

## Armenian Parliament votes to adopt draft on Constitutional amendments at first reading



The Armenian National Assembly voted 89-0 to adopt draft on Constitutional amendments at first reading. The bill proposes amendments to Article 213, which will terminate the liabilities of a member (judge) of the Constitutional Court who has served for a period of not less than 12 years in total. Members (judges) that have been in office for less than 12 years will remain in office until the term expires. Once the amendments to Article 213 of the Constitution come into force, the term of office of the President of the Constitutional Court will be terminated. The election of a new chairman of the Constitutional Court, who will be elected for a six-year term, will take place after the vacancies are filled. It was earlier planned to hold a referendum on Constitutional amendments, but it was cancelled because of the state of emergency declared due to the coronavirus pandemic. In its opinion the European Commission of Democracy through Law (the “Venice Commission”) clarified the scope of the Constitutional Court’s review in the framework of the process of amending the Constitution and acknowledged the National Assembly’s power to revoke its own decision calling for a referendum. Moreover, it recognized that the aim of implementing fully the provisions of the Constitution of 2015 concerning the composition of the Constitutional Court is legitimate. To reconcile this aim with the need to preserve the judges’ security of tenure and their independence, the Venice Commission recommended that judges who have not yet completed a term of office of 12 years should be able to stay in office until completion of this term, and that judges who have already served a term of 12 years should be able to benefit, before being replaced, from a new transitional period whose length should be determined by the Armenian authorities.

Pashinyan cancels trip to Moscow

p. 2

Yerevan Court Rejects Arrest Warrant Request for Gagik Tsarukyan

p. 4

Armenia imports 500 oxygen concentrators, 3 oxygen plants

p.7

Gianni Buquicchio: Venice Commission supports Armenia’s efforts to renew its democratic system

p. 5

## Pashinyan cancels trip to Moscow

Citing the continuing coronavirus crisis, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced on June 19 he will not travel to Moscow next week to attend a Russian military parade that will mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.

Russian President Putin invited him to the Red Square parade slated for June 24 when they spoke by phone on June 1. Pashinyan accepted the invitation.

In a letter to Putin publicized by his office, the Armenian leader said he looked forward to taking part in Russia's World War Two Victory Day celebrations.

"But as it turned out afterwards, the ex-

isting epidemiological situation does not allow me to carry out this visit," he wrote. "Based on that, I decided to refrain from travelling to Moscow. This was discussed in detail and agreed upon by our staffs."

Pashinyan added that he still hopes to meet with Putin soon.

Pashinyan announced his decision five days after 75 Armenian soldiers flew to Moscow in preparation for their participation in the parade.

The Defense Ministry in Yerevan confirmed their participation on June 2. It said that during the annual display of Russia's military might they will carry not only an

Armenian national flag but also the banner of a Red Army division that mostly consisted of Armenians and reached Berlin in May 1945.

Pashinyan's spokeswoman, Mane Gevorgyan, said later on Friday that Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan will "lead" the Armenian army contingent during the parade.

The parade, originally scheduled for May 9, was postponed by the Kremlin in April due to the coronavirus pandemic. Both Armenia and Russia have been hit hard by the pandemic.

## Armenian President hosts French medics, new group to arrive next week



President Armen Sarkissian hosted the French medics who have arrived in Armenia to assist their Armenian counterparts in the fight against the coronavirus.

Welcoming the guests and conveying his words of gratitude to friendly France, its president and people, President Sarkissian said: "These are difficult times for Arme-

nia. You have come to Armenia to support our country, to save lives. Being here not only helps patients, doctors, but also the ministry that needs to learn from your experiences, your achievements and your failures."

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of France to Armenia Jonathan Lacotte thanked the President for the hospitality and noted that more medical workers will arrive in Armenia next week with the support of the French Government.

He noted that none of the doctors from France have Armenian roots and will discover Armenia for the first time.

"I hope that this mission will open a new page in Armenian-French relations," the

ambassador said.

He noted that French specialists are in Armenia to share their experience and help Armenia get out of the current situation.

President Sarkissian praised the support of French doctors and wished them good health and a safe return to France.

