

Interview by H.E. Dr. Vahe Gabrielyan

Ambassador to Ireland

to

Metro Eireann

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1. You are the first ever Ambassador of Armenia to the UK with an added brief in Ireland. Please can you tell me your impressions of Ireland during your visits?

I had special feelings for Ireland, the Irish people and their history even before I was considered for the job and felt really privileged and proud to be appointed Armenia's Ambassador to Ireland, moreover the first ever one.

All my visits to Dublin have been enjoyable, whether on my own or accompanied with my family. Of course, the most memorable day was the one when I presented my credentials. All the officials from the Foreign Ministry and the President's office were very welcoming and helpful but I was most impressed when I met President Mary McAleese. The ceremony was very solemn and inspiring and the inspecting of the guard was an obliging experience, however I was touched by the President's warm welcome to myself and my family and her knowledge of Armenia and our history. I was very pleased to her assessment of the resemblance between our two nations' histories, fate and character and her offer of assistance in my mission was indeed encouraging. These were words every diplomat wants to hear. I just hope we will see her visit Armenia before long and share this mood with the Armenian people.

2. What is the exact nature of Armenian-Irish relations - on what cultural, political and trade matters do we cooperate?

We should realise that Armenian-Irish relations on a government-to-government level are in very young days. We have had contacts earlier of course, but on an official level we are in the initial stages, although I must mention with satisfaction that we have already had high level contact. Not long after my appointment, the then Foreign Minister of Ireland Mr. Dermot Ahern TD, invited our Foreign Minister of that time, Mr. Vartan Oskanian to visit Dublin in the beginning of 2007. This was the first ever visit of an Armenian Foreign Minister and we covered a lot of ground, discussed a set of important matters and ways of developing cooperation between the two nations. There are indeed many areas where we can closely cooperate: we are interested in Ireland's experience of European integration, economic achievement and conflict resolution, in regulating relations with a large Diaspora, etc.

Apart from the political dimension which we intend to expand, we are very keen on developing comprehensive economic cooperation. From my very first visits I had meetings at Chambers of Commerce of Ireland and we started a process of establishing cooperation

between them and the Chamber of Commerce in Armenia. The process has stalled for a while but we plan to rejuvenate it. Being small countries quite far apart geographically obviously causes some difficulties, and having no embassies in each other's capital cities does not help either therefore we have nominated one of our compatriots, a successful Armenian-Irish businessman to be our Honorary Consul who, being a Dubliner for decades can pursue trade issues on much more regular basis. We have received the consent of the Irish authorities and hopefully, pending some legislative amendments to our respective procedures in Armenia, will appoint him before long.

We are also in the process of finalizing an agreement on avoiding double taxation which will be good start, encouraging the business communities on both sides to more seriously look into doing business with each other.

3. In what spheres particularly do you see prospects for economic relations?

Apart from the traditional branches of economy such as mining, heavy industry, chemical industry, textiles and agriculture, Armenians have always been good, like the Irish, in spheres of economy requiring high-standard education, advanced skills and brainpower, spheres such as information technologies, hi-tech, software development, research, banking as well as industries for which geographical barriers and transportation costs are not important: diamond cutting and refining, jewellery making, etc. Tourism is one of those with highest potential, as are also organic foods production, food processing, intellectual services.

I would like to go back to the previous question for a moment and add that cultural relations of course are not at the bottom of our list. It is not by chance that the first thing we did in Ireland was organizing of an exhibition of photographs, in the Central library in Dublin, depicting the beautiful scenery, history, architectural and cultural monuments and everyday life of Armenia as seen by fifteen professional photographers.

And while we are on the subject of culture, I would like to mention with pride the Armenian collection at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. This is said to be the largest collection of medieval illustrated Armenian manuscripts not in Armenian hands. We, Armenians, who invented their alphabet in 406 and put it into uninterrupted use since then have a special reverence for the written word, the books and the spiritual in general and boast a unique collection of over 17,000 medieval manuscripts in the Matenadaran, the depository of ancient manuscripts in Yerevan alone. The second, hugely important collection is maintained and researched at the Mekhitarist Abbey in Venice while another unique collection is kept in the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem. The one in the Chester Beatty is unique in being not in Armenian hands and I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Director of the Library, the curator of the exhibition (only a small part of which is on permanent display) and all Chester Beatty staff for the wonderful work they are doing by preserving this important cultural heritage. We are grateful for the skilled handling, professional restoration and simply generous care.

4. How many Armenians are in Ireland, and in general, what types of experiences -good and bad - do they report to the embassy as regards life here?

