

## **Armenia: challenges and achievements**

On September 21<sup>st</sup> the Republic of Armenia celebrates the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence. This statement does little justice to the whole truth. Formally a young republic, Armenia, with a history going back to the beginnings of the first millennium BC, has managed to be a mighty empire, a succession of kingdoms and principedoms, has regained brief independence as a republic in 1918 only to lose it to the Red Army in 1920. Having lost greater part of territory to various surrounding empires at different times, Armenia suffered the most recent loss of her historic lands, including the Biblical Mount Ararat in 1921 when the Soviet leadership traded lands with Turkey, gaining a valuable stretch of the Black Sea shore. Two other parts were annexed to Azerbaijan only to create a conflict source which was to re-kindle as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed. The situation in the First Republic was further aggravated with the influx of the many thousand refugees fleeing the massacres and deportations of Armenians in Western Armenia (then part of the Ottoman Empire, now Turkey) that culminated in 1915 in the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, killing over 1.5 million people. Despite all these suffering, Armenians were able to recover and prosper; building within the USSR a Second Republic that prided itself on urbanization, 99 percent literacy rate, high level of industrialization, highest proportion of scientists/scholars per population in the Soviet Union, high-tech industries and intense cultural life. Unfortunately, before regaining independence for yet another time in 1991, Armenia had to suffer another blow: a devastating earthquake in 1988 turned a quarter of the country into ruins, killed 25,000 people and left another 500,000 without shelter. We would not have been able to recover this calamity were it not for a global outpouring of sympathy and help. By the way, the British were among the first to react and help generously. A Lord Byron school in Gyumri, built by the British and opened by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, is a lasting testimony to friendship and British generosity.

While Armenian-British relations on a governmental level may go back to only the First Republic period of 1918-1920, cultural and commercial relations go back for centuries. The poet Lord Byron studied the Armenian language at the Armenian Mekhitarist order in San Lazarus, Venice in 1816 and even wrote a text on its grammar. Byron inspired many an Armenian writer and poet and is widely known in Armenia. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century translations of Shakespeare's works into Armenian are considered literary

masterpieces in their own right. Armenians established a noticeable presence in the UK in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the textile industry in the Manchester area attracted Armenian merchants who by 1870 had already built their first church in Manchester. Today the UK boasts a vibrant Armenian community that was a couple of years ago recognized as the most successful among national minorities in this country. The community plays an important role in furthering economic and cultural relations between Armenia and the UK.

Despite the destruction of the economic infrastructures because of the demise of the Soviet Union and the dire consequences of the blockade imposed on Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey, the Third Republic has succeeded in rebuilding the economy and creating viable state institutions. First in the post Soviet space to privatize land and quick to embrace liberal market economy, Armenia was proclaimed in the early 90s by the international community ‘an isle of democracy in the Caucasus.’ We consistently implemented reforms of the judiciary, the electoral system and other public institutions, were able not only to overcome the imposed on us energy crises, but to have, for several years, a double-digit economic growth that lasted till the onset of the global economic crisis. As a landlocked country with no oil or gas, we knew well in advance that our main asset was our well-educated, highly-skilled human resource and that our aim should be a diversified economy focusing on hi-tech, knowledge-based industries, as well as services. Our well-regulated and effective banking sector can today be an example for a few countries and play a leading role in the region. Armenia’s membership in major international organizations, including the WTO, liberal laws and natural entrepreneurial climate make the country a good place for investment and business, respectively rated by relevant international agencies.

Armenia’s other strength is the worldwide Armenian Diaspora. Originally formed mainly by people fleeing the genocidal campaign against them in the Ottoman Turkey, it has long since grown into an influential network of confident and successful individuals and organizations who, being respected citizens of their respective countries, contribute their vast knowledge, skills, connections and means to the empowerment of their Homeland and act as a useful, effective and trusted bridge between Armenia and almost any other country.

Armenia faces two major foreign policy challenges: the formal resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations. After declaring independence and fighting off the Azeri aggression aimed at total ethnic cleansing, albeit at the high cost of the loss of many lives, the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh still awaits the recognition of its right to live in safety and security, under the authorities and state institutions that its own people have chosen through a series of democratic elections. As a guarantor of their security and currently representing them in negotiations, Armenia is doing her best to reach a just and lasting settlement through peaceful negotiations. The situation is aggravated as Azerbaijan, blinded by oil revenues and engaged in a highly dangerous build-up of its military, refuses to talk to the people with whom it has a conflict and who it claims are its citizens, contrary to the reality and developments of the recent 20 years.

In the no less difficult challenge of improving the Armenian-Turkish relations, Armenia's goodwill alone is apparently not enough. In genuine efforts to better relations with her neighbour, Armenia has put forward no precondition: she could have at the very least demanded that Turkey first recognized and condemned the 1915 Genocide of Armenians (doing the same by the UK would have been helpful). Instead, Turkey has itself demanded that Armenia relinquish efforts for the international recognition of the Genocide and that Armenian forces withdraw from the buffer zone around NKR, controlled by the latter's defence forces, before diplomatic relations can be established and the Armenian-Turkish border, effectively the last closed border in Europe, can be opened. Successive Armenian leaderships have adhered to the principle of no preconditions and Armenia's bold initiatives for reconciliation last year were highly commended by leading countries and international organizations. We hope that the Turkish leadership will find the strength to overcome any internal pressure or external blackmail in order to create new and favourable conditions for peace, stability and prosperity in our troubled region.

Armenians are often noted for their culture and entrepreneurial spirit. These are combined not only with the desire to lead in those spheres but also with the goodwill to live in peace and prosperity with all our neighbours and friends.