"We will never forget what you did for Armenia. Please come to Armenia after the coronavirus. I hope you will make friends here. Take with you my love for the people and president of France, a good friend of mine and our country," the President said.

The French doctors noted that they held discussions with their Armenian counterparts and presented their experience to them.

## Genocide denial has no future, truth will pave its way – Armenian MFA

The issue of recognizing and condemning the Armenian Genocide is not an Armenian-Turkish issue, Spokesperson for the Armenian Foreign Ministry Anna Naghdalyan said in a statement.

"This is the problem of Turkey and the international community. This is evidenced by Turkey's numerous statements and actions regarding the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by this or that country," the Spokesperson added.

The comments come after the High Advisory Board of Turkish presidency held a 5-hour meeting to discuss the steps against

the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

"The statements made by the Turkish President justifying the Armenian Genocide and insulting its victims are not new and are manifestations of hate speech, which have an impact on maintaining and strengthening the atmosphere of xenophobia against Armenians in that country," Naghdalyan stated.

"For us and the international community, the Armenian Genocide is a reality that served as a basis for the 1948 Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime



of Genocide as a mechanism for prevention of genocides and crimes against humanity," she added.

"Denial has no future, no matter how it is packaged. No matter how hard the Turkish authorities try to suppress the truth, the truth will pave its way," the Spokesperson concluded.

## Essential progress in talks impossible without full involvement of Artsakh authorities

Without the full involvement of the Artsakh authorities, there can be no significant progress in the negotiation process, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said at the joint sitting of the Security Councils of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh.

According to him, any progress requires reaching and implementing important agreements, and it is here that the people's mandate received by the Artsakh authorities is irreplaceable.

"The involvement of the Artsakh authorities in the talks is an objective necessity, the avoidance of which will further prolong the already protracted conflict. It is obvious that the parties to the conflict have confronting positions on a number of key issues, and there are many reasons for this situation, but if we try to generalize them for a moment, it becomes clear that we are facing two main problems," Pashinyan stated.

The first issue, he said, is connected with the unwillingness of the incumbent authorities of Azerbaijan to negotiate with the Art-



sakh authorities.

"I emphasize the incumbent authorities, because there are people in this hall who not only negotiated, but also signed documents with the former authorities of Azerbaijan, also during the presidency of Heydar Aliyev," he added.

Second, the Prime Minister said, Azerbaijan does not refuse from its maximalist aspirations and views the peace process as a means of fulfilling all its demands.

"In other words, it is not a way to reach a compromise, but a means of gradually

fulfilling all its demands. It can't happen, it won't happen, peace implies a willingness to reach a compromise and comprehensive solution," Nikol Pashinyan stated.

Aliyev and Pashinyan most recently met in February on the sidelines of an annual international security forum in Munich. They publicly traded accusations during a panel discussion on Karabakh held right after their brief talks.

The Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers have since tried to keep the peace process alive despite the coronavirus pandemic. In late April, they held a joint video conference with the U.S., Russian and French mediators co-heading the OSCE Minsk Group.

"The Foreign Ministers and Co-Chairs agreed to remain in close contact and to continue negotiations in person as soon as possible," read a joint statement issued at the time.

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced last week that more such talks will be held later this month.

## Ex-President Robert Kocharyan released on \$4 million bail



Robert Kocharyan's Facebook page posted a picture with a status update: "At home."

Shortly after a Yerevan court ordered Robert Kocharyan to be freed from pre-trial detention, the ex-president was released from the National Security Service jail in downtown of the city.

Kocharyan's attorney Hayk Alumyan told reporters outside the jail building that the ex-president left the area by car from the back exit.

The court ordered the release around 16:05 May 18th and Kocharyan's lawyer immediately headed to the detention center in downtown Yerevan to submit the warrant.

Kocharyan was freed after a court approved the personal guarantees of Artsakh's President Bako Sahakyan and former President Arkady Ghukasyan, who vouched on May 16th that Kocharyan will not obstruct justice amid the ongoing trial into the deadly 2008 post-presidential election unrest. Kocharyan was the outgoing president at that time.

Robert Kocharyan also served as President of Artsakh in the early 90s.

Heavy police presence was seen outside the courthouse today as rival demonstrations numbering few hundred were taking place.

