

UDC 32.001

IDENTITIES, IDEOLOGIES AND INSTITUTIONS. A Decade of Insight into the Caucasus: 2001-2011. – Alexander Iskandaryan (Ed.) – Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2011. – 232 p.

A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.

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Cover design by Matit, www.matit.am
Layout by Collage, www.collage.am

ISBN 978-99941-2-583-8

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This volume was published with the support of the Think Tank Fund of Open Society Foundations and the Heinrich Boell Foundation

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IMPORTED POLITICS: DIASPORA POLITICAL PARTIES IN ARMENIA'S DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE¹

By Eduard Melkonian²

Despite the similarities that the processes of democratization in the post-Soviet space display, their specificities in each of the newly independent states are no less evident. Several factors, both internal and external, account for this. For Armenia, the diaspora is one of those factors. In terms of numbers, the Armenian diaspora – called *Spyurk* in Armenian – is larger than the population of Armenia. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of diaspora Armenians lived in the countries of the West (the US, France, Canada, etc.) and the Middle East (Syria, Iran, Lebanon, etc.).

One of the most popular chants at the rallies of 1988-1990 was the slogan of “Together with the *Spyurk*.” These words reflected a natural desire for restoring relations and contacts with compatriots residing abroad, something the inhabitants of Armenia were denied during communist rule. But there was something more to that. Bidding farewell to the Soviet period of its history and resolved to follow the development path of Western countries, the people of Armenia, on the whole, were counting on the full support of Armenians from the diaspora to facilitate the speedy reform of the whole system of Armenian society and to bring it in line with Western standards. Those expectations – most of them divorced from reality and emotionally coloured – were the result of ignorance of the existing significant differences, ranging from lifestyle to ethnic self-consciousness, between Armenians of the *Spyurk* and those of Armenia, differences that had developed (as they should have!) over the seven decades in which the two had been separate and independent of each other. Moreover, the two branches of Armenians lived – and this cannot be overemphasized – in the two diametrically different worlds of Soviet socialism and Western capitalism.

1 This paper was published by the CI as: Melkonian, Eduard. “Politicheskie partii diaspory i protsessy demokratizatsii v Armenii.” *Diaspora, neft i rozy. Chem zhivut strany Yuzhnogo Kavkaza* (“Political Parties of the Diaspora and Democratization Processes in Armenia.” *Diaspora, Oil and Roses. What Makes the Countries of the South Caucasus Tick*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Heinrich Böll Foundation and Caucasus Media Institute, 2005 (in Russian). – Pp.103-113.

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Above all, the Armenians of Armenia pinned great hopes on the political organizations of the *Spyurk*: the *Dashnaktsutyun* (Armenian Revolutionary Federation/ARF), *Ramkavar-Azatakan* (Liberal Democratic Party) and *Hunchakian* (Social Democratic Party, also spelled *Hunchakian*). When Communists seized the power in Armenia in 1920, all three continued their activities in the diaspora, and turned into the core structures of the Armenian community institutions. Since in the public consciousness of the Armenian people, they had become the bearers and custodians of national political ideals, their return to the homeland was seen as the triumph of historic justice. Henceforth, they were able to not only continue their mission in the homeland, but to also take it to a higher – state – level.

However, their mission in the new environment was perceived in other ways, too. People thought that the years of operation in Western countries had allowed these organizations to also become carriers of certain political values and traditions that they now could and should plant in the new Armenia. Such expectations, however, failed to take into account the fact that the functions of those parties had undergone a fundamental transformation over the years of their existence in the diaspora. Even though they were nominally called political parties, they, for objective reasons, ceased to be parties, in the classical sense of the word, i.e. they stopped being organizations that aim to come to power in a country and implement their party programs.

In the *Spyurk*, the political, or more precisely, the ethno-political content of their activities was limited to two areas. One of them was the attitude toward the Soviet Union in general and Soviet Armenia, in particular.

Forced to emigrate from Armenia after the establishment there of the Soviet regime, the *Dashnaktsutyun* Party (the ruling party of the first Republic of Armenia in 1918-1920), the chief political opponent of the Communists, became a force that not only maintained its inherent anti-communist and anti-Soviet orientation, but also managed – in a short space of time – to make this orientation organized and widespread, this time in the diaspora.

