

The Armenian diaspora in France on the Nagorno-Karabakh: which political influence?

The vast Armenian diaspora in France is the result of a long history of French support to Armenians following the Genocide of 1915 and the several waves of migration that succeeded in the 20th century. Indeed, nowadays, around 600 000 people of Armenian descent are living in France (in 2011)¹. France was also one of the first European country to recognize officially the Armenian genocide, in 2001².

In this context, it is legitimate to question the political power of this community especially when considering the active participation of France in the OSCE Minsk Group (alongside the US and Russia) in the framework of the peace process in the Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, France has been involved in the discussions following the recent Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the final exodus of Armenians from the enclave between September and October 2023. Thus, this research will mostly focus on the events since the beginning of 2023.

Due to these recent events, France has sent its Minister of Foreign Affairs on the 3rd of October 2023, Catherine Colonna, to Armenia and opened the door to potential weapons deliveries from Paris. Furthermore, an important mediatic coverage took place, denouncing Azerbaijan's actions and the soon-to-be humanitarian disaster in the region with the displacement of 100 000 ethnic Armenians from the Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Observing these facts, it is absolutely pertinent to analyze the role which played the Armenian diaspora in this mediatic and political coverage.

In order to properly analyze the political weight of the Armenian diaspora in France, three parts will be needed. The first one will focus on the historical roots of the Armenian community in France with their positions on the conflict. Furthermore, the second part will analyze the Armenians influence on French media. Indeed, as it will be observed, media represent a fantastic tool to influence public opinion and foreign policy, which are essential to influence the direction of a country's politics. Finally, the third and last part will concern the direct influence of Armenian lobbies and organizations on the French political system. The main goal of this research is to highlight the political influence of the Armenian Diaspora in

¹ https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/les-armeniens-en-france-22-12-2011-1411512_23.php

² <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/11/dossiers/genocide.asp>

France alongside its tools to reach its goals, in the light of the 2023 events. The main research material will be based on historical facts, political declarations and media articles.

I) **The Armenian diaspora in France: history and focuses**

In order to fully understand the political influence of the Armenian diaspora in France, is it necessary to take a look at its history, its composition and its main rhetorical axis. First of all, the Armenian diaspora in France is nowadays estimated at 600 000 individuals (in which 400 000 persons are born in France)³.

Important Armenians are part of the French culture and History: Charles Aznavour was a major French-Armenian singer of the 20th century and supported the Armenian cause through his songs such as *Tendre Arménie* (Dear Armenia) or the World War II resistant Missak Manouchian, member of the French Resistance in Nazi occupied France. Moreover, 2024 will be “the year of Armenia” in France as it will be 100 years since the birth of Charles Aznavour alongside the expected entrance of Missak Manouchian at the French Panthéon; this event was announced by Rima Abdul-Malak, the French Minister of Culture, during her visit to Yerevan on the 27th of October 2023⁴.

Concerning the diaspora, the Armenian immigration to France took an important turn between 1915 and 1923 as the Armenian Genocide was taking place in the Ottoman Empire alongside persecutions which continued under the newly formed Republic of Turkey. The first major wave of immigration arrived in 1923⁵. Two thirds of the Armenian population in the empire had been eliminated⁶.

Then, the Armenian immigration settled in the French most economically dynamic regions such as Paris or Marseille (port of entry for a majority of Armenians).

Several waves of Armenian immigrants reached France in the 20th century. In the 1950's and 1960's, a part of the Armenians still living in Turkey emigrated to France and found work in the car industry (Renault and Citroën factories). In the 1970's and following the breakout of

³ <https://www.la-croix.com/international/Haut-Karabakh-sait-diaspora-armenienne-France-2023-09-25-1201284163>

⁴ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/l-armenie-en-france-a-l-honneur-de-l-annee-2024-annonce-la-ministre-de-la-culture-20231027>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-enjeux-territoriaux/les-petites-armenie-de-l-hexagone-7236686>

the Libanese Civil War, a number of Armenians of Lebanon also found refuge in France. Finally, the fall of the Soviet Union caused the last important wave of Armenian immigrants in the 1990's and 2000's. Nevertheless, the most essential wave remains the one of 1923. Nowadays, Armenians can be found in almost every region of France while Armenian largest population centers remain around Paris and Marseille⁷.