*2nd President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan, who ruled the country from 1998 to 2008, spent two weeks in jail in summer of 2018, but was eventually freed. But on December 7, a higher court overruled the release and ordered him to be remanded into custody pending trial again.*

*Kocharyan, along with several other former officials, is charged with "overthrowing Constitutional Order" during the 2008 March protests in Yerevan when 8 protesters and 2 security officers died. The former President is accused of unlawfully ordering the military to intervene. He is also charged with bribery.*

*He vehemently denies wrongdoing.*

## Yerevan Court Rejects Arrest Warrant Request for Gagik Tsarukyan

(RFE/RL) - A court in Yerevan on June 21 refused to allow law-enforcement authorities to arrest Gagik Tsarukyan, a wealthy businessman leading the main opposition Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK), on charges strongly denied by him.

The National Security Service (NSS) charged Tsarukyan with vote buying and moved to arrest him after the Armenian parliament lifted his immunity from prosecution on June 16.

The NSS says that Tsarukyan “created and led an organized group” that bought more than 17,000 votes for the BHK during parliamentary elections held in 2017. It claims to have collected documents and testimony showing that the vote bribes were handed out to residents of the Gegharkunik province.

Tsarukyan and his political allies reject the accusations as politically motivated. They say that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan ordered the criminal proceedings in response to the BHK leader’s recent calls for the Armenian government’s resignation.

Pashinyan flatly denied that and any other political motives when he spoke in the parliament controlled by his My Step bloc on June 17. “We don’t need to turn criminal cases into subjects of political horse-trading so that they make fewer [anti-government] statements or watch their language,” he said.

The district court in the Armenian capital



rejected the arrest warrant request for Tsarukyan following three-day hearings that ended on Friday. It did not immediately publicize its reasons for the decision.

Tsarukyan refused to talk to journalists when he came out of the court building in Yerevan moments after the announcement of the decision. “Ask my lawyers,” he said before getting in his car.

“I am happy that the court proved strong enough to stay away from political processes,” said one of the lawyers, Yerem Sargsyan. He suggested that during the hearings the court found his and his colleagues’ arguments against Tsarukyan’s arrest convincing.

The defense lawyers said earlier that the NSS failed to come up with any compelling evidence of Tsarukyan’s involvement in the alleged distribution of vote bribes. They also accused the investigators of serious procedural violations of the due process.

Armenian prosecutors condemned the court’s refusal to sanction Tsarukyan’s pre-

trial arrest as “baseless and illegal” and said they will appeal against the ruling.

A spokesman for Prosecutor-General Artur Davtyan said that the court “ignored” legitimate justifications of the arrest presented by the investigators. The official, Gor Abrahamyan, said that Tsarukyan could obstruct the investigation and exert “illegal influence” on other suspects in the case if he is not placed

under arrest.

The BHK has the second largest group in the Armenian parliament, having finished second in the last general elections held in December 2018. Tsarukyan’s party had joined Pashinyan’s first cabinet formed following “Velvet Revolution” of April-May 2018. Pashinyan fired his BHK-affiliated ministers in October, accusing Tsarukyan of secretly collaborating with the country’s former leadership toppled in the revolution.

Addressing senior BHK members on June 5, Tsarukyan accused the government of mishandling Armenia’s coronavirus crisis and failing to mitigate its socioeconomic consequences. Pashinyan and his loyalists reacted angrily to that speech.

Tsarukyan again linked the criminal case against him to the speech when he spoke to reporters on Friday. “If I am to blame for this situation in the country, the spread of the [coronavirus] epidemic, this poverty and economic decline, I am ready to go [to jail,]” he said.

## Armenian PM says will speak to Azerbaijani people directly, should the dialogue with political elite fail

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan calls on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to refrain from bellicose rhetoric and demonstrate constructive approach.

“I call on Aliyev to publicly agree with my formula that any solution to the Karabakh issue should be acceptable to the people of Artsakh, the people of Armenia and the people of Azerbaijan,” PM Nikol Pashinyan said during a Q&A session at the National Assembly.

