Friday, January 17, 2025. Interment followed at Ridgeland Cemetery in Watertown.

Pauline Harian

Centenarian Descendent of Genocide Survivors

HAVERTOWN, Mass. — Pauline Harian, lifelong Haverhill resident and proud Armenian-American, died peacefully on January 20, 2025, in Haverhill, at the age of 100.

Pauline was born on November 11, 1924, daughter of the late Simon M. Hairian and Zaroohy H. (Movsesian) Hairian, both of whom were survivors of the Armenian Genocide. She was the middle child of three siblings between older brother Byron B. Hairian and younger brother Ronald Z. Hairian. (Pauline changed the spelling of her last name in the 1950s.)

Pauline graduated from Haverhill High School in 1942 and, with World War II raging, enrolled in the FAA Aircraft Communication School in Flushing, NY. She earned a certificate as an Airway Operations Specialist and worked at Logan International Airport in the Traffic Control Center, where she reviewed commercial and military flight plans and updated pilots in real time about weather and flying conditions.

After the war, she worked at Smith Chevrolet and at the former Hale Hospital on Buttonwoods Avenue as a bookkeeper, and from 1956 to 1965, she worked at the Internal Revenue Service as a Supervisor of Accounting. In 1965, she bought her home in Haverhill in her own name — a rare and remarkable feat for a single woman at that time — and lived there the rest of her life.

Pauline valued education and in 2015 endowed the Byron B. Hairian Scholarship Fund at Haverhill High School for a graduating senior who plans to study mathematics. Pauline also had a selfless devotion to her family, and ultimately became the end-of-life caregiver for her mother and for both of her brothers, Ronald, who died in 1996, and Byron, who died in 2012.

She supported many charitable causes



and was a longtime member of the former St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church in Haverhill and more recently was a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church at Hye Pointe in Ward Hill.

Pauline is survived by her cousins, Virginia Deranian, of Shewsbury, Mass., and Lucy Talanian, of Milton, Mass.; by her caregiver and good friend, Lana Haynes, of Plaistow, NH; and by many nieces, nephews and friends.

Her visitation was held on Tuesday, January 28, in the H.L. Farmer & Sons Funeral Home, Haverhill. Her funeral service followed at the funeral home. Interment was held in the Linwood Cemetery, Haverhill.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Holy Archangels Armenian Church, St. Michael & St. Gabriel, P.O. Box 8069, Ward Hill, MA 01835. Please make checks payable to "Hye Pointe."

To share a memory or for more information, visit www.farmerfuneralhomes.com

in countless volunteer capacities. Later in life, after retiring from work, she continued to volunteer weekly at the St. James office and Bingo night.

Mimi loved airplanes and considered travel to be the best teacher. She considered it her greatest gift to create multi-generational experiences by taking her sons

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Armenian Community Responds to Eaton Wildfire

WILDFIRE, from page 6

and compassion felt by Armenians worldwide: “It is in times like these that we unite in common purpose and take the bold actions necessary to help ease the burdens and hardships that many of our people in LA are experiencing right now.”

“Their world has been disrupted,” he said. “The fear and anxiety in what is a very unstable situation are running high.

AGBU is mobilizing efforts in coordination with those on the ground to aid fellow Armenians, Simonian added. He noted that they have already committed \$50,000 to the American Red Cross and \$50,000 to World Central Kitchen, respectively, to support their urgent frontline relief operations, now underway.

“At the same time,” the statement continued, “the AGBU Central Board is working closely with the AGBU Western Region leadership and its numerous volunteer committees to provide humanitarian aid to those in need.

Further information will be announced in the days to come, the statement added.

The Tekeyan Cultural Association Beshgeturian Center at 1901 N. Allen in Altadena, which was inside the mandatory evacuation zone, is only now being inspected for damage, said Dr. Arshavir Gundjian, President, Tekeyan Cultural Association of the United States and Canada.

“Even though externally, no major physical damage is evident, of course we expect there to be smoke damage internally which we will have to remedy.



The Sahag-Mesrob School in Altadena burns in Eaton Fire

Gundjian added, “We were happy that the area was guarded by National Guard and police, so we are thankful and expect that it was protected from any looting. Our local Center committee chairman brought the guards and national responders breakfast to express our appreciation of their efforts.

Once we regain access to the building and remedy any damage suffered,” said Gundjian, “we will provide access to the building to Armenian community members and to Sahag & Mesrob school, which suffered heavily as a result of the fire.”

Donations are still being accepted and distributed at St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church, 58 South Sierra Madre Boulevard, Pasadena 91107, (626) 793-2909.

(First published in Pasadena Now on January 21, 2025.)

Ehikian Appointed Acting Administrator Of US General Services Administration

Washington (gsa.gov) — The US General Services Administration (GSA) announced Stephen Ehikian as Acting Administrator and Deputy Administrator on January 22.

Ehikian will oversee GSA’s nationwide real estate portfolio of over 360 million rentable square feet, over \$110 billion dollars in products and services through federal contracts, and the delivery of technology services across dozens of federal agencies that serve millions of people. As an appointee of President Donald J. Trump, he will accelerate the adoption of technology throughout gov-



Stephen Ehikian (gsa.gov photo)

ernment, drive maximum efficiency in government procurement for the benefit of all taxpayers, and will work closely with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) team to do so.

Ehikian is a serial entrepreneur in the software industry who has successfully built and sold two companies focused on sales and customer service to Salesforce. He most recently served as Vice President of AI Products and has a strong record of identifying next-generation technology. He graduated from Yale University with a bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering and Economics and earned a MBA from Stanford University.

“Under the Trump-Vance Administration, I will return the GSA to its core purpose of making government work smarter and faster,” said Ehikian. “Moving forward, GSA will be laser focused on driving an efficient government and enabling our sister agencies to provide better service to taxpayers at lower costs.”

Ehikian was sworn in on January 20.

GSA provides centralized procurement and shared services for the federal government. GSA manages a nationwide real estate portfolio of over 360 million rentable square feet, oversees more than \$110 billion in products and services via federal contracts, and delivers technology services that serve millions of people across dozens of federal agencies. GSA’s mission is to deliver the best customer experience and value in real estate, acquisition, and technology services to the government and the American people.

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Paylan Plea for Diaspora to Stand Behind Armenia

PAYLAN, from page 1

Paylan served in the Turkish parliament representing Diyarbakir in the HDP party from June 2015 to June 2023, as part of the HDP party, where he even drafted a law to recognize the Armenian Genocide. Paylan is currently a visiting scholar with the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C., focusing on the South Caucasus and Turkey. In essence, he said, he is in exile now.

Paylan said he left Turkey last year because of the many assassination attempts and threats.

“There were so many attempts. My friends convinced me to leave. I am technically in exile now but I am keeping my struggle from Washington, DC. I am working with the rational Turks, rational Armenians and the Armenian government and Turkish Parliament to establish peace in the region,” he said.

He spoke extensively about his late friend, drawing parallels between their approaches as well as their situations in Turkey.

Greeting the audience in Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish, he paid tribute to Dink, at times getting emotional. He explained how Dink’s positions were at times hard for diasporan Armenians to understand, straddling the line between honoring one’s Armenian heritage and extending a hand in friendship to Turks.

“For Armenians — and for which Armenians — who was Hrant Dink,” he asked. “[For] some Armenians when they saw Hrant just talking about the Armenian Genocide, he was a hero but when he was talking about the sufferings of the Azeris, the sufferings of the Kurds, the centuries we coexisted together, [they] were not happy with those sentences,” Paylan said.



Hrant Dink

“Hrant described his position this way: ‘I was on the knife’s edge. I could fall this side or that side,’” Paylan said. “He tried to stay on the knife and it was so difficult.”

Similarly, Dink was hyperaware of what he was saying not only to Armenians in Turkey and around the world, but to the Turkish government, wondering if he would meet with reprisals.

Paylan alluded to the winds of change in Turkey in the 2010s which allowed many to be open about their Armenian and Kurdish heritage and for people to speak about the Genocide, as well as Kurdish rights. That Turkey is gone now, he said, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Some of those freedoms were a result of the European Union application process for the Turkish government.

In yet another parallel tract with Dink, Paylan said many urged him to leave Turkey for fear of reprisals. They tell him, he recalled, “Garo, they are going to get you as well. You have to be silent.”

His voice choking at times, he recalled the assassination in 2007. “That assassination was coming and maybe he felt it but as an optimist, he wanted to go on. That was the question for Hrant. He was a romantic. He wanted to change Turkey. He wanted to make Turkey a democracy. He knew that was the only way for his grandchildren to not suffer the things he [had] suffered, that his grandfather [had] suffered. He wanted to live in Turkey and his children and grandchildren to live in Turkey. I begged Hrant to leave Turkey. I was feeling it. It was coming. Just a week before the assassination, I begged him to leave but he didn’t listen,” he

said. “Then when he was assassinated, I was so angry at myself” for not insisting more.

He noted, “Hrant Dink had a dream and that dream was very beautiful,” he said. “He was my hero. He was my mentor. He gave [me] my name back.”

Hidden Identity

He told a story recalling that when he was 4, his mother took him to the doctor but stressed before leaving the house that she would call him Kaya and that he would have to call his mother “anne” in Turkish, rather than “mama.” “It hurt me but I understood it was the rule to survive there,” he recalled.

“I understood my identity was not something normal in that land. I used that name, Kaya, for more than a decade,” he said. Dink, in his youth, had adopted the name “Firat” before reverting to his birth name.

Paylan recalled many personal stories that exemplified the modern Turkish dehumanization of Armenians.

In secondary school history, the only mention of Armenians was one line, that they were traitors during World War I and were dealt with. Dink, he recalled, told everyone there that Armenians in fact were not traitors and that “we used to live here for 4,000 years and something bad has happened in this land.”

He added in Turkey the word “Armenian” suffices as an insult.

“They didn’t need to use another word. Just to say you are an Armenian was a swear word. Hrant Dink saved us from this,” he said. Dink, he said, managed to normalize the Armenian identity. “More important than that, he made people understand that Armenians were a part of this land and they used to coexist,” he said.