Ironic as it may seem at first, the second most influential party, the *Ramkavar Azatakan*, became the main opponent of the *Dashnaktsutyun* in the Armenian diaspora. That was ironic because the ideology and practice of communism was alien to the former to a much greater extent than to the latter, given *Dashnaktsutyun's* socialist orientation. However, the *Ramkavar Azatakan*, together with the *Hunchakian* party, offered an alternative to anti-Soviet attitudes in the *Spyurk*. Refusing to recognize, and moreover, essentially rejecting the ideology and practice of communism, the *Ramkavar*, at the same time, were taking account of the fact that

Soviet Armenia was the only remaining part of their homeland, where Armenians continued to live as part of the Soviet Union, with highly truncated, but nonetheless some form of statehood. In light of the recent past, it was especially important that the lack of full sovereignty was offset by external security and the opportunity for the peaceful development of the people. Assuming that the Soviet regime was the lesser of evils in terms of national interests, the Ramkavar limited their activities to the role of “soft opposition,” and sought to establish ties with Soviet Armenia.

These differences in relation to Soviet Armenia led to the political disengagement in the Spyurk, which, in turn, determined the path of its development not only in the ethno-political sphere, but in almost all other areas.³

The second component of the ethno-political activities of all three parties emerged in the 1960s. It was the relentless and varied - in form and content - action for the recognition and condemnation by the international community and individual states of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Largely through the efforts of the parties and organizations established specifically for this purpose, some international organizations and parliaments of a number of countries adopted relevant resolutions.

Along with this, the most important task of these parties has been the preservation of the ethnic and cultural identity of diaspora Armenians under conditions of rather powerful and constant exposure to host cultures. With this purpose in mind, they created in the Armenian communities in various countries a vast network of cultural, youth, women's, charity and other institutions which, to some extent, allowed counteracting the ongoing assimilation, particularly intense in the countries of the West.

Clearly, however, the above mentioned activities could not promote the formation among diaspora-based Armenian political parties of skills and traditions characteristic to proper political activity.

Meanwhile, in their expectations, the people of Armenia consciously or unconsciously projected onto those parties their views of classical political parties of Western countries. And even with the understanding that the parties of the Spyurk were in no way real players in the political arena of host countries, for many people, the very name of these organizations, as “parties,” was associated with their ability to fulfil themselves as such in Armenia.

These expectations had another explanation too. Despite the absolute popularity

3 For more details, see: Melkonian, Eduard. «Mezhdu dvumya mirami. Puti politicheskoy adaptatsii armyanskoy diasporoy.» *Vertikal istorii* (“Between Two Worlds. The Paths of Political Adaptation of the Armenian Diaspora.” *Vertical History*). – Tbilisi, № 5, 2003 (in Russian). – Pp.74-85.

in Armenia at that time of the Armenian National Movement (ANM, the party that led the mass movement first for the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh and then for the independence of Armenia), part of the country's population tied – as a matter of principle or for personal reasons - the possibility of alternative political activity to the return of the political parties from the Spyurk. The history of those parties, their active role in the diaspora, and, finally, the effect of the “forbidden fruit,” caused by the prohibition imposed by the Soviet authorities on their activities in the homeland, explained these attitudes.

The political parties of the Spyurk were aware of these sentiments in Armenian society and were fully responsive to the popular desire that they should re-establish themselves in their native land. Notably, however, the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and the very speed of their occurrence, took these parties by surprise. However, in this they were not alone: these processes turned out to be unpredictable for both Western politicians and for experts on the Soviet Union. After a brief period of hesitation caused by the radical actions of the Armenian opposition toward local and central authorities, the parties of the Spyurk, cognizant of the irreversibility of the collapse of the Soviet Union, took – even more readily - the opportunity to resume their activities in Armenia. Their return in 1990 coincided with the troubled period of dual power, when all the structures and units of the Soviet state and party authorities were in fact paralyzed, while the new government was at an early stage of formation, still full of uncertainties.

