



Diaspora Afraid to Acknowledge Grave Realities in Armenia

Transcript of Arsinée Khanjian's Interview with CivilNet (July 26, 2016)

I: The situation has not been calm in Armenia, we've been trying to understand what's going on from different perspectives, this last ten days' developments yesterday were critical. We're trying still to confirm some information; some information is not being confirmed. There are members of the Sasandzerer group who are in hospital, there are police officers who have been hurt, there are citizens who have been detained unlawfully. Yesterday, a group of protesters rallied around, for the second day already, around Yerevan to gather support and the rally, Arsinee Khanjian, a well-known public figure and actress was also there. We've spoken with her in Armenian, but today we want to discuss her impressions and what she's learned being here starting yesterday until day. Thank you Arsinee for being here with us.

A: My pleasure

I: So you just arrived from the airport and went straight to the rally, we caught you on our live feed taking footage. What were your impressions of what was going on? You arrived and said you wanted to be there and see for yourself what's happening. Less than 24 hours later...what were your impressions of what's happening in Armenia, being here first-hand.

A: Of course, like any Armenian in the diaspora, we learned very early on about the situation about what was going on in Yerevan. We had to rely for that on mostly the Armenian media sources. And, soon after I realized that there was very little analysis of what were the actual reasons for this upheaval and this resistance. Because it sounds like it was a resistance, there were expressions of extreme discontent, unfortunately, the information was not circulating clearly about why now and what was specifically, this time, the claims, per say. And then myself, I was travelling Europe, so I was getting bits and pieces of information whenever I could until I arrived last night. And my presence here is really due to attend the wedding of dear friends, but as I got into the car, I heard that two of the people that have been, sasnadzereh, had been injured and they had taken out and they were under supervision, police supervision, they were taken to hospital, but I realized that the only way I can really understand is to join the demonstration, 3:14 because there was one that was starting actually when I arrived around 10 o'clock last night. So, my immediate impulse was to be there because I wanted to be with the people. It seems to me that this country has been suffering for a long time now from absence of real understanding of how it's being governed. I think that this lack of transparency, this lack of people's ability to feel that they are fully respected citizens of this country has been going on for a number of years. And, now, this is the summation of a situation where it is no longer acceptable for people to feel



that they can remain in the country, the ones who are choosing to remain in the country, feel that they have something to say. 4:19 So, it's the democratic foundation of how the government and people are interacting that is being questioned. Let alone the specifics it turns out of why Sasnadzereh have taken on....

I: Arsinee, I want to go back to something you said earlier, you were saying there were bits and pieces of information and not enough analysis, is this because there isn't enough news coming out of Armenia, is this because the diaspora isn't well-versed in the developing events in Armenia and is unable to make the connections themselves.

A: Both. I think both. I think the information is not freely circulating. I mean, the country has major transparency issues in terms of anything significant that happens, and this is from political, to economic, to social issues. I think it has always been very difficult to really understand, even for people who live here, what's really going on. And then when you translate that into the communication that exists, or does not exist, all these years later after independence with the diaspora, I think things are culminating into a real intensity, but of no substance, per say. I think the diaspora is functioning still in its commitment to support Armenia in every way. The diaspora is terrified of the possibility of ever any civil war or any blood spilled within the country. 5:50 So, in the absence of understanding the real context of the people's displeasure, frustration and anger, I think suddenly they're left to personal interpretation based on their own historical connection with Armenia or their sense of identity. There is no real evaluation of what is really happening in Armenia that is being 6:34 transmitted to the diaspora. I do think the diaspora has a huge role to play here, be it institutionally, be it organizationally, along the lines of the party configurations, but at the end of the day, right now, as we speak, there is nothing that is being carried out and individual Armenians are basically making their own judgement of what they should be, what they can imagine, understand, or interpret the situation is.

I: But this has been happening for such a long time, ever since Armenia's independence, this lack of communication or objectivity towards the reality in Armenia has been lacking generally in the diaspora, many of whom judge Armenia by the pleasantness or unpleasantness of their vacations spent here.