He recited another story from his military service. “I was doing my service in the office with a young soldier. One day he ran into my office and he told me, ‘Garo, you know what they told me about you? They said you are an Armenian and I punched them in the face.’ I told him I am an Armenian and he fainted. He said, ‘how can you be an Armenian? You are a good guy.’ That is what he was told, that Armenians are betrayers and something like evil. Hrant Dink dismantled that.”

“Of course, they killed us, but there were hundreds of thousands of people who survived after the genocide. They were sentenced to silence and I was one of them as well,” he said.

In fact, Paylan’s ancestors in Malatya were also killed in the Genocide.

Personal Connections

Several times during the talk, Paylan stressed the importance of Armenians coexisting with neighbors, including Turks and Azerbaijanis.

“There were so many problems but so many good days, as well,” Paylan said.

He stressed that the peoples of that region — Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish or Greek — all played parts in and contributed to shaping each other’s cultures.

“The music that he was enjoying was the music that the Kurds or the Turks enjoyed,” he said, as was the food, and therefore he found common ground.

That approach, however, was not popular with the Turkish majority there, Paylan explained. “That was a big threat to the establishment. That is why they killed Hrant. He was like an icebreaker ship. That ice was frozen for 90 years and he broke that ice,” Paylan said.

Paylan said that whenever diasporan Armenians were assassinated or publicly criticized Turks as killers, the Turkish government exploited that as a win. “They needed to keep the Armenian identity in the Turkish nation as an enemy and they benefitted from that card,” he said.

Dink Assassination

Paylan spoke about the day Dink was assassinated, on January 19, 2007, outside the offices of his newspaper, *Agos*, in Istanbul. That day, Paylan was working at his family’s shoe manufacturing business when he got the call. “I saw Hrant lying on the pavement and it was not a surprise for me, unfortunately. Thousands of people [gathered and] started to shout ‘We are all Hrant, we are all Armenians.’”

He lamented that Dink was isolated. “We are all responsible for Hrant Dink’s death. We didn’t take care of him. He was so isolated. He was a target,” Paylan said.

Because Dink was talking about peace and reconciliation, many Armenian organizations shunned him.

He noted, “Of course we all want this wound [of the Genocide] to be healed. That wound is still open and we want this wound to heal. But what is the right approach? Hrant Dink was really showing that.”

He recalled that Dink had visited the US a few months before his death and his reception had been mixed. He likened that to some comments he himself still gets. He recalled that he recently spoke in Los Angeles, where “some Armenians ... asked me how much Erdogan is paying me to talk this way,” he recalled.

Paylan said that the efforts by the Armenian community to get the genocide recognized have been worthy and notable, yet, the emotional burden of the Genocide remains as it was.

“Whatever we did, it did not heal our wounds. President Biden recognized the Genocide but did it heal our wound,” asked Paylan. “I don’t think so.” He added, “Of course those are important steps.”

He stressed the only body that can help with the pain is the Turkish parliament.

Paylan in 2015 introduced a measure in the Turkish Parliament to recognize the Genocide. For years, he has been dragged through the courts in Turkey for the action.

Similarly, he said, Biden “did not lift a finger” during the Artsakh war, as he said Trump would not. He added that President Trump was in office during the 2020 war launched by Azerbaijan against Armenia and Artsakh and similarly did not interfere.

Armenia in Peril

Paylan warned repeatedly about the risk of Azerbaijani aggression and cautioned against the belief that aid would come from the US or the West because of Armenia’s Christian heritage. And he stressed that with the new administration in the US, Armenia has lost even more ground.

“What kind of national interest do we have to show Mr. Trump for him to lift his finger to stop [President Ilham] Aliyev from attacking Armenia? This is the question that Hrant Dink would ask,” Paylan noted.

He warned that the world is in a “dark era,” and that Aliyev is watching the new administration’s desire to claim the Panama Canal or Canada, and may seize an opportunity to do what it wants in Armenia. At the same time, the Middle East is being rocked by Israel committing “a genocide” against the Palestinians and looking to wound Iran. “Unfortunately, it is a totally dark era,” he said. “We need to come to terms. Armenia is at stake now.”

He urged Armenians to adopt a new way of thinking and join forces. Instead, he said, Armenians in the US should band together and present themselves as a forceful electoral bloc in the US, much like Jews.

“I believe 2 million Armenians living here should do better. Eight million Jews are living here. We don’t even have 0.1 percent of their influence. Why is that? We are as clever as them. We have great entrepreneurs and intellectuals and we suffered just

like them. So what is the problem? Hrant Dink asked us to think about that. He said stop trying to just target Turks. Forget about the Turk as an enemy. Try to think of the Turk identity as a neighbor and focus on Armenia. That is what we need to do,” he said.

“This is the era of deterring” the catastrophe of Armenia being invaded. “This requires might.”

“Wherever you go in Yerevan, you see young soldiers that don’t have their arms or legs. ... We lost that war. ... We won the war [30 years go] but we didn’t win the peace,” he added.

He said Erdogan is successfully playing his foreign policy game, winning concessions from the West, as well as Russia. Aliyev, Paylan said, is learning from that playbook.

“We relied on Russia and thought everything would go forever like this,” he said. “I believe what we should rely on is our mind, our power and our strategic thinking.”

He said Armenians can’t think that whatever is bad for Turkey is good for Armenia. “When Turkish democracy was getting better, we benefitted from that. We could talk about the Armenian genocide, we could talk about equality. When Turkish democracy deteriorated during the last 10 years, we suffered so many catastrophes again, including the Artsakh catastrophe.”

Instead, he said, “whatever is good for Armenia and Turkey, is good for the region.”

He advocated brokering a peace and opening borders to Azerbaijan, as well as creating person-to-person relations between the peoples.

“Our expectations should not be that high, but what we can do is at least to deter the massacres against the Kurds or deter a war which can be implemented against Armenia,” Paylan said.

“Turkey and the entire world is so far away from Hrant Dink’s dream. The good news is that still there are hundreds of thousands or even tens of millions that are ready to struggle for it,” he said.

“We will never forget. It is a burden we need to carry with honor. But if they don’t recognize it, it’s their problem,” but he added. “We should put 95 percent of our energy in our future,” Paylan said. “So many nations are committing genocides and massacres and it will happen unfortunately in this era. Nobody will care about a genocide that happened 110 years ago. It is up to the Turks. If they recognize it, they will get rid of this burden.”

Non-Christian Armenians

He then spoke about the complex history and identity of Armenians in Turkey who survived the Genocide, including those who had converted to Islam, either willingly or by force, and the hundreds of thousands of Armenian orphans who were adopted by Turkish or Kurdish families.

As the member of parliament representing the Kurdish-majority Diyarbakir, he said, so many people came up to him and whispered to him that they had an Armenian grandmother. “In almost every family there was an Armenian grandmother. ... When it comes to the Armenian patriarchate in Turkey, ‘They ask about their [own] identity, they want to send their kids to Armenian schools. The acting patriarch said whoever is not a Christian cannot be an Armenian. Hrant Dink really just struggled about this as well. He said they were forced to convert or chose to convert to Islam.’”

“The dilemma of to live or to leave is the biggest dilemma of those three generations,” he said.

The hybrid event was co-sponsored by the Friends of Hrant Dink, Inc., and Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies.



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Arts & Culture

The Mysterious Donor Who Fled Communism and Left Millions to The Art World



Aso O. Tavitian grew up poor — but at age 64 he began an “explosion of buying.” Under the radar, he amassed old masters, leaving 331 to the Clark. How did he do it?

By Ted Loos

NEW YORK (*New York Times*) — He did it all quietly. “Nothing about him said, ‘Look at me,’” said Candace Beinecke, president of Aso O. Tavitian’s foundation.

“Very few people outside the art world knew about him,” confided Olivier Meslay, the director of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass.

When it was announced in November that Aso O. Tavitian, through his foundation, had left the Clark 331 artworks estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars — plus \$45 million to build a new wing to house it all — the news prompted some to wonder: So who was this guy?

Tavitian, who died in 2020 at age 80, was a self-made man and a focused, under-the-radar collector who built a staggering trove of old masters and other classical European artworks — by esteemed painters like Hans Memling, Peter Paul Rubens, Parmigianino, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Gian Lorenzo Bernini — in just 16 years.

Most of the objects that Tavitian collected that were not in the Clark gift — including fine English furnishings that resided in his grand houses, one in New York City and one in Stockbridge, Mass. — will be sold in a four-part auction at Sotheby’s New York in February, “The Vision of Aso O. Tavitian,” with an overall estimate of \$14 million to \$21 million.

It will finally give the public a window into his art-filled and very well-appointed life.

The collection had an aristocratic cast — Meslay called it “princely.” Some notable lots include a religious painting by the Renaissance master Ambrosius Benson (estimated at \$600,000 to \$800,000) and a Madonna and Children from around 1620 by the Italian old master Daniele Crespini (\$300,000 to \$500,000). But Tavitian, while a lover of fine wine,

continued on next page



Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud

Exploring Armenian Roots through Photography

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan
Mirror-Spectator Staff

YEREVAN-BORDEAUX, France — French photographer Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud has been pursuing her artistic vision for more than 30 years, specializing in humanist, documentary and landscape photography. Since 2004, her work has been showcased in numerous exhibitions. Her photographic reports from Japan, Mexico and Vietnam have inspired several acclaimed exhibitions. Hamalian-Testud has also collaborated with the Opéra National de Bordeaux, producing series such as *Meeting the Artist* and *Behind the Scenes*, which offer intimate insights into the world of opera. In the spring of 2015, she presented a series of photographs documenting Armenia as part of the *Arménie(s)* event at the Musée d’Aquitaine in Bordeaux. Her creative pursuits have since expanded into co-writing and co-directing films, broadening her artistic horizons even further.

Dear Gaëlle, some photographers keep their first cameras and photographs as treasured memories. Have you kept yours?

For my 11th birthday, my father offered me a choice between two gifts: a small camera or a watch. Without knowing the deeper reason, I chose the camera: an Instamatic. I used it until the end of my teenage years, though it didn’t accompany me into adulthood. A vintage 6x6 Hasselblad quickly took over, marking the beginnings of a sense of artistic fulfillment. That camera is the dearest to me, like a jewel, the one I will always cherish.

Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, “Your first 1,000 photographs are your worst.” Would you say this was true in your case?