As for probably any community, speaking of precise numbers is not realistic; exact statistics simply do not exist. However, we know that there are not many Armenians in Ireland by any count and those who are known, do not live concentrated in one place. The Armenian community in Ireland has not been, until very recently, formally organized around any structures. They have recently started talking about establishing some sort of a community centre, possibly also a Sunday school and having organized Sunday Holy Mass. The Embassy undoubtedly encourages such activity and we hope to see a coherent community that can contribute to Armenian-Irish bilateral relations.

From whatever contacts we have had, we have no reports of any bad experience. On the contrary, and I want to specially mention this, in 1988 in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Armenia, the Irish people showed their warmth and generosity and were of great assistance both morally and materially. Our compatriots, in fact literally one or two ten, recall those days with special warmth and were extremely impressed with the generosity of help. We are indeed grateful. That attitude means a lot to us and will not be forgotten.

5. Please could you inform our readers about the current status of the Nagorno Karabakh problem - and ask if those involved in the Northern Ireland peace process have offered any advice to the Government of Armenia in solving this.

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is one of the most intricate conflicts of our time because of several factors: it has a long history; has claimed a terrible number of lives and is in a very complex region where many powers have interests. Let me explain its roots as briefly as possible. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia and Georgia, formerly part of the Russian empire, became independent in 1918 and new country, Azerbaijan was also formed. The latter had claims for Karabakh, part of the ancient Armenian province of Artsakh, but these claims were considered so unfounded by the League of Nations that it did not grant Azerbaijan membership. When the three countries were sovietised by the Red Army in 1920, the authorities of Soviet Azerbaijan formally acknowledged that Karabakh was part of Armenia, however, a year later the Communist authorities in Moscow decided to re-draw the borders in Caucasus at their own whim and thus cut two big chunks of indigenous Armenian lands, Nakhichevan and Karabakh and “presented” them to Azerbaijan, albeit with some degree of formal autonomy. Armenians never reconciled with this fact and kept protesting but not much was possible under either the Leninist “internationalist” dogma or Stalinist repressions. Consequently, under continuing oppression of Azeri authorities all Armenian population of Nakhichevan was ousted, and some demographic change was forced in Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh through various means of discrimination and violation of human rights. When Gorbachov’s perestroika offered hopes for democracy and justice, Armenians in Karabakh raised their voice through legitimate legislative procedures and demanded restoration of justice. Repressions and organized pogroms of Armenians – also in towns of Azerbaijan, far from Nagorno Karabakh – followed and when the Soviet Union collapsed these attacks grew into full-scale outright military aggression against the civilian population. A bigger part of Karabakh came under Azeri occupation, population was killed or fled, towns and villages were destroyed, while the

rest, still unoccupied parts were bombed and shelled around the clock. Karabakh was able to organize self defence and ultimately beat the Azeris against the odds, liberating most of the territory and establishing control over some adjacent lands. Almost all Karabakhi men went to fight to protect their families and homes. A formal ceasefire was established in 1994 and still holds although shootings on the contact line are frequent. A negotiating format, co-chaired by the US, Russia and France and including about another ten countries was put together by the OSCE in early nineties and has since been working on finding a resolution acceptable to all parties. Several proposals have been put on the table since then and rejected by one or more of the three parties (Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia), the last three of them – by Azerbaijan. In the meanwhile Karabakh has managed to hold a referendum, declare independence, conduct three presidential and parliamentary and even more local elections and is successfully building a democratic independent state, working hard to improve the welfare of its people and eliminate the consequence of the imposed on them war.

Currently the negotiations are based upon the so-called Madrid principles, which is a draft document on the basic principles of resolution as suggested by the Minsk Group co-chairs at the margins of the OSCE Ministerial meeting in Madrid in 2007. The main burden of negotiation has been on the regular meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Armenia and Azerbaijan and quite a few meetings of the Presidents as well. The co-chairs frequently travel to Yerevan, Baku and Stepanakert (the capital of Nagorno Karabakh) to discuss various principles and details. One major impediment to the peace process is that Azerbaijan refuses to directly talk to the Nagorno Karabakh authorities, which is counter to logic, because the conflict is in the first place between Azerbaijan and Karabakh.

Most recently, on November 2, 2008, declaration on the prospects of a political settlement for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict was signed by the Presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, committing the parties to non-use of force and resolution of the conflict by peaceful means only. On the background of the ongoing and non-abating warmongering rhetoric from Azerbaijan that often verges on a strong anti-Armenian hate campaign, as well on the background of the tenfold increase of the military budget of Azerbaijan in the recent few years, we think that the signing of such declaration is quite an important development.