“I have a feeling that the Azerbaijani lead-

ership should feel uncomfortable that in my capacity as Prime Minister of Armenia I don’t avoid speaking directly to the people of Azerbaijan,” PM Pashinyan said.

He added that internal fears are one of the reasons for increased belligerent rhetoric on the part of Azerbaijani leaders.

“Modern technologies and means of communication provide an opportunity to speak directly to the people of Azerbaijan,” he said.

According to Pashinyan, the Karabakh

issue may well be not only a national security issue for the Azerbaijani elite, but also an issue of retaining property or power. However, the issue has a wider context for the peoples.

“I’ve never ruled out that should the dialogue with Azerbaijan’s political elite fail, I may choose to speak directly to the people of Azerbaijan, very openly and frankly,” Nikol Pashinyan said, adding that the option is always on the agenda.

## Gianni Buquicchio: Venice Commission supports Armenia's efforts to renew its democratic system



The President of the Venice Commission Gianni Buquicchio mentioned Armenia and the help provided by the Venice Commission to the country, as he presented the activities of the Commission in 2019 to the Committee of Ministers on June 17.

“In two member states, Armenia and Moldova, an oligarchic regime has been overthrown. We are accompanying both countries in their efforts to renew their democratic system,” Mr. Buquicchio said.

“One of the main challenges, especially for the Armenian but also the Moldovan authorities, is to find the right balance between, on the one hand, the need for meeting the expectations of the people and for real change in the country, and, on the

other, the requirements of legal stability and to maintain rule of law standards,” he added.

On 18-19 June the Venice Commission will adopt in a written procedure two documents on Armenia:

- Draft *Amicus curiae* brief for the Constitutional Court of Armenia relating to Article 300.1 of the Criminal Code (18 June)
- Opinion on three questions in the context of constitutional amendments concerning the judges of the Constitutional Court (19 June).

## EuroNest PA highlights self-determination as a core Eastern Partnership value

In a message to the Heads of State and Government, the Euronest PA Bureau has highlighted self-determination among the core values of the Eastern Partnership.

“We, Members of the Bureau of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly (Euronest PA), representing our Delegations from the European Parliament and from the Parliaments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and



Ukraine, reaffirm our strong commitment to the respect of all values at the core of the Eastern Partnership, namely democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and good gover-

nance, sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination, all of which need to be upheld and strengthened, in the interest of the citizens that we represent,” the Bureau said in an address.

MP Gayane Abrahamyan, member of

Armenia's delegation to Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, describes it as “an unprecedented commitment in this format, considering that it has been assumed not only by European countries, but also the Eastern Partnership countries including Azerbaijan.”

She says the “balances document” is a result of complex and tense negotiations.

“We have not only managed to remove wording harmful to the interests of Armenia and Artsakh, but also prevent the attempts of the Azerbaijani delegation to include unilateral formulations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,” Abrahamyan said.

## 250 MW power plant to be constructed in Armenia



The Armenian Government has decided to exempt the ArmPower company from

customs duties. The company will use the imported goods for the construction of a 250 MW gas-fired combined cycle power plant.

ArmPower has already invested about 69 billion drams and will invest another 61 billion in the purchase of necessary equipment and construction of the plant. Currently, there are six jobs, another 106

with an average salary of 545,000 drams will be created.

In terms of capacity alone, the plant's annual sales will be about 20 billion drams. Power generation volumes will be determined by the system operator.

The produced electricity will be fully supplied to "Electric Networks of Armenia" CJSC.

## No gas price hike for ordinary consumers in Armenia

The gas price will remain unchanged for customers, after the Public Services Regulatory Commission voted unanimously on June 19 to set new gas tariffs.

In an application submitted to the Commission on April 1 Gazprom Armenia suggested raising the tariff from \$255 to \$283, while the Commission offered to set the price at \$266,71.

At the same time Gazprom Armenia offered to set the same price for all consumers, while the Commission suggests maintaining the existing differentiation and continue to view greenhouses,



processing companies and socially vulnerable families as separate consumer groups.

According to the Commission's decision, consumers will continue to pay 139

AMD per 1 cubic meter of gas, and the vulnerable groups will pay 100 AMD, if the consumption does not exceed 600 cubic meters.