Henri Cartier-Bresson was undoubtedly aware of his artistic aspirations very early on and knew how to explore them from the start. As for me, the unconscious worked for a long time. Being self-taught in photography, I have always struggled to grant myself legitimacy in this art. It was precisely the famous first 1,000 photos that sparked my need to express myself through this medium. Even though I found most of them to be poor, they nonetheless developed my aesthetic sense. I recall one image, just one, that I finally considered successful and that gave me a sense of satisfaction. It was through this that the art of photography began to reveal itself to me, eventually becoming an essential means of expression for my balance.

The Opéra National de Bordeaux has given you carte blanche on several occasions, allowing you to create intimate portraits and explore behind-the-scenes moments. What was it like to immerse yourself in the world of opera?

see HAMALIAN, page 17

Austin’s Blanton Museum to Host ‘In Creative Harmony’ Exhibit Featuring Gorky

AUSTIN, Texas — The Blanton Museum here will host “In creative Harmony: Three Artistic Partnerships,” starting on February 16, in which six artists’ works are paired in a three-part exhibit. The pairs are Arshile Gorky and Isamu Noguchi; José Guadalupe Posada and Artemio Rodríguez and Nora Naranjo Morse and Eliza Naranjo Morse.

The exhibit will close on July 20.

No artist creates in isolation. Shared visual languages, techniques, and concerns shape artistic innovation.

“In Creative Harmony” explores the ways in which artists inspire each other by highlighting the relationships between three pairs of artists: inter-generational Mexican printmakers José Guadalupe Posada and Artemio Rodríguez; friends and innovators in abstract painting and sculpture Arshile Gorky and Isamu Noguchi; and Nora Naranjo Morse and her daughter Eliza Naranjo Morse, who will be creating new work together for the first time.

This three-part exhibition — each partnership organized by a different Blanton curator — reveals the diversity of connections and contexts that drive creativity.

Arshile Gorky and Isamu Noguchi: Outside In

From the late 1920s through the 1940s, painter Arshile Gorky (circa 1904–1948) and sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) developed their distinctive abstract vocabularies grounded in the natural world or evoking organic forms. Simultaneously, the artists established a friendship informed not only by their work, but also by a shared sense of otherness. The tension between “outside” and “inside” structured their stylistic synthesis of nature, memory, and myth, as well as their national and ethnic identities, resulting in highly personal visual languages.

Outside In reunites for the first time the three known collaborative drawings Gorky and Noguchi produced with De Hirsh Margules in 1939 in response to the outbreak of war in Europe. It will also present works shown by Gorky and Noguchi in landmark exhibitions of the 1940s but not seen together in over 70 years. These works ground Gorky and Noguchi in their historical moment—between Surrealism and the emerging New York School—and reveal the originality and impact of their visions.

Organized by Claire Howard, Associate Curator, Collections and Exhibitions, Blanton Museum of Art.

José Guadalupe Posada and Artemio Rodríguez: Calaveras y Corazones

Calaveras y Corazones explores a cross-generational conversation between two radical Mexican printmakers. Known as “The Mexican Goya,” José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913)

see GORKY, page 15



ARTS & CULTURE

The Mysterious Donor Who Fled Communism and Left Millions to the Art World

from previous page

especially Burgundy, was not born to the manor.

He was a Bulgarian-born Armenian (the name Aso, which he preferred, was short for Assadour) who grew up poor and fled Communism with his family in 1959, moving to Beirut.

"Times were hard for his family, and they went to Beirut with no money and no place to live," said his partner, Isabella Meisinger, who was with him through his primary collecting years, after 2004.

"Catholic teachers helped him with his education, and he tried to help other people in return," Meisinger said. The Tavitian foundation, which will receive the proceeds of the Sotheby's sale, focuses its philanthropy on education and peace, particularly in the Armenian region, and on the arts.

Tavitian immigrated to the United States in 1961, when he was around 21, and drove a taxi while studying at Columbia University. Later in life, that experience showed. "He drove the taxi driver way — weaving in and out and trying to get ahead of the traffic," said his longtime employee Laura Fitzpatrick, who is the director of operations for the Assadour O. Tavitian Trust.

At Columbia, Tavitian received a master's degree in nuclear engineering and worked on a PhD in nuclear physics, but he did not complete his dissertation. In 1969, he was a co-founder of what became the software sorting company Syncsort, later becoming its chief executive and a majority shareholder.

In 2004, a notable year in several ways, he moved into a grand townhouse on the Upper East Side that had been under renovation for five years.

By that time he was 64 and a widower — his wife, Arlene, had died in 2002 — and he met Meisinger on a trip to the Hamptons, where she was working in an antiques shop.

"In the beginning, he thought he would just decorate the houses," said Meisinger, who recalled that most mornings, they would pore over auction catalogs of paintings and sculptures at the breakfast table. "It took him some time to go from the \$400,000 range into the millions."

But when the leap happened, "It became an explosion of buying," said David Bull, a painting conservator who advised Tavitian on purchases.

Etienne Bréton, a Paris-based consultant and dealer who worked with Tavitian locating pictures like Jean-Antoine Watteau's "The Proud Man" (circa 1715), one of the paintings in the Clark gift, said that the speed of Tavitian's progress was unusual.

In the case of Watteau, Bréton found the work in a collection in southwest France and personally ferried the consignment on the Eurostar to Tavitian's suite at Claridge's hotel in London for a viewing. Tavitian agreed to pay around \$3 million for it.

Tavitian's prime collecting years came as the art world turned most of its energy to contemporary art, leaving relative bargains available. Bréton said it "amused" Tavitian when he saw freshly painted works going for tens of millions, saying of his old master purchases, "This is nothing compared to that."

Ignoring trends helped fuel the quest. "I can't give you another example post-1970 of anyone who put together a collection of old masters like that," Bréton said.

Tavitian's taste ran heavily to portraits, from roughly 1450 to 1850. Bréton echoed others in Tavitian's life when he noted that the collector imbued "a human personality" to the painted faces he surrounded himself with, and that the sheer skill of old master artists for bringing their subjects to life may help explain his devotion to the genre. "He never had children, so these were his babies," Meisinger said.

Meslay, the Clark's director, recalled Tavitian going on about the power of a marble bust by Jean-Antoine Houdon, "Little Lise" (1775), on which he spent more than \$2 million, giving it to the Clark. "He was speaking of it like it was alive," Meslay said.

Meisinger said it was the delicacy of the ribbon in Lise's hair and her angelic face that helped seal the deal. She added that it was Tavitian's 2006 purchase, for more than \$5 million, of Parmigianino's "Portrait of a Man" (1530) — a cornerstone of the Clark gift and a highlight of what will be the Aso O. Tavitian Wing there, being designed by Selldorf Architects — that put him in the stratosphere.

He started to go for "the best of the best," she said.

An increase in purchasing power didn't hurt. In 2008, he sold a large portion of his stake in Syncsort.

Each fall, Tavitian and Meisinger would host a dealers' dinner at their East 79th Street home, amid the English and French antiques, where advisers would bring works for him to consider.

Not that he was a soft touch on price. "If he was interested, he'd take a day or two to think and then he'd make an offer," said Bréton. "He'd say, 'When I make an offer, I

won't move from it. You take it, or you don't take it.'"

George Wachter, the worldwide co-chairman of old master paintings at Sotheby's, agreed that the collector "didn't want to bargain."

At the same time, he could be dogged in pursuit of the right work, especially at auction. Wachter recalled, "He said to me once, 'When I decide I'm bidding on something, it's mine already.'"

Tavitian thought nothing of flying to Paris for a day to look at a painting, or to London to look at a Georgian bookcase.

enjoying in a few years. It is one example of the valuable sculptures that bolster the medium's prominence at the museum, not previously one of its strong suits.

Tavitian loved the Clark, which is only about 35 miles from Stockbridge. He joined its board of trustees in 2006 and showed some of his works in a 2011 show, "Eye to Eye: European Portraits, 1450-1850."

Tavitian was involved with other institutions, too, serving on the board of the Frick Collection for 12 years. He left the Frick and the Metropolitan Museum of Art one major work each: Giovanni Battista Moroni's "Portrait of a Wom-



One of the works in the Tavitian collection

The London-based English furniture dealer Simon Phillips, of Ronald Phillips Ltd., said he saw "some old friends" among the furniture pieces that will go on the block at Sotheby's — meaning items he sold to the collector, including a pair of late George II carved mahogany library armchairs, circa 1755, originally made for Eccleshall Castle in Staffordshire, England, and covered in elaborate French needlework, estimated at \$150,000 to \$250,000 for the pair.

Phillips said that Tavitian took care of his treasures, too. "He always said that the sunlight was tough on the furniture at his house in the Berkshires," Phillips said, noting that he kept the finest pieces in the city. "He wouldn't put something great in the window."

Meisinger knew more about furniture than paintings when she met Tavitian, but learned about other fields along the way. She urged Tavitian to take a second look at Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Renaissance bronze "Countess Matilda of Canossa" (circa 1630-39) when they saw it at an art fair in Maastricht, the Netherlands. As a child she had seen Bernini's great Fountain of the Four Rivers in Rome, and it made an impression.

"He said, 'That's a lot of money,'" Meisinger recalled. "I said, 'If you don't buy it, someone will grab it right away. A small one by Bernini is rare.'"

They went to lunch and discussed it for about 90 minutes, and Meisinger recalled that Tavitian ended up paying just under \$2 million for the piece, which Clark visitors will be

an" (circa 1575) and Francesco Salviati's "Bindo Altoviti" (circa 1545).

In the fall of 2019, he got a cancer diagnosis. He had already been considering the Clark gift but after the health news, "That accelerated his plan," Fitzpatrick, his assistant, said.

But he did not imagine that he had only six months left. "He thought he had five years to live," Meisinger said.

died of septic shock in the hospital there, though the cancer was far along, too, said Fitzpatrick.

Meisinger and Tavitian had planned to be married, but in the early days of the pandemic, they couldn't find anyone to perform the ceremony before he died.

"I tried to get a license to marry them in Massachusetts, but it came the day after he died," Beinecke said.

Tavitian told Meisinger that after his death, she would have her pick of artworks that were not in the Clark donation.