Considering this immigration, Armenian political organizations were being created in France. In April 1965, one of the world's first Committee for Defense of the Armenian Cause (*Comité de défense de la cause arménienne*) is created in France. These organizations have spread throughout host countries of the Armenian immigrants. The most crucial objective of these organizations was the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and the acquisition of reparation from Turkey⁸. Consequently, this organization pushed Armenians of France to take political action and gain political influence in order to reach their goal. They promoted their objective to elected officials from any political party with success as the Armenian Genocide was finally recognized by France in 2001⁹.

Acknowledging this process is crucial in order to properly understand and measure the political influence of the Armenian diaspora in nowadays France over current issues, as it is a phenomenon which started around six decades ago.

Furthermore, the Armenian diaspora in France is structured around a common trauma (similar in the USA) as it is the cornerstone of its own existence, which is the Armenian Genocide and the responsibility being held on Turkey (Féron & Baser, 2023). Moreover, the Armenian diaspora is also campaigning for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan and the general support of Armenia (Baser & Swain, 2008). Nevertheless, the Armenian diaspora is not acting like one man and can have different opinion on the current Armenian government and its actions (Féron, Baser, 2023). Finally, in France, Armenians can use the mediatic sphere to support their position and influence the public area, which leads to the second part.

⁷ <https://www.la-croix.com/international/Haut-Karabakh-sait-diaspora-armenienne-France-2023-09-25-1201284163>

⁸ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-revue-d-histoire-de-la-shoah1-2003-1-page-445.htm>

⁹ Ibid

II) The Armenian diaspora and the media

Media have a non-negligible power on public opinion and foreign policy and thus, influencing journals can give an agenda-setting power on the government. According to the literature (Baum & Potter, 2008; Soroka 2003; Rioux & Van Belle, 2005; Robinson, 2016), media, public opinion and foreign policy are intertwined. Media directly influence the public opinion and consequently, following the public opinion, the foreign policy makers may adapt their decisions to the expectations of the public. Furthermore, the agenda-setting role of the media for the elite can bring attention to issues which had been neglected before (Robinson, 2016). Despite the existence of a journal for the Armenian diaspora in France, *Nouvelles d'Arménie Magazine*, its lack of a large popularity makes it irrelevant in this research and more attention will be paid to national media.

When an event is vastly covered by the media, we can safely deduce that it is a coverage requested by the public. Without demands, the media would not be profitable organizations and have to follow the public trends in order to attract revenues. Nevertheless, the media can also bring public attention to neglected problems. With the number of articles published in the French media about Armenia in 2023, we can legitimately deduce that the Armenian cause is, first, interesting the French public (constituted of a vast Armenian part) and second, the French media play a crucial role to maintain public attention on the issues in the Caucasus. Additionally, articles in favor of Armenia can be directly written by people of Armenian descent¹⁰ or member of the diaspora may participate in interviews.¹¹¹² Journals, such as *Le Monde*, openly published their opinion against the Lachin blockade¹³.

Besides, right leaning journals can use the religious aspect of the conflict in order to attract their conservative and also, Christian audience, such as *Le Figaro (right-wing)* and *Valeurs Actuelles (far-right)*. Indeed, the defense of Christianity in a Muslim neighborhood finds echoes in this audience¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶.

As it is difficult to measure exactly the impact of the media on the public opinion and the foreign policy, its power is absolutely non-negligible. Following the resurgence of hostilities

¹⁰ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/histoire/armenie-100-ans-de-solitude-20221224>

¹¹ <https://video.lefigaro.fr/figaro/video/le-but-final-de-lazerbaïdjan-cest-laneantissement-de-toute-larmenie/>

¹² <https://www.sudradio.fr/emission/le-fait-du-jour-275>

¹³ [Le blocus du Haut-Karabakh par l'Azerbaïdjan doit cesser \(lemonde.fr\)](https://www.lemonde.fr)

¹⁴ [Pourquoi faut-il aider l'Arménie ? - Valeurs actuelles](https://www.valeursactuelles.com)