A: But also, I have to yesterday I heard something very specific from one of the demonstrators. I was saying 'The diaspora's biggest fear is to have human losses caused by ourselves, between ourselves.' The diaspora is terrified by this. The diaspora, as we know, has been marked by the history of the genocide, so spilling blood, loss, is a traumatic sort of memory. So they certainly don't want to see Armenia, who's miraculously now an independent country, and the diaspora has dreamt about this independence, this free Armenia. So they don't want to turn the paradise that we have imagined in our subconscious into hell. So, in a way, they're watching from far, thinking that the best way is to leave to the local authorities



the way to handle this. But, I feel the diaspora has to become a participant. The diaspora has to be involved, especially in situations like this, where we have to know that in the country, there is repression. In the country, of course there is corruption, we know that. We don't want to talk about these things so we don't wash our dirty linens in public, but I think we are now a country, a nation, with our history, the way it has divided us, that we have to say that we have to be participating one way or another. The diaspora has sent a lot of financial support over the years, a lot of cultural and educational and social organizations have been built to support the population, but yesterday as I was saying, one of the demonstrators said, 'You know, the diaspora, you are taking very major mistaken steps here,' I said, 'Why's that?' and they said, 'Why can't you see that all the money that is coming into the country is going into corruption, into systems of operation, that are not, at the end of the day, benefiting to the people.' And I think the frustration today is of course geopolitical, there is the Karabagh question, what is going to happen to the land, what going to happen to....

I: There was something I was going to ask you, the Karabagh developments in April, we saw that the diaspora consolidated very fast, they tried to get involved in any little way, or large way they could, sending in sleeping bags to cans [10:18](#) , here we see that it's as a major problem as Karabagh and as related to Karabagh as it could be, and yet there's no even small consolidation, small attempts of people, if there are any I'm not aware of, I apologize, however, this lack of trust in itself that the diaspora can be involved in Armenia's internal affairs, where does this come from?

A: But it's a historical phenomenon, I mean since the independence of Armenia, I think the diaspora has been allowed only on few accounts, and maybe not allowed, but it has given itself, that responsibility to express itself, to mobilize around it, the question of the genocide denial of course, and the necessary recognition. And then the whole question of Karabagh, the lands, but those are two very concrete historical elements that the diaspora has felt and lived for the last 100 years. We don't want any more loss of land, properties. We don't want any more either this continuous denial of the history, which constitutes the diaspora's major identity. However, the diaspora has never managed until now, even with the diasporan political parties who have eventually come into Armenia, to establish themselves at par with the existing dynamic of the authorities. There may be obvious explanations for that, but for whatever reason, however, this has not succeeded therefore the diaspora cannot allow itself and does not know how to do it. We can talk about the land and Karabagh. We can send reinforcements in that sense (intellectual and otherwise), we can talk about the genocide, but the internal affairs are so confusing to the diaspora. Within the country it is so difficult for people to understand, what is the predicament. 12:15 So, how does the diaspora mobilize in all of this? Right now, for instance, as of yesterday, the major issue for me is, why other than the Armenian Press, the diaspora a little bit, but coming out of Armenia as such, other than the Armenian media and press, why is the international community not bringing, and I'm talking about non-Armenians, international community,



all these countries around the world, when the failed coup happened in Turkey, everyone instantly talking about what was going on in Turkey. It has been 10 days, and there is serious upheaval in this country, and there is anger that is being expressed, and more and more, with a larger participation of the people, they have democratic claims that are being ignored under all kinds of manipulations, institution manipulations, that belong to the authorities, to the government. So why is it that the diaspora is not asking itself: "Where is the international community's attention on Armenia?" We have incredible lawyers out there, in the United States, in France, in the rest of the world, who know about human rights violation issues and who work in those fields, why are they not participating by first of all, finding out what's going on here in Armenia and then triggering attention. Why the journalists who are working for all of these important media outlets in the Diaspora, why aren't they pushing, or maybe they are, and probably the challenges are big, but all the same, we are not hearing anything in terms of how the Diaspora is trying to address what's going on right now in Yerevan. So, this is where I feel that the Diaspora has to stop feeling that they are only capable of intervening in certain aspects of our national identity, and I call myself a national identity because I am a Diasporic Armenian, 14:19 but this country is everything I feel I have to live for. This is the reality and I think every Diasporan has to at least ask that question to himself or herself, "What does it mean?" If they don't choose to be participating, then that is fine, then it's clear. But if they don't know if they won't or not, that is a problem, and it is a very urgent problem right now. We need this connection to immediately happen.

I: 14:51 We hear from a lot of protesters that 'Where's the diaspora? We need help!' However, probably, the authorities have made sure that such intervention does not occur, does not happen. There's this duality, but also, another question, that wasn't a question, but a question for you, how long will you be here and being here, you personally, what kind of action do you plan to take?