She chose a handful of pieces, including Johann Wilhelm Preyer's "Still Life of Grapes" (1831-36), because it hung in the kitchen and reminded her of his interest in wine.

That bequest may have been smaller than the one to the Clark, but it demonstrated the collector's faith in art's power to endure.

Bréton said Tavitian's attitude was: "I will die, the dealer will die and the auction rooms will change. But the picture will remain."



ARTS & CULTURE

Recipe Corner



by Christine
Vartanian Datian



FEAST IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Blanche Shaheen: My Favorite Dessert of All Time – Knafeh

“Ask anyone from Arab countries what their favorite dessert is, and without hesitation they will most likely respond: ‘Knafeh,’” says Blanche Shaheen at her acclaimed Arab food blog, Feast in the Middle East, where she features cuisine from all of the Levant and beyond.

“This iconic dessert, spelled a myriad of ways, from kanafeh to knafe to kanafeh, is undoubtedly the most popular dessert among Arabs the world over. This layered confection consists of shredded phyllo dough called ‘kataife’ doused with ghee or melted butter, covering a layer of gooey sweet and melted cheese. The whole pastry is then doused with a sweet syrup accented with lemon, or even rose water depending on preference. Chopped pistachios crown the top with extra crunch and contrasting color. Eaten together, the rich layers are sweet, creamy, buttery, and crunchy.”

“The dough is usually dyed a bright orange, so most people can spot the massive disks of melted buttery goodness in bakeries from a block away. While there are several theories on the origins of this legendary dessert, most historical roads lead to the town of Nablus in Palestine. The knafeh bakers from Nablus are renowned, often passing on family recipes handed down to them from hundreds of years ago. Nablus certainly is the most plausible area of origin, as the town is famous for their Nabulsi cheese. This cheese is made fresh from goats roaming the picturesque olive tree studded hills, making the ultimate foundation for knafeh. To solidify their place in world history, 170 Nabulsi bakers got together in 2009 to make the largest knafeh in an attempt to break the Guinness World Record. The pastry covered the city like an orange carpet spanning 75 meters wide and weighing in at 1550 kilograms.”

“While knafeh was a well-kept secret in Arab countries and Turkey, recently the secret has leaked out into the American mainstream, with the arrival of this dessert at Trader Joes. While the uninitiated might welcome this novel and niche dessert in a conventional supermarket, this frozen version does not even come close to the ones made at home or found in bakeries. For many, visiting Nablus to eat the authentic dessert is not practical, but with just a few ingredients you can make a superior version of knafeh in your own home. Many Middle Eastern markets sell everything you need, from the dough and the cheese to the orange dye and ghee.”



Blanche Shaheen,
Host of Feast in the
Middle East

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 1/2 pounds Akawi sweet cheese or farmer’s cheese (Mexican Queso Blanco)
- 1 pound thawed, shredded phyllo dough
- 1 1/2 cups ghee (or melted butter)
- 1/4 teaspoon knafeh orange coloring (Blanche likes the Ziyad brand)
- 1/2 cup ground pistachios

Sugar Syrup (Attar):

- 2 cups water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- A few drops of rose water (optional)

PREPARATION:

Preheat the oven to 350°F. If using salted farmer’s cheese, place the cheese in a bowl of water and let soak overnight. This will extract the salt, resulting in a sweet cheese. Drain the cheese, and pat dry with paper towels. If using Akawi cheese you can skip this step. Place the cheese in a food processor and process until cottage cheese consistency is achieved. Set aside.

Chop the phyllo dough into slices, then shred with your fingers. Put the dough in a large round pizza pan on low heat on a stovetop burner, and add the ghee and orange coloring. Work with your hands (preferably gloved) to incorporate the ghee with the dough. Remove 1/3 of the dough and set aside in another bowl. Spread the remaining 2/3 dough evenly in the pizza pan, and press down firmly as you will invert the knafeh and you want this layer to hold together. Spread the cheese over the dough evenly.

Top with the remaining shredded phyllo and pat down evenly as well. Cover with foil and bake on the lower rack for 15 minutes. Uncover and bake another 15 minutes.

In the meantime, make the attar recipe or sugar syrup. Add 2 cups water and 1 cup sugar to a saucepan, and boil. Then reduce the heat to a simmer, and simmer for about 15 minutes. Add 1 tablespoon lemon juice, and optional rose water. Set the syrup aside. Remove the knafeh from oven, and invert upside down using another pizza pan. Drizzle with syrup to taste.

Any remaining sugar syrup can be served on the side for guests to add more if they wish. Sprinkle ground pistachios over the knafeh and serve immediately.

If you have a product you think would be a good fit for the thousands of viewers of Feast in the Middle East, please feel free to email Blanche at fitmeinfo@protonmail.com for information.

She works with many brands she is passionate about, and companies she’s worked with in the past include: Ziyad, Cortas, Ridha Naturals, Harvest Peace Olive Oil, Levant Blends Coffee, Sadaf, Sea of Herbs, Antler Farms, Ambrosiac Salep, MVMT, Draeger’s Markets, Thrive Market, Keto Box and Wilton Armetale.

You can check out her cooking video tutorials and cultural commentary on growing up Arab American at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/blanchetv>. Her recipes can also be found at <https://feastinthemiddleeast.wordpress.com/>. She has been featured on NBC’s “California Live,” BBC World News, KQED’s “Check Please” program, NPR radio, the Palo Alto Weekly, the Los Altos Crier, the Mountain View Voice, the San Jose Mercury News, and the Rumi Awards show she hosted for an international audience.

Growing up in an Arab American household, rich traditional Arabic dishes were central to Blanche’s family’s life. However she noticed that previous generations of her family did not document these heirloom recipes on paper, but passed the cooking techniques only by word of mouth. So Blanche began a mission of cultural preservation, taking down the cooking methods and exact ingredients of these hundreds of year old recipes. She launched a popular YouTube cooking show called “Feast in the Middle East” to not only share these recipes with her family, but with the world.

Some of these dishes are classical favorites, like smoky Syrian Muhammara dip with walnuts, pomegranate molasses and roasted peppers, “Warak Enab,” or rice and lamb rolled into tender grape leaves and cooked in a tomato broth, or Lebanese semolina custard scented with rose water called “Layali Lubnan” or “Lebanese Nights.” Other dishes, like Musakhan, come from small and obscure villages like Ein Erik in the Palestinian West Bank. Musakhan is a sumac spiced chicken roasted on bread and smothered with caramelized onions and toasted pine nuts. Ancient recipes like chewy semolina date ring cookies called Ma’moul commemorate both Easter and Ramadan, while an over 1000- year-old cinnamon spiced bulgur wheat porridge called Burbarra celebrates the Feast of Santa Barbara in the Arab Levant, Malta, and even Eastern Europe.

While many of these dishes used to take hours to make, Blanche modernized these recipes to adapt to today’s western palate and busy lifestyles.

Readers will be able to recreate street foods like Chicken Shawarma and crispy Falafel in their own kitchens using easy techniques and familiar ingredients. Fusion dishes like Baklava Granola with pistachios and cardamom, Middle Eastern Nachos or “Machos” with pita chips and cucumber yogurt sauce, and a Lemon Cheesecake made with creamy labneh cheese adapt middle eastern spices and ingredients to western tastes. Today the “Feast in the Middle East” YouTube series has brought together a global cooking community in an unexpected and beautiful way. Now viewers are making these recipes in the United States, Canada, India, Australia, Spain, Korea and beyond.

ORDER: Feast In The Middle East - A Personal Journey of Family and Cuisine by Blanche Araj Shaheen, go to: https://secure.mybookorders.com/mbo_index.php?isbn=9781545675113

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ARTS & CULTURE

Books

New Novel *Blood Family* Explores Armenian Culture and Folklore

Author Eric Avedissian announces the release of his latest novel, *Blood Family*, the third installment in the four-book *Martyr's Vow* series published by Shadow Spark Publishing.

Blood Family continues the story of Armand "Tark" Tarkanian, a monster hunter who can communicate with the dead thanks to a bloodline curse. In *Blood Family*, Armand receives an invite from distant relatives in Watertown, Mass. to mourn the passing of the family patriarch. What he finds in the moldering mansion is an odd assortment of Armenian traditions, dark secrets, and personal grudges.



Eric Avedissian

Things aren't what they seem: paintings shift and change, bones hang from trees, and the family's elusive patriarch is a *dakhanavar* – a vampire from Armenian folklore.

The *Martyr's Vow* series is comprised of four books: *Accursed Son* (2022), *Mr. Penny-Farthing* (2023), *Blood Family* (2024) and a forthcoming novel, *The Book of Wine and Sorrow* (2025).

"The idea for writing a series of novels combining horror and Armenian folklore came in grad school. I bristled at the negative depictions of Armenians in popular media. They were mostly drug dealers, criminals, or unflatter-

ing stereotypes. I set out to create an Armenian hero in a speculative fiction series you could root for and be proud of," Avedissian said.

Speculative fiction is a broad literary term that encapsulates fantasy, science fiction, horror and magical realism.

"The *Martyr's Vow* series not only captures the elements of horror and the paranormal, but it includes Armenian culture and folklore, particularly ancient mythology. When I wrote *Accursed Son*, I researched pre-Christian Armenia and found a fascinating pantheon of gods, goddesses, monsters and heroes. Armenia was a civilization rich with legends and old stories ripe for harvesting. Why not bring those tales and legendary creatures to life?" Avedissian said.

In *Accursed Son*, the first book in the series, Armand is an embalmer working in his family's funeral home. A bloodline curse allows him to see the spirits of those he embalms. The ghosts allow Armand to experience what they did when they died, which unwillingly pulls him into a murder investigation. Armand's quest to understand more about this curse and how to get rid of it guides him through the series.

Blood Family is set in Watertown, Mass., a town with a sizable Armenian population. Avedissian is no stranger to Watertown. In 1990 he interned at the *Armenian Weekly* newspaper in Watertown. He also attended Harvard Summer School in 1993 and lived in Watertown then.

"I wanted to showcase the cultural impact Armenians had in Watertown in the novel, and how Armand travels from Fresno to Watertown. He's used to spending time with Armenians in his family on one coast, but he's unfamiliar with Armenians on the East Coast. It's also fun including locations I knew when I was in Watertown," Avedissian said.