Having returned to Armenia (while preserving all of their structures in the Spyurk), these parties were forced to begin their operations virtually from zero; they did not have either party members or any proper party structures in the country. In an effort to promptly establish their operations, they began with feverish activity, above all with a wide campaign to attract the largest possible numbers of new members into their ranks. In the absence of local personnel, party functionaries sent on a mission from the diaspora were in charge of all their activities at this initial stage. Compared to the ignorance of the people of Armenia about the realities of the Spyurk, the arriving emissaries' understanding of the Armenian reality was just as superficial. It is noteworthy that regardless of their citizenship, almost all of those emissaries came from the Middle East which was a kind of hotbed of diaspora activism, with characteristic radicalism combined with a simplistic perception of reality. For the sake of rapid growth in party numbers, they ignored and often turned a blind eye to the true motives of newcomers.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of the latter had rather vague ideas about the parties themselves, their histories, ideologies, etc. There were many former communists

among them who viewed membership in the new parties as a way to recover the lost guarantees of the fulfilment of their personal, often very pragmatic (not to mention selfish) expectations. Having many members of this type would very soon have negative impact on the activities of the host parties, leading in some cases to their split. Yet, in 1990 and 1991, thanks to the efforts aimed at the speedy development of the returning parties, they ended up being among the leading – after the ANM – political forces of the country. In this context it is significant that the very degree of their influence in Armenia reflected very precisely their weight in the Spyurk, with the ARF doing much better than the Ramkavar, not to mention the Hunchakian.

The steep growth in the popularity of both the ARF and the Ramkavar party was apparently unexpected for the parties themselves, or, to be more precise, for their functionaries from the diaspora. Misguided by the sympathies of a certain segment of the public, they lost the ability to soberly assess the reality on the ground and neglected their duty to teach, gradually but constantly, at least to their own party members, the basics of political culture and democratic governance, i.e. the things that they knew so well and had used so successfully in the diaspora. Instead, in its ambitions, the Dashnaksutyun party decided to take steps that had important ramifications for the political development of the country as a whole.

I am referring to the first presidential election in Armenia held in late 1991. The victory of one of the ANM's leaders, Levon Ter-Petrossyan, was expected and obvious to everybody, from laymen to the political elite. Despite this, the ARF nominated its own candidate, popular and respected stage and movie actor Sos Sargsyan, and launched a wide election campaign. This fact alone indicated that at that time the ARF did not have a strong and relatively popular party leader of its own in Armenia, able to compete with the ANM candidate.

Had this happened in a country with longstanding democratic traditions, the consequences of the ARF's actions would have been limited to defeat in the election (less than 5 percent of the popular vote went to their candidate) and a drop in its ratings. But in the Armenia of those days, the ramifications were far more extensive and profound. They were caused by the ensuing reaction of the ANM.

Back in 1988, when the Karabakh movement was facing stiff opposition from the central authorities of the Soviet Union, the ANM, as well as other forces opposing the Soviet regime, counted on the full support of the Spyurk. However, the initial response from the diaspora, and first of all from its political parties, was totally unanticipated. Already in November 1988, all three parties of the diaspora made a joint statement (something they hardly ever did), supporting the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Soviet Armenia, but at the same time urging Armenians to

demonstrate restraint and calm, and to abstain from actions that could undermine the trust of the leadership of the Soviet Union. This position of the political parties, another result of their total ignorance of the Armenian reality, led not only to disappointment but also to distrust on the part of the Karabakh movement in general and the ANM, in particular.⁴

These sentiments further intensified after the return of the diaspora political parties to Armenia, as a result of their indefatigable activity aimed at the early establishment of their own party structures. Against this background, the ANM perceived the nomination of the ARF's own candidate in the presidential election of 1991 as a direct challenge to itself. The challenge was posed by a party that had only just settled in Armenia, had not in any way participated in the struggle for independence, and, besides, was led and financed from abroad. At that time, the ANM was at the peak of its popularity (83 percent of the voters voted for Levon Ter-Petrossyan). It met the challenge with a rigid rejection of all opposition movements.