Large consumers including TPPs will pay 135.909 AMD instead of the current 139 AMD if the consumption is below 10,000 cubic meters. If they consume more, the price will rise to \$255,91 per 1,000 cubic meters.

Greenhouses will pay \$ 224 per 1,000 cubic meters during the heating season, from November 1 to March 1, instead of the current \$212.

The new gas tariff will come into force on July 19, 2020.

## Lithuanian medics and experts arrive in Armenia



The European Union and Sweden have joined efforts with Lithuania to support Armenia to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its conse-

quences. The team will work alongside their Armenian colleagues to fight the virus for 14 days.

EU Ambassador Andrea Wiktorin,

quences.

The Lithuanian medical team comprising medical workers and experts has already arrived in Armenia. The medical team has also brought medical equipment and supplies.

The team will work

Lithuanian Ambassador Inga Stanytė-Toločkienė, Swedish Charge d'Affaires a.i. Birger Karlson together with RA Deputy Foreign Minister Avet Adonts and First Deputy Minister of Health Anahit Avanesyan went to the airport to personally greet the arriving team and wish them good luck in their invaluable mission.



## Armenia imports 500 oxygen concentrators, 3 oxygen plants



Armenia has received 500 oxygen concentrators. The devices were transported from China on a special flight organized by the Commandant's Office, Prime Minister

Nikol Pashinyan informs.

"The concentrators will be distributed to medical institutions engaged in Covid-19 treatment, which will allow to considerably improve the condition of patients on oxygen and prevent the aggravation of their condition," the Prime Minister said.

Another 150 devices will be delivered in the coming days, which will allow to fully meet the demand at this point. The possibility of providing such devices for home use is also being discussed.

Three large oxygen plants have also been

imported, which will increase the concentrated oxygen generating capacity of three medical centers.

The devices were bought on funds from Armenia's state budget.



## Poland sends medical supplies to Armenia

On June 19, a plane loaded with medical supplies for Armenia took off from the airport of Wroclaw, Poland.

The humanitarian aid includes 20,000 medical masks, 2,400 face shields and 2,700 liters of hand and face sanitizers.

Armenian Ambassador to Poland Samvel Mkrtchyan, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Pavel Jablonski, high-ranking diplomats, representatives of the Solidarity Fund and journalists were present at the airport.

The Georgian ambassador to Poland was also present at the airport to send another plane with Polish aid to Georgia.

The Ambassadors of Armenia and Georgia thanked the Foundation and the organizers for their assistance, and the Polish side noted its continued readiness to support friendly countries in difficult times.



## US Department of State: Armenia met the minimum requirements of fiscal transparency in 2020



The US Department of State has listed Armenia among the states that met the minimum requirements of fiscal transparency in 2020.

The Department's fiscal transparency

review process assesses whether governments meet minimum requirements of fiscal transparency. For the purpose of this report, the minimum requirements of fiscal transparency include having key budget documents that are publicly available, substantially

complete, and generally reliable.

2020 Fiscal Transparency Report reviews governments that were originally identified in the 2014 Fiscal Transparency Report and Equatorial Guinea. It assesses those that did not meet the minimum fiscal transparency requirements and indicates whether those governments made significant progress toward meeting the requirements during the review period of January 1 – December 31, 2019.

According to the report, Armenia's neighbors Georgia and Turkey also met the minimum requirements, while Azerbaijan failed to meet the minimum requirements. No data is available about Iran and Russia.

## Nikol Pashinyan: “Armenia is committed to further developing partnership with the EU based on shared democratic values”

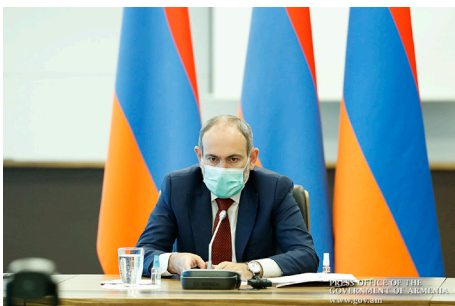


Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan took part in the Eastern Partnership Summit’s video-conference, which was attended by European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, leaders of Eastern Partnership countries: Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan, as well as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, other European leaders.