Blood Family dips into the history of the Armenian Genocide through Krikor Barsamian, a *dakhanavar*, or vampire from Armenian legends. Krikor is turned into a *dakhanavar* during the Hamidian massacres in the 1890s. When his family perishes during the Armenian genocide during World War I, Krikor gets his revenge in the bloodiest way possible. He's haunted by the trauma of the pogroms for decades after settling in America and the pain reverberates through generations of his family.

Avedissian started his writing career as a newspaper reporter in New Jersey. His reporting over 27 years earned



him multiple awards from the New Jersey Press Association.

His first published fiction story was for a science fiction magazine in 2018. Before that, he wrote and designed a tabletop role-playing game based on old pulp serials called *Ravaged Earth*, which was published in 2008. Avedissian's award-winning novel *The Ocean Hugs Hard* is a noir horror mystery set in the Jersey Shore in 1966 that pays homage to horror writer H.P. Lovecraft in terms of style and theme.

After receiving a master's degree in writing from Rowan University in 2020, he changed careers from journalism to education. He's currently an adjunct professor at Atlantic Cape Community College where he teaches English composition.

In 2024 Avedissian was awarded a Fellowship in Prose from the New Jersey Council on the Arts. Fellowships are competitive awards to New Jersey artists following an independent review of work samples. Avedissian submitted the first chapter of *Accursed Son* for review. The grant Avedissian received was used to further his writing goals.

"Writing is a personal and intimate act," Avedissian said. "Unleashing your innermost thoughts on the page and creating characters that readers can identify with is powerful."

To purchase a copy of *Blood Family*, visit <https://books2read.com/u/4AIerN>

Austin's Blanton Museum to Host 'In Creative Harmony' Exhibit Featuring Gorky

GORKY, from page 12

is also considered the father of modern Mexican printmaking. Inspired by Posada's use of irony, satire, and caustic social critique as potent artistic strategies, Artemio Rodríguez (b. 1972) employs the same grim humor in works challenging contemporary social and political injustice.

Both Posada and Rodríguez depict imagined, sometimes apocalyptic, worlds where "all's fair in love and war." These two thematic throughlines connect their bodies of work with scenes of murderous skeletons and damsels in distress, often depicted as calaveras y corazones ("skulls and hearts/sweethearts"). This section will feature approximately 80 carefully chosen works, including many Posada prints drawn from Rodríguez's personal collection and loans from esteemed institutions.

Organized by Vanessa Davidson, Curator of Latin American Art, Blanton Museum of Art

Nora Naranjo Morse and Eliza Naranjo Morse: Lifelong

For Lifelong, contemporary artists Nora Naranjo Morse (b. 1953) and Eliza Naranjo Morse (b. 1980), the mother-daughter descendants of a renowned artis-

tic family of the Kha'p'o Owingeh (Santa Clara Pueblo, NM), are collectively creating an immersive environment. Together, they'll merge their familial and personal artistic practices through artworks that center Indigenous ways of thinking about our relationship to the planet, the sacredness of life, and acts of creativity. Their new collaborative work is grounded in the materiality of their community, from the micaceous clay of Pueblo ceramicists to local found and recycled materials, all imbued with legacies of storytelling.

Working together at this scale for the first time, Nora and Eliza Naranjo Morse explore the deep roots of how materials and languages embody meaning, how images and forms narrate ancestral journeys and how art can help envision a better future for all of us.

Organized by Hannah Klemm, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Blanton Museum of Art

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with more than 21,000 objects. Recognized as the home of Ellsworth Kelly's Austin, its major collecting areas are modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and prints and drawings.



Eliza Naranjo Morse, "Hurt," 2018, watercolor and clay on paper, 10 x13 in. (Courtesy of the artist)



ARTS & CULTURE

'Between Borders' Opens in US Theaters

By Karine Armen

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

GLENDALE — "Between Borders," a new movie about an Armenian family who fled Baku after the pogroms of 1988, is being released in the US this week. It was screened at the AMC Theater in Glendale on Sunday, January 26, hosted by the Armenian Film Society (AFS), and with the

Petrosyan family, who were forced to flee Baku due to the pogroms, go to Volgograd, Russia, and eventually move to the U.S.

Ivan and Violetta Petrosyan lived in Baku with their two daughters, Olga and Julia. Their families had lived in Azerbaijan for generations. Once the Karabakh independence movement began, the Azerbaijani government instigated pogroms in the Azeri cities of Sumgait and Baku, forcing the entire sizable Armenian population of Azerbaijan to leave.

The film starts in a U.S. Immigration Court in Washington, DC, where the Petrosyans are applying for asylum. As Ivan and later Violetta are on the stand and explain their plight and why they can't return to Russia, tension builds up.

Elizabeth Tabish, who plays the role of Violetta, has an impressive portfolio and is known for playing Mary Magdalene in the Biblical series, "The Chosen." Her grandmother was Armenian, and her father is Lebanese. During an interview on the opening night, Tabish said, "It was touching to meet [the real] Violetta after shooting a difficult scene."

The film was shot in Romania and the Petrosyans

visited two weeks and watched the production. Tabish added, "Being Armenian and playing this character who was protective and warm reminded me of my grandmother and great-grandmother. I felt they were with me."



Actress Elizabeth Tabish (Karine Armen photo)

participating of actress Elizabeth Tabish, writer/director Mark Freiburger, and producer Ken Carpenter. The question-and-answer was moderated by Armen Karaoghlian of the AFS.

The film is based on the story of the

ent stages of their journey.



This is the first time Tabish has played an Armenian character. She said, "We need to tell the Armenian stories. It has been an underrepresented group of people in movies and storytelling." She continued, "We need to remind everyone what has happened and prevent it from happening again."

Producer Ken Carpenter said, "Romania was an easy choice because we were creating Russia and Azerbaijan, and the buildings and streets were there."

Isaac Norris is the producer and co-writer of the movie. His father was the pastor of the church in Russia which the Petrosyans attended. Norris' parents serve as the executive producers because they wanted to tell their story. Isaac Norris said he has known this family for 30 years and has seen the differ-

ent stages of their journey.

Norris is friends with Julia Petrosyan-Eliason, the youngest daughter, who is married and has two children. Ivan and Violetta live in West Virginia, and Olga, her husband, and their two children live in Indiana.

Mark Freiburger is an award-winning filmmaker who has worked in film for a long time. He loved the true story because it teaches history, compassion, understanding of the refugees' plight, and acceptance.

The movie premiered at the Armenian Film Society's Armenian Film Festival in September 2024.

To learn more about the movie, visit <https://www.youtube.com/@BetweenBordersMovie/videos>



Elizabeth Tabish with her actor husband Stan Mayer (Karine Armen photo)



from left: Armenian Film Society's president Armen Karaoghlian, actor Florin Penisoara, producer Ken Carpenter, writer/director Mark Freiburger, Elizabeth Tabish, and film distributor Dave Mechem (Karine Armen photo)



ARTS & CULTURE

Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud: Exploring Armenian Roots through Photography

HAMALIAN, from page 13

It is an extraordinary privilege that the Bordeaux Opera has entrusted me on multiple occasions to photograph the women and men working behind the scenes, whose rare skills contribute to the success of the performances. My approach begins with meeting several of them, asking questions about their craft and their daily lives within the opera. Their desire to share their work and leave a lasting trace is often strong.

Then, I wander through the opera for quite long periods, immersing myself in their world. I take photos gradually, as people become accustomed to and comfortable with my presence. Of course, I photograph the artists during their individual and collective rehearsals, capturing their moments of intimacy, concentration, and connection before the performances, but also occasionally their emotions after the shows. I place just as much importance on highlighting the work of the seamstresses, prop makers, technicians, and all the other artisans who work in the shadows of the stage.

However, I imagine documenting “terra incognitas” must be even more exhilarating. Could you share insights about your “Ành òi” (Images of Life) exhibition on Vietnam and other international photography projects?

Wherever I am, no matter the place or time, my need to observe and connect with people remains as strong as ever. However, traveling elsewhere to photograph, stepping outside of myself, and immersing myself in cultures far removed from my own has always proven to be a deeply introspective experience.

I have no ethnological expertise, yet it is in the everyday lives of people that I find my greatest inspiration and joy. For instance, it was strangely during my first reportage in minority villages in Vietnam that the need to explore my Armenian roots emerged. Similarly, while working on a project in Mexican cemeteries, my urgency to delve into life itself took on a profound significance.

These works have been exhibited in several French cities, including Paris and Bordeaux, at the Musée d’Aquitaine.

Once you mentioned that your exhibition, “Hayastan. Thoughts of Armenia,” was inspired by your second visit to Armenia — a journey both to explore your roots and to let go of a burdensome past. Do you feel you achieved that?

I did not find any trace of my ancestors or family in Armenia that could have shed light on my roots. Nevertheless, the time spent observing Armenians and sharing in their daily lives contributed to my personal growth.

I came to understand that the unique aspects of my character, my way of living, my doubts, and my joy did not stem solely from my life experiences but were largely imprinted in my genes — like a memory carried by the body. This realization breathed new life into my artistic inspiration.

I’ve known two remarkable Hamalians from the Armenian diaspora: Leo Hamalian, an editor from the US, and Sona Hamalian, a humanitarian and educator from Syria-USA-Armenia, both now deceased. Could you tell me where your Armenian ancestors hail from?

A priori, these two individuals, whose remarkable human commitment is evident, unfortunately, are not part of my family.

My paternal grandfather, Hagop Hamalian, was born in Urfa. His parents were murdered before his eyes during the genocide of 1915. He was only 11 years



Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud in Armenia

old when he began the path of exile. My grandmother, Vartanouche Derderian, born in Malatia, fled the massacres with her mother and siblings at the same age as my grandfather.

My grandparents met in Paris as adults. They had three children, including my father.

I’m excited to hear about your collaboration with my friend, filmmaker Hakob Melkonyan, on the documentary film “Seuls,” which is set for release in early 2025. Could you tell us more about this project?

Hakob Melkonyan is such a dear friend that my bond with him feels almost familial. About 10 years ago, as he was discovering my photographs of Armenia at an exhibition, he proposed that we make a film together. At the time, I laughed, wondering what I could possibly contribute to a filmmaker! He had told me that we shared the same perspective on humanity.