¹⁵ [L'éditorial du Figaro Magazine: «Au nom de l'Arménie» \(lefigaro.fr\)](https://www.lefigaro.fr)

¹⁶ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/le-cri-d-alarme-de-sylvain-tesson-m-macron-qu-avez-vous-fait-de-vos-promesses-aux-armeniens-20230927>

in the Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, an important media coverage followed in France with an important share of the articles speaking of Azerbaijan “ethnic cleansing”¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹. Following this mediatic activity, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna, visited Armenia on the 3rd of October 2023 (and even qualified herself several days later the Armenian exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh as an “ethnic cleansing”²⁰). An eventual weapon agreement has been discussed between France and Armenia and it was concluded on the 23th of October. France agreed to deliver defensive armaments to Armenia in order to “defend itself”²¹. Consequently, we can establish a parallel between this phenomenon and the article of Rioux and Belle (2005) where they empirically proved the correlation between the number of articles from *Le Monde* and the French Foreign Foreign Aid Allocations; countries with more mediatic coverage were more likely to receive France’s support. This is the case for Armenia, as the media vastly treated first, the blockade of the Lachin corridor²²²³²⁴ throughout 2023 and the recent Azerbaijani offensive in September 2023, with the exile of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh in the following month²⁵²⁶²⁷. The threat of an invasion of Armenia by Azerbaijan was also widely discussed in the media²⁸²⁹³⁰. Following that, France’s decision to assist militarily Armenia is not surprising. While an empirical study is needed to establish this correlation, as in the work of Rioux and Belle (2005), an evident parallel can be observed. Following these events, the Armenian diaspora can protest in the streets to request France (or international) intervention in the conflict³¹. Additionally, an important mediatic event of 2023 was the humanitarian convoy to Nagorno-Karabakh led by the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo,

¹⁷ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/le-cri-d-alarme-de-sylvain-tesson-m-macron-qu-avez-vous-fait-de-vos-promesses-aux-armeniens-20230927>

¹⁸ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/marie-dumoulin-le-haut-karabakh-est-menace-par-un-nettoyage-ethnique-20230922>

¹⁹ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/l-editorial-du-figaro-magazine-au-nom-de-l-armenie-20231006>

²⁰ <https://www.humanite.fr/monde/armenie/haut-karabakh-une-euration-ethnique-selon-catherine-colonna-ministre-des-affaires-etrangees>

²¹ [La France vend des équipements de défense sol-air à l'Arménie après les exercices militaires de l'Azerbaïdjan avec la Turquie \(francetvinfo.fr\)](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/actualites/la-france-vend-des-equipements-de-defense-sol-air-a-l-armenie-apres-les-exercices-militaires-de-l-azerbaïdjan-avec-la-turquie)

²² [L'éditorial du Figaro Magazine: «Au nom de l'Arménie» \(lefigaro.fr\)](https://www.lefigaro.fr/monde/l-editorial-du-figaro-magazine-au-nom-de-l-armenie-20231006)

²³ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2023/09/04/le-blocus-du-haut-karabakh-par-l-azerbaïdjan-doit-cesser_6187738_3232.html

²⁴ [L'Arménie, l'exode et la crainte : au Haut-Karabakh, récit d'un conflit programmé – L'Express \(lexpress.fr\)](https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/armenie/l-armenie-l-exode-et-la-crainte-au-haut-karabakh-rit-d-un-conflit-programme)

²⁵ [Après l'exode, l'Arménie au défi de l'accueil des exilés du Haut-Karabakh \(ouest-france.fr\)](https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/armenie/apres-l-exode-l-armenie-au-defi-de-l-accueil-des-exiles-du-haut-karabakh)

²⁶ [Haut-Karabakh : le chemin de croix des Arméniens \(parismatch.com\)](https://www.parismatch.com/Actualites/International/Haut-Karabakh-le-chemin-de-croix-des-Armeniens)

²⁷ [Au Haut-Karabakh, un départ sans retour \(humanite.fr\)](https://www.humanite.fr/monde/armenie/haut-karabakh-un-depart-sans-retour)