A: I will be here until August 5th and in terms of the actions I can take, I think the most important thing for me is right now to really be with the people. The number of people is increasing by the minute. I think people are really coming to understand between liaisons that there is something really important right now happening, I think the resistance is not only in that in play where Saszandzerer are right now, holding their grievances and holding, being held there, I think the people out in the city are, they were on balconies, in cars, there were thousands, I don't know how many the number was-

I: There's no exact estimation, we've heard from 5,000 to 15,000.

A: If we take the minimum of 5,000 I would say this is a very serious gathering. So for me, it is important to listen, ask questions and try to understand from whatever I can gather what it is that I have to bring and I'm open to any participation, contribution, I think this conversation is a tricky one for me because on the one hand I feel that I want to be involved, at the same time, I want to be involved in a



responsible way and in the absence of confirmed information, this makes my own personal ethical decision-

I: Decision-

A: -complicated, but I think this is a risk that I have to take and I think this is a risk that the diaspora has to take [16:59](#). And maybe the diaspora has to, the individuals in the diaspora, they have to put pressure on their own organizations that they belong to or they're around and those organizations don't have to be political parties necessarily, they can be cultural organizations, everyone has to feel that there is something at stake for all of us. It's not only about the people of Armenia. We have been talking for years now about how Armenia is emptying. The youth, the driving force of the next generation is leaving, we know that the government is aware of this and we know that the government has its own agenda of preservation and what is best. I'm not sure what the government thinks is best for the Armenian people. I am sure that they know what is best for their own survival. And this may be fine to a certain extent, but it doesn't look like the sense of survival for the government is really, 100 per cent, in the spirit of serving the people of Armenia. External pressures, geopolitically are extreme, we know that between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia there are a lot of things at play, but it seems that this is the only attention that we're getting and this is the only pressure that we have to address. We don't have the support of anyone else in the world. And I think at this time of open communication, Armenia, like Syria managed, like others with the Arab revolutions [18:32](#), I mean, things are happening in Armenia, I hope not to the extent of disaster that Syria has gone through, but I think also if we don't make this clear and transparent and available for people to see and understand, it may become a really dangerous trap.

I: If I may conclude, what your saying is that probably diasporas are not understanding that what's happening now in Armenia is putting for Armenia's state-hood at risk. It's not just an internal upheaval, it's also about Armenia's persistence and state-hood regarding also its place in geopolitical situation and time.

A: The diaspora is, as I said, terrified, of losing the statehood. We have it and we just don't want to let it go. The truth is, we had it, it evolved, maybe this is time to reconfigure the concept of that statehood. Maybe this is the time to say, "Okay, we have it, but we have to reinvent it, we have to change certain things." We have to open our eyes and we have to become participants, we have to include our conversation to what's going on in Armenia with the citizens who live in this country. It may sound scary, but every culture, every state has evolved over history, through changes. If Armenia needs change, we have to take those steps and hopefully, peacefully and that's where the pressure has to happen to, with the negotiations with the existing government. [.20:30](#) This is not about this government deciding what is going to be the future of the Armenian people. The Armenian people are in Armenia and outside of it.



We are responsible of our history and not only financially. We are responsible of our future by being in the conversation constantly. We do have examples of that in history, Israel is that country. It doesn't mean that in Israel everything is peaceful and that everyone gets along. It doesn't mean that the Jewish diaspora in Israel are always seeing eye to eye. No. But that conversation is open. That conversation does not exist for Armenian people. The Armenian Nation doesn't have that privilege. And, this is what we have to address and perhaps, this is the time where we have to start conversing. We have a ministry of diaspora, I'm not sure, I've never figured out, other than photo-ops for meetings of this community and that community and talking about language issues and you know, tourism and so on, what are we really doing? That ministry of diaspora for me is an essential body to establish communication of responsibility, both from Armenia towards the diaspora, and from the diaspora towards Armenia at every level of building a nation.

I: And yet the Minister of Culture receives such honourable reception wherever-

A: The Minister of Diaspora you mean.

I: The Minister of Diaspora, yes. Thank you Arsinee very much for this conversation. I hope the diaspora learns from your experience here in Armenia and thank you to the viewers for joining us. At CivilNet we're working 24/7 to bring you the latest updates. [22:13](#)

This interview was conducted in Armenia by CivilNet on July 26, 2016.