At that time, I had embarked on an identity quest exploring my Armenian roots through photography. After many discussions between the two of us, we decided to write and co-direct a documentary film. It would follow a female photographer retracing her paternal grandfather’s past in Armenia after the genocide of 1915. Being a native of Armenia, Hakob had the cultural knowledge and expertise to guide me through this project.

We traveled several times for scouting trips with only one clue about my grandfather’s period of exile: the name of an orphanage where he had lived in northern Armenia — in Gyumri. Once there, our encounter with a child profoundly altered the direction of our film’s narrative. Instead of solely uncovering traces of the past, we were confronted with the chaotic present.

The making of this film demanded a profound emotional commitment, an ongoing internal dialogue that felt like a cathartic exploration, as well as the flexibility to meet creative demands. My collaboration with Hakob Melkonyan was both incredibly enriching and effective, thanks to our complementary skills and consistently aligned sensitivities.

The release of “Seuls” is scheduled for this year in international film festivals.

This extraordinary experience has opened up new avenues for me to explore in film writing and creation.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS & PROGRAMS

MASSACHUSETTS

FEBRUARY 1 — Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter Valentine’s Soiree: dining, wine and music. Pianist Marina Margarian, violinist Armenuhi Hovakimyan, 8 p.m. Baikar Center, 755 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown, \$75/person, RSVP: Sossy Yogurtian 617 281-1647 or syogurtian@comcast.net

FEBRUARY 8 — Valentine’s with Frank Sinatra, featuring Rich DiMare, hosted by Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church. An unforgettable evening featuring a specially crafted dinner sponsored by Fiorella’s. Saturday, 6 p.m., Nishan and Margrit Atinizian Hall, 200 Lexington St., Belmont. Tickets \$85. (617) 489-2280 or email:holycrossbostonma@gmail.com.

FEBRUARY 24 — UNDER THE SNOW MOON. Monday, 4 p.m., virtually, to keep connected. Program of the Friends of Armenian Heritage Park. For details and to register, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Calendar

MARCH 1 — Poon Paregentan (“Great Carnival”) Dinner-Dance. Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Church, 180 Old Westford Rd., Chelmsford. A terrific family evening of great food, music and dancing. Featuring the fabulous Ani Ensemble — Oud Virtuoso John Berberian; Dave Anisbigian, guitar and vocals; Art Chingris, Dumbeg; and Ara Jeknavorian, clarinet. Also featuring the latest dance tunes from Armenia and America Pop music by DJ Garen. Adults: \$35. Students: \$15. Children under 6: free. Paid reservation must be made by February 26 either on the church website, stsvartanantz.com, or by contacting Corie Horan, coriehoran@gmail.com.

MARCH 15 — Global Arts Live, in collaboration with The Friends of Armenian Culture Society presents: The Naghash Ensemble - First Boston Appearance! With its eye on the 21st century, the Naghash Ensemble combines the earthy spirituality of Armenian folk song, new classical music, and medieval polyphonic vocal music. 8 PM, Berklee Performance Center - 136 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston. Tickets: \$30, \$38, \$48, \$58www.globalartslive.org/content/event_page/10301

APRIL 10 — LET’S PARTY FOR THE PARK! Thursday, 7-9 p.m. Abigail Adams Ballroom, InterContinental Hotel, Boston. Benefit to raise funds to Care for & Maintain Armenian Heritage Park on The Greenway. Advance Reservations only. For reservations, ArmenianHeritagePark.org/Support

APRIL 11 — Lecture by historian and author Dr. Elyse Semerdjian sponsored by the Tekeyan Cultural Association Boston Chapter. Semerdjian is the holder of the Robert Aram and Marianne Kaloosdian and Stephen and Marjan Mugar Chair of the Armenian Genocide Studies at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide, Clark University. Her new book is called Remnants. 7 p.m., Friday, the Baikar Center, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown. (Use Norseman Ave. entrance.) Free admission. Book signing. For info, email syogurtian@comcast.net.

APRIL 12 — Holy Cross Armenian Catholic Church presents a nostalgic concert by Marten Yorgantz and Meghedi Vocal Ensemble, artistic director Marina Margarian. If your child would like to perform on stage, they can audition to join Meghedi Children’s Chorus every Saturday, 3.15 to 4.15 p.m. 200 Lexington St., Belmont. For registration and information, call 781-929-3415 or 781-439-3702.

To send Calendar items to the *Mirror-Spectator* email alin@mirrorspectator.com or alin.gregorian@gmail.com. You can also visit our website, www.mirrorspectator.com, and find the “calendar” section under the heading “More.” You can also mail them to the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 755 Mount Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02472. All calendar entries must be received by noon on Monday before publication.

COMMENTARY

THE ARMENIAN
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Observations on the Armenian-American Strategic Partnership

By Suren Sargsyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

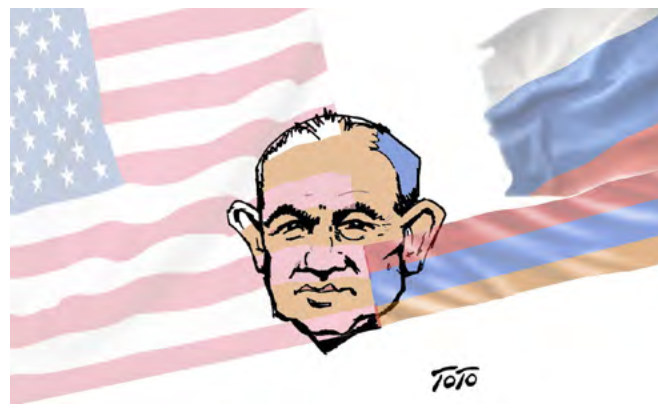
On January 14, the US officially upgraded its relations with Armenia to a “strategic partnership.”

“We are establishing our US-Armenia Strategic Partnership Commission,” outgoing US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced before signing the commission’s charter with the Armenian foreign minister. This document was signed just days before President Donald Trump took office, marking a milestone in US-Armenia relations under the Biden administration. Let’s clarify the nature of this partnership and the implementation scenarios for the charter.

Firstly, it’s crucial to differentiate between a strategic ally and a strategic partner; Armenia and the US are not strategic allies. The status conferred to Armenia by this document should be viewed with appropriate caution. Its signing was coordinated with the Trump administration’s transitional team, meaning this is an intergovernmental document, not one between the Biden administration and Armenia. Thus, it should not be considered an achievement of only the Biden/

Pashinyan administrations. If presented as such, the Trump administration will likely respond, “Go ahead and implement it with Biden.”

The signing of this charter was made possible by several factors, including the groundwork laid in the 1990s when Armenia signed numerous agreements with the US and during Levon Ter-Petrosian’s 1994 visit, where a memorandum was signed between Vazgen Sargsyan and US Secretary of Defense William J. Perry. Armenia’s active role in combating international terrorism and its participation in peacekeeping missions under the Kocharyan administration during the 2000s was emphasized by then-Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan in a National Assembly speech about joining the international anti-terrorism coalition. Also, Armenia deepened its relations with NATO and the US during the 2010s under the Sargsyan administration, achieving significant milestones in bilateral ties. This agreement therefore is the result of the efforts of the Ter-Petrosian-Clinton, Kocharyan-Bush, and Obama-Sargsyan administrations, culminating during the Biden and Pashinyan administrations.



Again, it is important to clarify that a strategic partnership is not the same as a strategic alliance like those between the US and Israel or the UK. The US will not offer Armenia security guarantees, military assistance, or arms supplies. This arrangement does not include the establishment of US military bases or personnel in Armenia. Security support entails advisory programs, military engagement activities, professional military education through the International Military Education and Training program, and maintenance of the partnership with the Kansas National Guard. Additionally, there will be financial and technical assistance for the economy, reforms, human rights, and social programs. There is also interest in deploying American small modular nuclear reactors in Armenia. As for combating ISIS, Armenia remains committed to the anti-terrorism coalition initiated after 9/11, participating in the fight against terror and now the campaign to defeat ISIS. The strengthening of ties between the Kansas National Guard and Armenia’s Ministry of Defense builds on the cooperation established in 2003.

The next question concerns the implementation of this document, which appears challenging given the incoming administration. The Trump team must begin

from scratch and appoint commission members accordingly. The document requires further development based on its principles. However, it is evident that the US does not plan to offer Armenia security guarantees, weapons, ammunition, or military equipment. American troops will not be deployed at the border; instead, experts will provide guidance on enhancing border security.

It is crucial not to overrate or undervalue the status bestowed by the US, as it can provide a strong basis for reforms. Armenia’s authorities should fully leverage the opportunities this status offers. Additionally, it’s important to recognize that this status can be revoked; Georgia lost its strategic partner status just a few months ago after its elections. Regardless, a valuable opportunity should be used to promote economic agenda priorities.

(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.)

Cal Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation Announces New Chair, Members

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation is pleased to announce its new chair, Assemblymember John Harabedian; new board members Senator Sasha Renée Pérez, Assistant Majority Whip Assemblymember Jessica Caloza, Assemblymember Nick Schultz, Assemblymember David Tangipa, and new members. The California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation has now expanded to 50 members.

The new members include Senator Caroline Menjivar, Assistant Majority Whip Senator Laura Richardson, Senator Suzette Martinez Valladares, Assemblymember Dawn Addis, Majority Leader Assemblymember Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, Assemblymember Patrick Ahrens, Republican Deputy Leader Assemblymember Juan Alanis, Assemblymember Tasha Boerner, Assemblymember Bill Essayli, Assistant Majority Leader Assemblymember Robert Garcia, Assemblymember Jeff Gonzalez, Majority Whip Assemblymember Mark Gonzalez, Republican Deputy Whip Assemblymember Heather Hadwick, Assemblymember Matt Haney, Assemblymember Maggy Krell, Assemblymember Alex Lee, Republican Deputy Whip Assemblymember Alexandra “Ali” Macedo, Assemblymember Stephanie Nguyen, Assemblymember Liz Ortega, Assemblymember Blanca Pacheco, Assemblymember Diane Papan, Assemblymember Darshana Patel, Assistant Speaker pro Tempore Assemblymember Celeste Rodriguez, Assistant Majority Whip Assemblymember Michelle Rodriguez, Assemblymember Chris Rogers, Assemblymember Pilar Schiavo, Assemblymember José Luis Solache, Assemblymember Esmeralda Soria, Assemblymember Catherine Stefani, and Assemblymember Avelino Valencia.