In the ARF's case, there were two landmark events. The first of those took place in June 1992, when one of its leaders, Greek citizen Hrair Marukhyan, was expelled from Armenia on charges of subverting its government's policies and efforts to resolve the Karabakh conflict. This was a serious signal, targeted not only at the ARF but also at the diaspora at large, that the Armenian leadership would not tolerate any intervention in the business of ruling the country. As Levon Ter-Petrossyan put it, mutual misunderstanding and mistrust would remain until the leaders of the diaspora get used to the idea that politics is made in Armenia not in the Spyurk.⁵ However, the continued activity of the ARF, its disagreement with many of the key ANM policies, served for the latter as grounds for even more repressive measures. In December 1994, the President imposed a ban on the ARF and all its structures, including its media arms. In addition, in that and subsequent years, several ARF members, including one of its leaders, were arrested and prosecuted on various charges.⁶

Importantly, these actions by the authorities were taking place against a general background of backsliding from the principles of democratic governance and rejecting not only criticism but even the slightest doubts with regard to government policies in a particular field. In that sense, the attitude to the second most influential returning party, the Ramkavar, was quite illustrative. Right from the outset,

4 *Armenia at the Crossroads: Democracy and Nationhood in Post-Soviet Era*. Ed. by Gerard J. Libaridian. – Waretown, MA: Blue Crane Books, 1991. – Pp.127-133.

5 *Armenian International Magazine (AIM)*. Los Angeles, March 1994. – P. 32.

6 *Armenian International Magazine (AIM)*. Los Angeles, November-December 1994. – Pp. 37-38.

the Ramkavar party's "soft opposition" to the Soviet authorities discredited it in the eyes of both the new government and a considerable part of the public. Having returned to Armenia in 1990, the Ramkavar party, unlike the ARF, assessed its capabilities soberly and relinquished any claims to power (at least, at that point in time), and generally adopted a loyal attitude towards the authorities. However, even the Ramkavar, in spite of their traditional opposition to the ARF, considered it necessary to speak out against repressions directed at the latter, denouncing the measures taken by the authorities as a serious threat to the emergence of a democratic society. Lacking valid reasons for banning the activities of the Ramkavar, the authorities resorted to other tactics: splitting the party from within. This was the time when the Ramkavar had to pay the price for its indiscriminate recruitment policies. The skillful actions of the authorities worked wonders: the Ramkavar party split, went into a deep crisis and left the ranks of Armenia's major political forces.

The crisis, however, affected the ruling party itself. The sharp drop in its popularity and credibility was especially evident during the second presidential election in 1996, when only 51.7 percent of the votes were cast in favor of Levon Ter-Petrosyan's re-election. Even that number was disputed by the united opposition, which accused the government of rigging the elections and tried to storm the parliament building. The authorities reacted by sending in troops and making arrests. *Le Monde* published a story where it described the policies of the Armenian authorities of the day: "the methods of Ter-Petrosyan's governance resemble the methods of the totalitarian regime that Ter-Petrosyan used to criticize early in his political career."⁷ The comparison seemed to be valid not only for the authorities' domestic policies. In its quest for the complete neutralization of the political forces of the diaspora, the ANM followed the example of the communist authorities of Armenia of the 1920s-1930s and attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to create its own structures in the diaspora as an alternative to the political parties existing there.⁸

When it comes to considering the political processes underway in Armenia in the 1990s, it is quite difficult to unequivocally assess the actions of the authorities or the forces opposing them. The experience of state-building in the post-Soviet

7 *Le Monde*, 4 October 1996.

8 *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun* daily, 11 August 1994 (in Armenian). On the confrontation between the Armenian authorities and the political parties of the diaspora, and its impact on the election of the new head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in 1995, see Melkonian, Eduard. "Armyanskaya Apostolskaya Tserkov vo vzaimootnosheniakh Armenii i diaspori." *Religia i politika na Kavkaze* ("The Armenian Apostolic Church in the Relations between Armenia and Diaspora." *Religion and Politics in the Caucasus*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: CMI, 2004 (in Russian). – Pp.31-52.

space shows that the transition from totalitarian to democratic principles of society building is fraught with various difficulties. After declaring its independence in 1991, Armenia became a country led by young people (most of them under 45) lacking any experience of government work. They became the country's ruling elite in circumstances that were even more extreme than in other post-Soviet republics (energy and transport blockade, military confrontation with Azerbaijan, etc.). They were forced to act hastily, adapting to the changing situation and putting back the development of strategies for national development. On the one hand, their sincere desire to lead the country out of the crisis was over time transformed into a firm belief that they were the only ones capable of doing it. On the other hand, the avalanche of new challenges, coupled with lack of funds or expertise needed to tackle them, made them intolerant to serious displays of disagreement with their policies. In addition, once they had, figuratively speaking, looked power in the face, they were no longer able to take their eyes off that mysterious Sphinx, and reveled in their increasingly unlimited power.