The Prime Minister stated in his remarks: “Honorable Presidents,

Dear Colleagues,

I am very pleased to meet all of you at this video conference. I hope next time we will have an opportunity to meet in person in the Eastern Partnership summit



in early 2021.

Over the last two years, the Armenian Government has been implementing comprehensive reforms to develop stronger democratic institutions based on the rule of law and government accountability. Fighting corruption and reforming the judiciary are at the top of our current agenda.

Our efforts, however, have not gone

without strong resistance from the former oligopolies and the corrupt circles. Those, who fear to lose their illegally-acquired property, manipulate the mass media, and fabricate fake news to instill distrust of government and its efforts to confront coronavirus pandemic. Despite all these obstacles, we are firmly determined to complete our reforms to achieve irreversible democracy in Armenia.

Dear Colleagues,

At each stage of the reforms, we have felt the unconditional support of our European friends. Indeed, the European Union



is Armenia’s primary partner in institution building. In this regard, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement is of particular importance.

Armenia is committed to further developing partnership with the EU based on shared democratic values and cultural commonalities. The Eastern Partnership is a driving force of our cooperation. It provides for an effective platform for dialogue and cooperation with the EU and the countries of the region as well. Sustaining its integrity is of crucial importance. Any attempt to create internal divisions will undermine the very philosophy of the Partnership and its impact.

Armenia welcomes the Joint Communication on the policy beyond 2020. The outlined five objectives of the document are in line with our priorities. We believe that the post-2020 deliverables should provide for enhanced resilience and tangible results.

The best way to deliver visible results to citizens of Armenia would be the long-awaited launch of the visa liberalization dialogue.

The measures taken to address the coronavirus have once again demonstrated the solidarity and cooperation fostered by the EU and the Partnership. Armenia highly appreciates the support of over 92 million euros to meet the immediate needs of the crisis and mitigate its negative impact.

The global challenges require collective action, not confrontation. Any attempts to take advantage of the pandemic in order to

escalate the tension in the region are highly irresponsible and should be condemned by the international community. In this context, the EU’s continuous balanced position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in line with the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship approaches, is a very important factor for maintaining peace and stability in our region.

Thank you for your attention.”

During the videoconference, the Prime Minister of Armenia

responded to the unfounded and baseless statement issued by the President of Azerbaijan. Nikol Pashinyan underlined the racist policy pursued by that country’s authorities. In particular, he cited the campaign of glorifying Ramil Safarov, who killed with an ax Armenian officer Gurgen Margaryan who was asleep in Hungary while attending NATO drills. Nikol Pashinyan stressed that people in Nagorno-Karabakh are determined to build their own future and stand ready to defend their security by responding adequately to any encroachment.

Prime Minister Pashinyan once again called on the President of Azerbaijan to show a constructive approach, and to publicly accept Nikol Pashinyan’s conflict settlement formula, that is, any settlement must be acceptable to the people of Artsakh, to the people of Armenia, and to the people of Azerbaijan.



## Armenian Patriarch Suggests Opening Greek Church for Christian and Muslim Worship



By Harut Sassounian

The recently elected Patriarch of Turkey, Sahak Mashalian, continues his controversial public statements thus antagonizing the Armenian community of Istanbul and Armenians worldwide. A few months ago he made critical remarks regarding the resolution adopted by the U.S. Congress recognizing the Armenian Genocide.

It is clear from the Patriarch's statements that he wants to ingratiate himself to Turkish authorities and particularly Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Our repeated advice to him not to stick his nose in subjects that are not his responsibility has fallen on deaf ears. He does not seem to understand that he needs to remain quiet.

The whole world is aware of the controversy revolving around Pres. Erdogan's repeated statements to reconvert the Hagia Sophia historic church to a mosque. In 1935, Ataturk had changed the status of the mosque to a museum.

Erdogan's statements had raised a worldwide controversy particularly in Greece and among Greeks worldwide. Hagia Sophia was designated as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site. Changing its status to a mosque will certainly anger people around the world. This is the controversy that the Armenian Patriarch has foolishly dived into, just to please Erdogan. In recent days, there has been a lot of criticism about the Armenian Patriarch's controversial suggestion.

