



## **Armenia's Diaspora – Its Role & Influence**

### **KEY POINTS**

- **Armenia has, in proportional terms, the largest Diaspora of any former Soviet state**, much of it concentrated in Russia, the US and France. This has been a huge source of support for the Armenian state. But it's also periodically acted as a brake on Yerevan's scope for manoeuvre, particularly over the Nagorny Karabakh dispute and relations with Turkey. This is likely to remain the case in future.
- **The most politically active Armenian Diaspora community is the US one**, whose focus on achieving official US recognition of the 1915 'genocide' is likely to intensify over the coming two years. By contrast, the Armenian community in Russia remains largely disengaged from political lobbying – but might we see this change over time?

### **DETAIL**

*"We live different lives, Armenia and the Diaspora. Here it is real politics, while the Diaspora lives with the ideas of unreal politics, and they cannot change their ideas so quickly." (Levon Ter-Petrosyan, then-President of Armenia, 1993)*

**Of all the former Soviet states, Armenia has the largest global Diaspora community, in proportion to the size of its national population**, by some margin.

Whilst precise figures are open to debate (given in particular the tendency of some Diaspora activists to inflate the numbers), it is generally reckoned that there are around 8-10 million people of Armenian descent currently living outside Armenia (whose own population is currently estimated at around 2.9 million). The largest Armenian communities are based in Russia (2.3 million), the US (1.5 million), France (400,000) and the Lebanon (230,000), with sizeable populations (80,000 or more) also residing in Ukraine, Syria, Argentina, Poland, Turkey<sup>1</sup>, Iran and Canada.

**The 'gap' between the size of the Diaspora and Armenia's own population is growing.** It's estimated that Armenia's population has shrunk by almost 1 million since 1992 as a result of an exodus of Armenians to join these Diaspora communities. Most (70%) of these are believed to have gone to Russia and other CIS countries, with only 10% joining the Armenian community in the US. The latter remains largely comprised of descendants of former residents of the Ottoman Empire who fled the territory of modern-day Turkey during and after the massacres and deportations in 1915 – this was supplemented by a 'second wave' of Armenian immigration into the US from the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Iran) in the 1970s-80s.

---

<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the true size of the Armenian population of Turkey are particularly problematic, given the reluctance of some ethnic Armenians there to identify themselves as such, and also in view of the seasonal fluctuations in the size of the Armenian migrant workers' community in Turkey (often based there illegally).

**Britain's Armenian Diaspora remains fairly small (around 18,000),** and drawn from a wide number of other Diaspora communities (Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Lebanon).

*What role does the Diaspora play in Armenian society?*

**Diaspora support has played a crucial role in Armenia's economic survival and development.** Since 1991 Armenia has received several billion dollars' worth of financial support from US-based Diaspora Armenians alone. Among the most prominent donors has been the Lincy Foundation run by California-based magnate Kerk Kirkorian, which on its own has invested nearly \$300 million in Armenia since independence. More recently, however, it has been the Diaspora community in Russia that has provided the most significant financial flows into the Armenian economy – as of 2008, remittances from Armenians working in Russia accounted for 15% of Armenia's official GDP (some believe the real figure, taking into account 'shadow' payments outside the official banking system, may in fact be twice as high).

**But the Diaspora's contribution cannot be measured purely in terms of investment and aid levels.** It has arguably played an even greater, although less easily quantifiable, role in terms of developing Armenia's 'human capital stock', providing generations of young Armenians with training & study opportunities in the West, and exposing them to a world outside the confines of the former USSR. Diaspora Armenians have also made significant 'in-kind' contributions to improving the Armenian economy, health and education systems through technical advice and support. This also extends to the unrecognised 'Nagorny Karabakh Republic', which has received proportionally very high levels of Diaspora support since 1992 in the form of both funding and technical assistance (e.g. Armenian Diaspora doctors, teachers, engineers, etc. undertaking voluntary secondments to institutions in NK).

**The Diaspora plays a key role in leveraging support for Armenia from foreign governments – nowhere more so than in the US,** which has provided \$2 billion in aid to Armenia since 1992, making it one of the largest recipients of US aid per capita in the world. Lobbying of the US government and Congress by Armenian Diaspora groups has been crucial to securing this outcome. The most active of these are the Armenian Association of America (AAA) and the larger Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the latter being affiliated to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaks), a nationalist Armenian political party currently in opposition to the ruling regime.