²⁸ [ÉDITORIAL. N'oublions pas l'Arménie \(ouest-france.fr\)](https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/armenie/EDITORIAL-N-oublions-pas-l-Armenie)

²⁹ [Azerbaïdjan-Arménie : ces exercices militaires qui ravivent le conflit – L'Express \(lexpress.fr\)](https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/armenie/azerbaïdjan-armenie-ces-exercices-militaires-qui-ravivent-le-conflit)

³⁰ [Après l'annexion du Haut-Karabakh, « on peut craindre que l'Azerbaïdjan décrète la prise du sud de l'Arménie » \(humanite.fr\)](https://www.humanite.fr/monde/armenie/apres-l-annexion-du-haut-karabakh-on-peut-craindre-que-l-azerbaïdjan-decrete-la-prise-du-sud-de-l-armenie)

³¹ [Haut-Karabakh : des milliers de manifestants en France et en Belgique en soutien aux Arméniens \(france24.com\)](https://www.france24.com/fr/monde/armenie/haut-karabakh-des-milliers-de-manifestants-en-france-et-en-belgique-en-soutien-aux-armeniens)

and other political personalities³². The convoy has not been authorized to enter the Nagorno-Karabakh and the reluctance of Azerbaijan to allow its passage was clearly exposed in the French mediatic scene³³³⁴.

The media can also be a tool for personalities to alert the political elite on the events in the Caucasus. Sylvain Tesson, a famous French writer who sided with Armenia, wrote an open letter to the French President, Emmanuel Macron, in *Le Figaro*, in order to push him to act on the situation³⁵.

While the direct influence of the diaspora on the French media requires more empirical research (despite evident parallels and a striking support of the media), the influence in the French government appears to be more evident.

III) The Armenian diaspora and the political sphere

Considering the consequent number of French citizens of Armenian descent, it is evident that such a number has an influence on the elections and the overall French political machine, only by its size. As we have seen earlier, this influence has been shown by France official recognition of the Armenian Genocide on the 29th January 2001.

Moreover, politicians can offer propositions and/or make an international action for Armenia and/or the Nagorno-Karabakh in order to gather votes for its party. “Les Républicains”, the party of the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, embodies the French center-right/right-wing and is the most recurrent defender of the Armenian cause as we can see in this LR call (170 elected LR officials) to support Armenia³⁶. Nevertheless, Nicolas Sarkozy tried to mobilize the Armenian electorate for the 2012 presidential election but in vain as the Armenian diaspora is politically heterogeneous in France³⁷. Additionally, an important

³² [Une délégation d'élus français bloquée sur la route du Haut-Karabakh \(rfi.fr\)](http://rfi.fr)

³³ <https://www.france24.com/fr/asi-pacifique/20230831-haut-karabakh-des-%C3%A9lus-fran%C3%A7ais-escortent-un-convoi-humanitaire-refus%C3%A9-par-l-azerba%C3%AFdjan>

³⁴ https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/haut-karabakh-avec-les-elus-francais-au-secours-des-armeniens-31-08-2023-2533445_24.php

³⁵ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/le-cri-d-alar-me-de-sylvain-tesson-m-macron-qu-avez-vous-fait-de-vos-promesses-aux-armeniens-20230927>

³⁶ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/toute-la-droite-lr-reunie-d-une-seule-voix-pour-soutenir-le-haut-karabakh-20230612>

³⁷ <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-enjeux-territoriaux/les-petites-armenie-de-l-hexagone-7236686>

support group for Armenia, *France-Arménie*, can be found in the French Senate and is partly composed of LR officials³⁸.

Furthermore, alongside political backing from the LR, Armenians possess their own political influence group in France. Indeed, the most important is the CCAF (*Le Conseil national des Conseils de coordination des organisations Arméniennes de France*) or The National Council of Coordinating Councils of Armenian Organizations in France in English, which regroups Armenian interests' groups in France in order to influence the public sphere. Its importance can be justified by discussions organized during dinners with several French presidents (François Hollande in January 2016 and Emmanuel Macron in January 2020)³⁹. This organization is also at the origin of FDR committee, which is a cooperation project in economy, culture, agriculture and many other fields between France and Armenia which started in December 2021 with the signature of both Armenian and French Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴⁰. In 2022, the CCAF pushed the French Senate to request the French government sanctions against Azerbaijan on the 15th November and the French National Assembly to require from Azerbaijan the end of hostilities with Armenia and the establishment of a peace on the 30th of November⁴¹.

