

# ARMENIA: THE FUTURE

genuinely happy that this long-standing conflict is finally coming to an end.

**ME: 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?**

VG: 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 for the existence of such a massive diaspora is not the free choice to live where one wishes.

There has certainly been economic emigration since independence was restored in 1991. 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 thousands of 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 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. In a centrally planned, 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 the 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, 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 – and the strengthening of the Republic of Armenia.

We co-operate with the 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 the people and enhance their ties with their homeland. In this light, we are very keen to learn from

the Irish experience of developing the relations between the homeland and the diaspora.

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.

**ME: 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 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). What is the reality of the situation from your perspective?**

VG: Let me start with the CIS and Russia. As one would appreciate, Armenia – at least eastern Armenia – was for a long time part of the Russian Empire and, for over 70 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 others with whom we were part of the same country. We should maintain these ties of friendship and co-operation and build on them for our own benefit.

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 a 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 the 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, 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 on this issue – between 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 action, 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.

## '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'

# Two sides to Nagorno-Karabakh

WITH NAGORNO-Karabakh, as with any long-standing political conflict, diametrically opposed viewpoints exist on its origins and escalation.

Visit the website of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an icon on the screen's right grabs the attention, such is its starkness. It features an outline of Azerbaijan, as computer-generated fire-fumes emanate from the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the southwest. The text 'ARMENIAN AGGRESSION! Towards Azerbaijan' accompanies it, and leaves the viewer in little doubt as to the troubled relationship between these Caucasus neighbours.

Armenia's corresponding ministry site also carries an icon – although less dramatically imaged – which is labelled 'KARABAKH CONFLICT'.

Both ministries claim to have right on their site, and both countries and their peoples have suffered greatly from the conflict, not least those in Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

Today, the region is technically part of Azerbaijan, but is self-governed under the auspices of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Armenians have comprised an absolute demo-

An Armenian T-72 tanks serves as a war memorial near the town of Stepanakert in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh



graphic majority in Nagorno-Karabakh since at least the early Middle Ages

In 1924, the Soviet Union – of which modern-day Armenia

and Azerbaijan were then a part – created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region within Azerbaijan, even though the population in the area was

almost entirely Armenian. As the Azerbaijani population grew, the Armenians claimed discrimination, and tensions mounted on both sides.

By the late 1980s, these frictions had exploded into a full-on conflict. As violence increased, the ethnic Azeri (Azerbaijani) population fled

the region, while ethnic Armenians were forced to escape from other parts of Azerbaijan.

A declaration of war never emanated from either Armenia or Azerbaijan, but large-scale combat took place between Azerbaijani and ethnic Armenian forces. The ethnic Armenians won out, and occupied some of Azerbaijani territory outside Karabakh, which acted as a buffer zone linking it with Armenia.

In 1994, a Russian-brokered ceasefire was signed, leaving the region under de facto ethnic Armenian control. It also left areas of Azeri territory around the enclave in Armenian hands.

More than 30,000 people have lost their lives since the eruption of tensions, and more than one million Armenians and Azeris have had to flee their homes.

Russia, France and the US co-chair the OSCE's Minsk Group, which has been attempting to broker an end to the dispute for over a decade. Last November, both the Armenian and Azeri governments pledged to increase their efforts towards a peaceful solution.

– Catherine Reilly