**These lobbying organisations are highly instrumental in maintaining international political support for the 'Armenian cause',** particularly in the US, where their goal remains to secure official US government recognition of the 1915 'Genocide' against ethnic Armenians in the Ottoman empire.

**Relatively small numbers of Diaspora Armenians have returned to Armenia to live permanently,** and of these few have risen to prominence in politics. The most notable exceptions are *Raffi Hovannisian* (Californian-born leader of the opposition Heritage party) and *Vartan Oskanyan* (Syrian-born Harvard graduate, Armenia's Foreign Minister from 1998-2008, now Head of the Civiltas think-tank in Yerevan).

*Is the Diaspora's influence welcome within Armenia?*

**Yes – and no.** Successive Armenian governments have been fully conscious of the vital asset that the global Armenian Diaspora represents for a country lacking in mineral resources. Under President Sargsyan, a separate Ministry for Diaspora Issues has been created, charged with promoting even greater interaction between the Republic of Armenia and the global Armenian Diaspora. Significantly **Armenian Diaspora organisations have shown relatively little interest to date in internal governance/democracy-building issues** within Armenia. However, a view among some members of the global Diaspora is that the Armenian government over the last ten years has signally failed to harness the Diaspora's potential to rebuild the economy or promote democratisation. Economic policy in particular has remained parochial and oligarch-bound, and some significant Diaspora investors have retreated with fingers burned. The political elite have also been dominated by a narrow group of largely Karabakh veterans, whose main international links are mostly focused on Russia (through previous service in the Soviet military, for example).

**In the area of foreign policy, there have periodically been pronounced tensions between ruling administrations in Armenia and the global Diaspora**, most notably over policy towards Turkey and the NK conflict. This was most visible under the leadership of Armenia's first President, Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991-1998), whose relationship with the more nationalist elements in the Diaspora was always an uncomfortable one, given the latter's distrust of his perceived readiness to make excessive concessions on these issues (in particular his refusal to prioritise 'genocide' recognition by Turkey as a pre-condition for the normalisation of bilateral relations). **Under Ter Petrosyan, the Dashnak party was banned in Armenia**, and his eventual downfall in 1998 was at least in part triggered by furious Diaspora criticism of his support for an 'unacceptable' compromise solution on NK. For his part, Ter Petrosyan criticised the Diaspora's 'unrealistic' view of Armenia's policy priorities, and more recently, in his reincarnation as an opposition leader, has bemoaned the Diaspora's lack of focus on Armenia's retreat from democracy under his successors. President Sargsyan has, by contrast, attracted less ire from the Diaspora (in part in recognition of his Karabakhi roots and his direct role in securing NK's 'liberation'): whilst the ANCA strongly opposed his signing of the abortive Protocols with Turkey in 2009 on the normalisation of relations, the main focus of their criticism was the US (for allegedly 'pressurising' Yerevan into signing), rather than Sargsyan himself.

**Another important impact of Armenia's Diaspora, of particular relevance at present, is on its stance towards regimes such as Iran and Syria, where sizeable Armenian minorities remain.** The vulnerability of these minorities is felt keenly by the Armenian government. In addition to Armenia's need, as a small, blockaded country to remain on good terms with other neighbours, this explains why it has been found voting against, abstaining or absenting itself during voting for UNGA or Human Rights Council Resolutions on Iran and Syria.

*Outlook & Conclusions*

**The positives in Armenia's relationship with its global Diaspora will continue to outweigh the negatives from Yerevan's standpoint.** The support the Diaspora provides will remain crucial to Armenia's economic survival in a hostile neighbourhood. On foreign policy, however, sentiment within elements of the Diaspora will remain a significant obstacle to achieving compromise-based solutions over the NK dispute and Armenia's relations with Turkey.

**An interesting issue to track will be the position of the Armenian Diaspora in Russia,** by some margin the largest Armenian community outside the country itself. In contrast to the longer-established Diaspora communities in the US and Europe, Russia's Armenians have hitherto shown little interest in lobbying their host country's authorities to take a stronger line on e.g. 'Genocide' recognition. Given the nature of the Russian regime, its relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and the generally 'apolitical' nature of many Armenian labour migrants working in Russia, it is unlikely that this picture will change soon. Over time, the possibility that this community could also be mobilised as a political lobbying force in support of the Armenian 'cause' should not be entirely discounted. However, for the time being the public stance of organised Armenian groups in Russia is focused on proving its loyalty to the Russian state – a similar dynamic for a vulnerable minority as in Iran and Syria.