In the recent events in the Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenia diaspora was very active in the media sphere but also in the political one. Indeed, in 2023, we have seen this influence with the humanitarian convoy initiative to Nagorno-Karabakh led by the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, and other French officials, alongside the referral to the UN Security Council by France⁴² and the weight of the Armenian diaspora in order for France to sign a weapon agreement with Armenia “intended to reassure the large Armenian diaspora in France”⁴³. Political support was also given since August 2023 at the French National Assembly, with the speech of Jean-Louis Bourlanges, deputy from the Modem (center), “Armenia must live!”⁴⁴ and by French mayors of Paris, Lyon, Marseille and more than twenty other cities⁴⁵. Last but not least, Stéphane Séjourné, General secretary of *Renaissance*, the presidential party, and

³⁸ https://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_641.html

³⁹ <https://ccaf.info/>

⁴⁰ <https://ccaf.info/comite-fdr/>

⁴¹ <https://ccaf.info/histoire/>

⁴² <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/dans-le-haut-karabakh-la-france-au-secours-des-armeniens-20230824>

⁴³ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/10/24/apres-la-chute-du-haut-karabakh-la-france-lance-une-cooperation-militaire-avec-l-armenie_6196192_3210.html

⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1SddE2MkVs>

⁴⁵ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2023/10/01/appel-des-elus-francais-sur-le-haut-karabakh-si-le-president-azerbaïdjanais-n-entend-pas-les-exhortations-de-l-onu-des-sanctions-economiques-devront-etre-prises_6191857_3232.html

deputy at the European Parliament stated that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a “diplomatic priority” for France⁴⁶.

Moreover, a more obvious support was established with widespread demonstrations of the Armenian diaspora throughout France between September and October 2023 in order to request the support of France and the international community in the Nagorno-Karabakh. This mobilization acquired the support of important mayors such as the mayor of Marseille (Benoit Payan, himself descendant of an Armenian family) and Lyon (both left-leaning)⁴⁷.

Then, the Armenian diaspora in France can coordinate efficient actions in order to receive French political support in Nagorno-Karabakh matters but is not united when it comes to French domestic policy, as we have seen with Nicolas Sarkozy. Interestingly, LR are not the only supporter of the Armenian cause and the community has been able to gather backing from different political parties (as we have seen with the different mayors of Paris, Marseille and Lyon who are left-leaning). Thus, the diaspora has been able to create a heavy influence on the French public sphere through an impactful network of organizations capable of defending its interests in the highest sphere of the French political system, alongside gathering support from various political orientations (from the left to the right).

⁴⁶ https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/armenie/haut-karabakh-le-secretaire-general-de-renaissance-a-peur-qu-on-fasse-les-memes-erreurs-qu-avec-l-ukraine_6075204.html

⁴⁷ <https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20231001-haut-karabakh-des-milliers-se-rassemblent-en-france-et-en-belgique-en-soutien-aux-arm%C3%A9niens>

Conclusion

As this research has proved, History and efficient organization are the roots of the Armenian political influence in France. Due to a vast diaspora politically active, Armenians were able to enter the French political life half a century ago. Moreover, the cultural impact of this community in France is non-negligible; important personalities of the diaspora were and still are influential figures in the public sphere.

Furthermore, the rallying of media from all political sides is one of their greatest achievements. Indeed, as this article showed, when Armenia and Armenians are threatened in the Caucasus, the diaspora possesses a tremendous capability to influence media and public opinion in its favor, from the communists (with journals such as *l'Humanité*) to the far-right (such as the journal *Valeurs Actuelles*). Media coverage is huge and journals openly taking positions for Armenia are not rare.

Finally, the Armenian community in France was also able to gather support in the highest French institutions such as the Senate, the National Assembly and with important mayors, which are a formidable influence tool to align the French Foreign Policy and its objectives.

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