The new chair, Assemblymember John Harabedian (D-Pasadena), stated: “I am honored to chair the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation this year and welcome so many members to our caucus. The Armenian diaspora is diverse, multifaceted, and dynamic. I’m excited to continue to build awareness around Armenian issues within the capitol community, and to continue uplifting the voices of our Armenian community members throughout the state.”

Members Speak Out

In turn, Senator Caroline Menjivar (D-San Fernando Valley) de-

clared: “I am excited for this invigorating reorganization of the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation. Which will, no doubt, make robust forward progress under the leadership of our new Chair, Assemblymember Harabedian. I’m also very grateful for the opportunity to elevate the voices of my Armenian constituents in Senate District 20 and the greater Los Angeles area.”

Senator Sasha Renée Pérez (D-Pasadena) said, “I am honored to join the California Armenian Legislative Caucus. As the state senator representing the largest diaspora of Armenians in the state, I am committed to supporting the Armenian American community in its efforts to preserve its rich culture and heritage.”

Senator Laura Richardson (D-South Bay) said, “The vibrant Armenian community in California has been a cornerstone of the state’s economic, cultural, and artistic landscape for decades. Having triumphed over adversity as refugees and immigrants in the wake of the Armenian Genocide, this community has not only persevered but also enlightened the world about the enduring impact of this historical tragedy.”

“I am excited to join the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation under the strong leadership of my colleague and Caucus Chair Assemblymember John Harabedian, and I proudly stand in solidarity with California’s vibrant Armenian-American population,” said Assemblymember Patrick Ahrens (D-Silicon Valley).

Assemblymember Juan Alanis (D-Modesto) said: “I am honored to have been invited to join the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation. The California Central Valley is home to one of the largest populations of Armenian Americans in the nation. I am excited to learn more about their rich and vibrant culture and their contributions to this region and this great state.”

Assemblymember Tasha Boerner (D-Encinitas) said, “California is, at its core, a diverse state. That diversity brings us a wealth of opportunities and experiences. As part of the California Armenian Legislative Caucus Foundation, I will work with my colleagues to amplify the culture and issues of the Armenian community across our state.”



COMMENTARY

MY TURN



by Harut Sassounian

Pashinyan Again Makes Anti-Armenia And Anti-Diaspora Statements

The biggest tragedy of Armenians worldwide is that Armenia is ruled by a prime minister who is not only incompetent, but also anti-Armenian.

During his interview with Armenia's Public TV last Saturday, Nikol Pashinyan repeated once again his nonsense about the difference between "Real Armenia" and "Historic Armenia." He even claimed that "Historic Armenia" is the enemy of today's "Real Armenia." Just because wars and invasions have shifted Armenia's boundaries over the centuries, it does not mean that there is no such thing as "Historic Armenia." Don't be surprised if one day Pashinyan claims that Armenia has only existed since 2018 when he came to power!

What Pashinyan is trying to do is deprive Armenians of the right to even dream of restoring "Historic Armenia," someday in the future. He naively thinks that by announcing that Armenia does not have any territorial demands from its neighboring countries, he will be able to convince Azerbaijan to sign a meaningless peace treaty with Armenia. The fact is that Pres. Ilham Aliyev has zero interest in signing a peace treaty. On the contrary, he repeatedly threatens to attack Armenia. He describes the Republic of Armenia as "Western Azerbaijan," demanding the settlement of 300,000 Azerbaijanis in Armenia.

Rather than saying that we have no demands from anyone, Pashinyan should just keep his mouth shut. He should neither say we have demands nor say that we do not have demands. The reason is that Armenia is currently weak and cannot confront militarily its much stronger enemies — Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, it is wrong to declare that we do not have any territorial demands because that would give up Armenians' right to regain someday their lost territories. To keep that dream alive, Armenia does not need to have a powerful army. It just needs to preserve its historic memory and transmit it to future generations until the day when, due to unexpected circumstances, the opportunity arises to recover what Armenians had lost. If they do not keep the dream alive, even when such an opportunity comes up, Armenians will not be able to take advantage of it because they have voluntarily given up that right.

The best example is what the Jews were able to accomplish after losing their homeland 2,000 years ago. By preserving their dream of "Next Year in Jerusalem" and transmitting it to future generations, they were able to take advantage of the opportunity created in the 20th century to return to their historic homeland.

In his interview on Public TV, Pashinyan stated that no one will sell weapons to Armenia if we keep mentioning Ararat as being our mountain. This is totally false. Saying Ararat or Arakads has nothing to do with acquiring weapons. It has everything to do with knowing how to run a country and a military, and having the funds to pay for the needed weapons. If saying Ararat would have deprived Armenia of obtaining weapons, how did Armenia acquire, before Pashinyan, billions of dollars of weapons which were regrettably captured by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war and are now displayed in Baku?

When Pashinyan was asked about the appropriateness of his riding a bicycle or making an omelet on Facebook, while the country is on the edge of war, he replied: "all the institutions of our country are working even when I am riding a bicycle."

Pashinyan also excused his constant concessions to Azerbaijan by explaining that he does not want to respond to Azerbaijan's escalatory rhetoric which is aimed at provoking new hostilities. He does not seem to understand that making concessions to the enemy does not deter war. On the contrary, it increases Aliyev's appetite to demand more concessions.

When asked about a Diasporan Armenian's dream to return someday to his ancestral homeland, Pashinyan nonchalantly and insultingly said: "He lives in Australia, wants to return to the birthplace of his grandfathers, let him return. What does that have to do with the Republic of Armenia?" He continued: "Our compatriot lives in Australia, wants to return to the homeland of his grandfathers, which could be anywhere in the world, including Mush, Ardahan, Sis, but for that we should make our soldiers a target? Is that what we want? In other words, we want missiles to fall on our military units at any moment because there are people in Canberra who want to return to the birthplace of their grandfathers, which is Adana. Is this logical?"

In response to a question as to why he has done nothing to secure the release of the Armenian hostages in Baku, Pashinyan replied: "There are superpowers today that have citizens in the same situation in different countries and they are unable to bring them back for years."

During his meeting with a group of Swiss-Armenians in Zurich last week, Pashinyan raised unnecessary questions about the basic facts of the Armenian Genocide: "We need to also return to the history of the Armenian Genocide. We need to understand what happened and why?" Pashinyan is probably the only Armenian in the world who does not know what happened in 1915. He then continued with a nonsense question: "How is it that in 1939 there was no agenda for the Armenian Genocide? And how is that in 1950 the Armenian Genocide agenda appeared?" Pashinyan does not even know that the term genocide did not exist in 1939. It was coined in the 1940s by Raphael Lemkin. Until then Armenians referred to the mass murders of 1915 as massacres.

As soon as a new patriotic leader comes to power in Armenia, he should announce that every one of Pashinyan's orders, laws, statements and agreements are null and void.

The Great Doom Festival

Where Pashinyan Faces Criticism for Everything, Even Global Warming

By Berge Jololian

They say "never blame the weatherman for the weather." Well, let's just ignore that wisdom and place all the blame for everything — from global warming to slow Wi-Fi — squarely on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan! How dare he attempt to strengthen Armenia through new diplomatic, military, and economic strategies? Doesn't he realize that Armchair Experts in the Armenian American Diaspora can't sleep at night unless they've pinned every cosmic catastrophe on him?

The Great Charter Disappointment

Word on the street (or at least in the swirling circles of diaspora rumor) was that the recent U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue signing would usher in a glorious era of U.S. paratroopers landing gently on Armenian soil — instantly. Imagine my shock when I strolled through Yerevan's Republic Square, searching in vain for swarms of American soldiers patrolling the perimeter like a scene from an action movie. Even the border area was suspiciously devoid of any G.I. Joes waiting to repel the next Azerbaijani incursion. How absolutely dare Pashinyan sign something that requires actual follow-up and policy coordination, instead of spontaneously producing a magical battalion of foreign defenders?

Turkey Quaking in Its Boots? Not So Fast

One might think that, after Armenia's U.S. partnership announcement, Washington would issue a thunderous warning to President Erdogan — perhaps via a megaphone from the White House lawn — demanding, "Stop meddling in Armenia or else...!" But no. Strangely enough, states typically conduct diplomacy in more nuanced ways. Surreal, right? If the diaspora's worst critics had their way, we'd have F-16s flying overhead, dropping leaflets that say, "Touch Armenia and face instant justice!". Instead, we got... incremental steps toward cooperation. Yawn! Where's the Hollywood spectacle?

Supermarkets Not Overflowing with Doritos

The "Pashinyan is incompetent" narrative also contends that if Armenia were a real success story, we'd immediately see all manner of American goods flooding store shelves: Twinkies, root beer, cheddar cheese, and maybe a random Kardashian cameo or two. Yet, on my quest to discover these fabled wonders of capitalist bliss, I was met with standard local produce. Imagine that: a new strategic charter might take time to translate into expanded trade. How absolutely unspeakably incompetent that the diaspora can't find new snack varieties in Yerevan after a single agreement signing.

The Real Foe: Not Dictators, But That Guy in Yerevan

If you read certain diaspora commentaries, you might think that the gravest threat facing Armenia isn't the Aliyev-Erdogan-Putin-Lukashenko quartet, each with a robust track record of aggression, authoritarian rule, and historical revisionism. No, no — the real villain must be the prime minister who's trying to expand Armenia's foreign relations, buy arms from India, and open the economy to new partnerships. In this worldview, all woes are pinned on Yerevan's administration. Azerbaijan's ongoing land grabs? A trifling detail! Turkey's massive defense budget? Meh. Russia's unpredictability and opportunism? Let's not get too complicated. Much easier to just keep yelling, "Pashinyan is a sheep. Grrrr!"

Supporting... or Sabotaging?