For their part, the returning diaspora political parties, seeking as they were, to make up - overnight - for their 70-year absence from the homeland, rushed to become major players in the still undefined political arena of the country. In pursuit of this objective, they did not only continue their habitual fight against each other but jumped into the power struggle with unconcealed excitement. Thus, wittingly or unwittingly, they largely discredited themselves in the eyes of the public, and provoked to some extent the harsh policies of the ruling party towards themselves and the opposition in general. Ultimately, this left a negative imprint on the democratization of Armenian society.

At the same time, one can argue that the role of the diaspora parties in Armenian politics was ambivalent. One can even say that, in the longer term, these parties' engagement had a positive impact on the building of Armenia's political institutions. In particular, they sped up the self-organization of the main political forces. The ANM was among the first to feel this effect. At the initial stage of its activities, it brought together a significant part of the society and individual organizations advocating the overthrow of the communist regime - the main obstacle to Armenia's independence and the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. The ANM was a rather loose organization without a clear structure, policy and statutory documents. However, with the arrival of an increasing number of parties, including those returning from the diaspora, the ANM was forced to not only renounce claims to represent the interests of all the people, but to also self-organize - on the eve of coming to power - as a rigidly structured party with all of the necessary attributes. This was

what allowed the ANM to successfully confront the opposition, including the ARF. This also resulted in the emergence of a new party, the National Democratic Union (NDU), made up of former ANM members, which eventually became one of the chief opposition forces in the country.

Strange as it may seem at first, for the ARF, the three-year ban on its activities played, on the whole, a positive role in terms of its self-organization. In this period, it not only rid itself of the burden of people who had joined it for purely opportunistic reasons, but also acquired its own 'field leaders' who were regarded as martyrs because of their imprisonment. But, probably, the main thing was that the party had to rethink its tactics. Having given up unreasonable and excessive ambitions, the ARF reconciled itself with the need to increase its influence gradually, putting the stress not only and not so much on its past services, but on the best possible consideration of the political realities on the ground. The ARF chose this course when it was legalized again after the forced resignation of President Levon Ter-Petrossyan on February 9, 1998 (under pressure from both Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan, who was elected president shortly afterwards, and the ministers of defence and interior).

Following its re-legalization, the ARF became a staunch ally of the president and the party in power, thus gaining more influential positions in the executive and legislative bodies of the country. For the sake of preserving and consolidating its positions, the ARF, led by local party leaders, made a commitment to the norms of Western democracy, necessitated by Armenia's membership in European organizations. Some of these norms and standards (such as alternative military service) were rather alien to the traditional values of this party. Over the past thirteen years of its work in Armenia, the ARF has traversed the difficult path of transformation from a quasi-political party, which it had been in the 70 years of its existence in the Spyurk, into a genuine political party of the classical type. And as such, today it is responsible for resolving the problems hindering the democratization of the contemporary Armenian society.

The Ramkavar party has also managed to transform itself into a classical political party. Initially it appeared that this party that professed liberal democratic values would occupy a worthy place in the political system of modern Armenia. Lacking, however, sufficient ideological, political or institutional stability and certainty, it never quite recovered after the crisis of the mid-1990s, and ceased to play any meaningful role in the political life of the country. A recent surge of activity during the election campaign for the parliament in 2003 did not yield any results.

As for the third party of the diaspora, the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, its

return to Armenia has to be treated with reservations, primarily because of its small size and unpopularity among the general public.

No doubt, the participation of the Spyurk in the democratization of the modern Armenian society has not been confined to political parties. The preference given to them in this article is due to the high degree of the politicization of the society, in general, and the high expectations from political parties, in particular.