Being involved in such intricate conflict and lengthy negotiations, we are of course interested in other nations' experience in conflict resolution and carefully study all available sources. We are impressed with the progress in the Northern Ireland talks and genuinely happy that this long-standing conflict is finally coming to an end.

6. Like Ireland, Armenia has a massive Diaspora. What does the Government of Armenia do, through its embassies, to ensure that the culture and traditions of Armenians are maintained when abroad?

At least two-thirds of Armenians live outside Armenia or the Republic of Armenia, for the bigger part of Armenia or Western Armenia is now part of Turkey. The reason of the existence of such a massive for us Diaspora is not the free choice to live where one wishes to. There has certainly been economic emigration after independence was restored in 1991. It is natural: with the demise of the Soviet Union, the economy, already under big strain

because of the 1988 earthquake that destroyed a third of the country and because of the hundreds of thousand Armenian refugees fleeing pogroms in Azerbaijan, deteriorated to an unprecedented low. The blockades imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey further aggravated the situation and a considerable for us number of people left Armenia to find jobs and security.

The Diaspora, however, was not formed by these people. It came into existence when hundreds of thousands were deported from their homes in Western Armenia, then part of the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) at the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout a centrally-planned and government executed annihilation campaign of Armenians that started under Sultan Hamid at the end of the 19th century and culminated, under the Young Turks, in 1915 in the first Genocide of the 20th century, all the population of Western Armenia was exterminated. At least 1.5 million perished in slaughter or died of hunger and exhaustion in the deportation through the deserts, while the rest fled for other countries.

When one speaks of the Armenian Diaspora, a generic name for the now confident, prospering, respected for their talents and hard work, and increasingly influential communities all over the globe, the history of how it came about should always be borne in mind because this historic memory is a defining feature of their psychology and activities.

Today, apart from maintaining their identity and their well-being, the Armenian Diaspora pursues two major issues: the international recognition and condemnation of the 1915 Genocide of Armenians – which Turkey still refuses to do – and the strengthening of the Republic of Armenia. We cooperate with Diaspora in all possible directions, including the strengthening and deepening of our bilateral relations with the countries where we have communities. Armenians are always loyal, law-abiding and hard-working citizens of the countries where they reside and act as a useful bridge for furthering bilateral relations. The Armenian Diaspora is an important part of the nation and a valuable asset and we do our best to help them and enhance their ties with their Homeland.

In this light, we are very keen to learn the Irish experience of developing the relations between the Homeland and the Diaspora and we believe it is a useful experience to study.

As for Embassies, working with the communities is an important part of our job. We work very closely with both structures and individuals of respective communities on a multitude of issues; political, trade, cultural, educational, tourism, investments etc. We have already achieved a lot and intend to constantly build on that.

7. There is confusion among onlookers as to whether Armenia wishes to eventually join the EU. Some say that popular opinion backs such a move, but that the Government's foreign policy favours the continuation of close ties with Russia and the CIS. What is the reality of the situation from your perspective?

Let me start with the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and Russia. As one would appreciate, Armenia, at least Eastern Armenia, was for a long time part of the Russian Empire and for over seventy years – of the Soviet Union. Throughout these years, we have built not only deep economic ties but also cultural, educational, historic people-to-people

relations with people with whom we were part of the same country. We should maintain these ties of friendship and cooperation and build on them for our own benefit. Also a lot of Armenians live in the CIS countries and our community in Russia is the largest among all our communities in the Diaspora. In addition, many families in Armenia have someone working in these countries on seasonal basis as well. Russia is also a strategic partner and a very significant economic partner and investor in our economy. All these ties are in our own interest.

Having said this, I must make it clear that integration into the European community, structures and economy is a government priority policy that we have announced since early years of independence, as well an express wish of the public. As the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301 CE, we believe that we are bearers of European values and Europe is where we belong. The policies of European integration that we have pursued consistently are by no means contradictory to our maintaining of good relations with Russia or the CIS countries. The two can successfully complement each other and there is no disagreement, well at least in this issue, between the public opinion and the Government's foreign policy.

We do see ourselves in Europe but understand well that we still have much work to do to achieve the way of life that we aspire. We also believe that once our aims and declared direction of development are clear, they will be reached not by making loud statements and claims but through consistency of actions, hard work and determination. We hope that Ireland will stand by a friendly nation once or when the need to assist on this road arises.

Conducted by:
Catherine Reilly
Dublin-London