Perhaps the sweetest irony is the diaspora's lament about Armenia's disunity while fervently broadcasting negativity that only fosters deeper mistrust and fragmentation. We've seen some diaspora folks appear to regurgitate lines suspiciously resembling Russian disinformation, labeling any shift away from Moscow as "treachery." Because obviously, siding with the same Kremlin that did nothing to help in 2020 is better than forging new alliances, right? Turkey and Azerbaijan must be cackling with glee at the spectacle: "Why pay trolls to undermine Armenian unity when certain diaspora figures do it for free?"

The Jaded Nostalgia

Some diaspora elements long for the "good old days" (which ironically never actually existed), where any show

of bravado from Yerevan would miraculously keep the wolves at bay. In truth, unyielding rhetoric without matching deterrence is a surefire recipe for calamity. But hey, let's not let reality stand in the way of a good rant.

A Humorous Plea for Sanity

Dear diaspora pessimist: Before you next declare Pashinyan responsible for climate change, your cat's weird mood swings, or the line at Costco, consider that building diplomatic, military and economic deterrence takes time. Partnerships with the U.S., France, or India don't magically teleport cavalry to Armenia's borders overnight. If we actually want Armenia to survive, we might channel our energies toward supporting — rather than sabotaging — Yerevan's attempts to navigate an impossible neighborhood.

Azerbaijan and Turkey do not need to sow disinformation or sabotage diaspora unity if the diaspora does it to itself. All Aliyev has to do is sit back, munch on some caviar, and watch as negativity and Russian-fed gloom erode diaspora cohesion. So how about a break from the "doom-laden blame-Pashinyan-for-everything" narrative? At this rate, next we'll accuse him of causing the next solar eclipse, and let's not even start on who's behind those UFO sightings...

Final Thoughts

Sarcasm aside, Armenia stands at a crossroads: forging new strategic ties, reforming the military and diversifying its economy are all monumental tasks that require national cohesion and diaspora partnership. If we spend our days gloomily insisting that Pashinyan is a naïve lamb awaiting slaughter — while ignoring actual wolves in Moscow, Ankara and Baku — we sabotage Armenia's future more effectively than any adversary could. A robust, supportive diaspora can be Armenia's greatest asset. Let's not become unwitting foot soldiers in the propaganda war seeking to bury the Armenian dream of progress.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to check the border one more time for those stealth U.S. paratroopers that just haven't shown up... yet.

(Berge Jololian resides in Yerevan, Armenia, and is a specialist in security and cybersecurity.)



In Armenia, Strategic Diversification Clashes with Geographic Realities

By Onnik James Krikorian

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has signaled plans to seek European Union (EU) membership. Though framed as an attempt to diversify away from decades of dependency on Russia, Moscow instead sees it as a western attempt to simply oust it from the region. Such a move is supported by some in Armenia amid disillusionment with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) following the 2020 war with Azerbaijan and a 2022 incursion into Armenia itself.

Nonetheless, diversification is long overdue in the country though it hardly had any choice. Only in the area of security has Yerevan found itself desperate to seek alternative partners given Russia's beleaguered situation in Ukraine. It has always been Armenia's geography that obstructs diversification in general, especially economically, but also in terms of security. Indian weapons are presumably transported through Iran.

Landlocked, blockaded, and still reliant on Georgia and Iran for physical overland access to the outside world, the EU market is largely off limits even if local producers could meet its strict standards or compete in a crowded marketplace. Even Georgia, which has had an EU Association Agreement in place since 2014, has hardly managed to make headway despite access to the Black Sea and open borders with all its neighbors, including Turkey.

Indeed, in 2023, Georgian exports to the EU stood at just 0.8 billion euros. That same year, Armenia exported roughly the same thanks to its Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in 2017. Since Ukraine, however, exports for both to the EU have declined. This is especially true for Armenia which is instead currently benefiting from the re-export of goods to and from Russia. That has proven nothing short of an economic miracle for the cash-strapped nation.

If overall trade between Armenia and Russia stood at \$2.5 billion in 2022, it reached \$12 billion at the end of 2024. Moreover, Russia accounted for 42 percent of Armenia's trade in 2023, with the EU at just 7.3 percent. Energy imports, particularly gas, and fuel for the country's sole nuclear reactor also come from Russia. Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) com-

plicates matters as Yerevan cannot be full members of both.

Russian officials have already warned that such a move could lead to higher gas prices, increased costs for imports, and greater unemployment. Some Armenian lawmakers from Pashinyan's Civil Contract faction have dismissed these fears but others have not. Recently, former Kocharyan-era oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, aka Dodi Gago, also rang alarm bells about potential economic hardship. A former U.S. ambassador also recently advised Armenians to be prepared for harsh winters.

The potential political fallout related from any socio-economic collapse was also flagged by the country's new Foreign Intelligence Service in its annual report published last week that warned of external actors exploiting economic and energy dependencies to destabilize the country. It also confirmed that there had already been an alleged attempt at staging a coup last year.

Despite the risks, on January 9, the government ostensibly moved closer to holding a referendum on potential EU membership following a petition collected by a group of extra-parliamentary forces believed close to the government. Although it garnered only 60,000 signatures, just over 2 percent of the overall electorate, parliament last week accepted a resulting bill that it will discuss next month. However, there is not yet any commitment as to when any EU referendum might be held.

Some critics claim that this would bolster the ruling Civil Contract and aligned political forces in parliamentary elections scheduled for mid-2026 at the latest. This, they claim, would also allow extra-parliamentary political forces to take on the traditional parliamentary opposition, helping the government maintain control over any new parliament. It is also possible that such a referendum could take place alongside or even as part of a much larger problematic one on the constitution.

Regardless, in lieu of a peace agreement, support from the EU for Pashinyan, whose ratings have been in

decline, could help ensure victory. The same is true if support comes from the United States as well. Earlier this month, Yerevan signed a historic Strategic Partnership Commission Charter with Washington, DC. This institutionalized framework for cooperation between the two countries is also important in terms of diversification in the area of nuclear energy.

But diversification should not be mistaken for replacing Russian hegemony for that from the West. In the midst of this web of geopolitical interests, Pashinyan noted at last week's World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos that equilibrium in Armenia's foreign relations is vital for both national and regional stability. "Deviation from balance can have very serious consequences," he warned, while also acknowledging that Armenia's economic future depends on normalizing relations with neighbors Azerbaijan and Turkey and deepening those with Iran and Georgia.

No EU referendum or US strategic document can change that on their own.

(Onnik James Krikorian is a journalist, photojournalist, and consultant from the U.K. who has covered the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict since 1994. This commentary originally appeared on commonspace.eu on January 27.)

DIVERSIFICATION SHOULD NOT BE MISTAKEN FOR REPLACING RUSSIAN HEGEMONY FOR THAT FROM THE WEST.

Russia Reportedly Summons Azerbaijani Ambassador as Bilateral Relations Continue to Sour

By Aytan Farhadova

On January 27, Azerbaijani Ambassador to Russia Rahman Mustafeyev met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin. While the official statement by Russia's Foreign Ministry said that they had "invited" Mustafeyev, some Azerbaijani media outlets wrote that he had been "summoned."

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov has not yet commented on the circumstances of the meeting.

Although relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have long been stable, as illustrated by a high-profile visit from Russian President Vladimir Putin to Baku in August 2024, the crash of a Azerbaijan Airlines flight in December — which Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said was Russia's fault — has caused those bilateral ties to fray.

The official web page of Russia's Foreign Ministry stated that Galuzin had invited Mustafeyev to discuss several issues between Azerbaijan and Russia. The Russian side emphasized the "absolute importance of building relations between Russia and Azerbaijan in the spirit of strategic partnership and alliance based on the declaration signed at the highest level on 22 Febru-

ary 2022, in the national interests of both states."

"In this regard, bewilderment was expressed over a series of recent anti-Russian publications in the Azerbaijani media, as well as in relation to the disinformation campaign against the Russian House in Baku. The absolute groundlessness of the accusations made was noted", the ministry's press release said.

The Russian House, known formally as Rossotrudnichestvo, is a state-funded organization intended to administer foreign aid, promote Russian culture, and support Russians living abroad. As with other Russian government organizations, it was sanctioned by the EU after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Azerbaijan's Russian House was established in July 1997, and has its headquarters in Baku, with two additional offices located in Khachmaz and Ganja.

On Friday, the pro-government media outlet Baku TV aired a report accusing the Russian House in Baku of engaging in anti-Azerbaijani espionage activities under the guise of cultural and humanitarian work. The report, citing "trusted sources" and without disclosing details, alleged that the Russian cultural centre has been fostering inter-ethnic discord and operating as a

hub for intelligence activities.

According to Azerbaijani journalist and political columnist Rauf Mirgadirov, the Russian House has been operating in Azerbaijan for many years and argued that it is no secret the Russian House serves the purposes of Russian intelligence.

Mirgadirov told OC Media that the proliferation of Russian agents of influence in Azerbaijan has long been openly acknowledged by the government and pro-government media.

"If I am not mistaken, around two years ago, journalists released the names of the journalists and the NGOs who were, at the very least, agents of Russian influence. This was clear many years ago, and now we are enemies with Russia," Mirgadirov said.

Even as bilateral ties worsen, Mirgadirov said that Aliyev would not let Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia completely deteriorate.

"Now, Azerbaijan's relationship is also not good with the EU, but the economic relationship continues. It is not in Aliyev's favor to also destroy the entire relationship with Russia. Aliyev would only turn away from Russia if Russia lost the [full-scale war with Ukraine], [or] if the government in Russia would be changed."

The fatal Azerbaijan Airlines plane crash in December, which many have said was the fault of Russian air defense missiles in Chechnya, was likely the highest-profile event that has worsened relations between the two countries.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry has so far not commented on the meeting between Mustafeyev and Galuzin, but the pro-government media outlet APA reported on it, mentioning only that the discussion concerned the plane crash. APA's brief article highlighted that Russia's Foreign Ministry had said there is a "need to complete the official investigation and publish its results to clarify all the circumstances of the tragedy."

Mirgadirov also said that tension between Azerbaijan and Russia will continue for some time.

"But then there will probably be some high-level discussions, and as a result of these discussions, there will supposedly be some statement about resolving the existing differences. And I would not say that the situation will return to normal, but the level of military action will not reach the point of conflict. This is in the interests of Ilham Aliyev," Mirgadirov said.

(This article originally appeared on OC-media on January 28.)