Had the Armenian Patriarch any wisdom he would have first consulted with the prominent members of the Armenian com-

munity in Istanbul asking for their opinion. More importantly, he should have asked for the advice of the Ecumenical Greek Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. Furthermore, has the Armenian Patriarch thought about asking for the advice of Islamic leaders in Istanbul whether it would be acceptable for them to practice their Islamic religion in the same structure as the Christians? To our knowledge, there is no such site in the world and the reason is that this is an unacceptable practice for Muslims.

The Armenian Patriarch's heretical suggestion would also antagonize the Muslims in Turkey and President Erdogan. So much for the Patriarch trying to ingratiate himself to the Turkish authorities!

Patriarch Mashalian is inadvertently supporting the change of the status of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque with a private area set aside for Christian worshippers. The only thing the Turkish authorities will conclude from the Patriarch's statement is that he is in favor converting the church to a mosque, ignoring his suggestion that a corner of the mosque be allocated for Christian worship. How would the Armenian Patriarch react if someday the Turkish government decides to convert the Armenian Akhtamar church near Lake Van (now officially classified as a tourist site) to a mosque, allowing a small room for Christian worship? To make matters worse, Patriarch Mashalian made his statement through a series of tweets. I wonder what prompted him to use the twitter to make such an announcement with serious consequences. "The Hagia Sophia should be opened to worship," he said, stating that it is big enough for that purpose while suggesting a space for Christians. "Let the world applaud our religious peace and maturity. May Hagia Sophia become a symbol of the peace of humanity in our era."

The Patriarch further stated that humanity was praying for such unity and suggested sharing the dome of Hagia Sophia: "Even though our faiths are different, don't we

believe in the same God?" Having been a place of worship for Christians for 1,000 years and another 500 years for Muslims, he stated that Hagia Sophia won't mind it. "Hagia Sophia was built with the labor of ten thousand workers at an astronomical cost," he said pointing out that for over 500 years numerous repairs have been made on the iconic building by the Fatih Sultan Foundation. He stressed that their aim was to preserve it as a place of worship, "not just a museum." He said it would be more fitting as a place of worship where believers could kneel down in prayer in awe of the structure, rather than a touristic site full of visitors rushing around." The Patriarch's statement was immediately publicized by the Turkish media.

The first harsh reaction to the Patriarch's naïve suggestion came from MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) leader Devlet Bahçeli who ridiculed the idea that "Hagia Sophia is a mosque on Friday and a church on Sunday."

The Hagia Sophia Cathedral is one of the most significant religious sites particularly for Greeks. It was built in 537 AD by the Byzantine Empire. It was the world's largest building and an engineering marvel of its time. Hagia Sophia was converted into an imperial mosque in 1453, following the Ottoman occupation of Constantinople, nowadays Istanbul. The mosque was then converted to a museum in 1935 by Ataturk's decree.

There is an interesting historical Armenian connection to Hagia Sophia. According to Wikipedia, "after the great earthquake of 25 October 989, which collapsed the Western dome arch, Emperor Basil II asked for the Armenian architect Trdat, creator of the cathedrals of Ani and Argina, to direct the repairs.... The extent of the damage required six years of repair and reconstruction; the church was reopened on 13 May 994."

We want to conclude by reassuring our Greek friends that the Armenian Patriarch's undesirable statement does not represent the wishes of the Armenian people.

## Budget allocations for the social sphere 75.4 billion drams up following revolution



Chaired by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, another hearing on public agencies' performance reports for 2019 was held in the Office of Government. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reported on the activities implemented in the period under review.

Minister Zaruhi Batoyan reported that the minimum monthly salary was raised on a regular basis in Armenia, taking account of macroeconomic indicators. Based on the research and proposal of the Ministry, the minimum salary was set at 68 thousand drams in 2020. The draft laws of the Republic of Armenia "On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" and "On Assessing Individual's Functionality" have been developed. Approved were the requirements for the staff and shelters to accommodate the victims of domestic violence, as well as the mechanisms and the amount of financial assistance provided by the state to the victims of domestic violence.

Amendments were made to the law "On Identification and Support of Persons Subjected to Human Trafficking and Exploitation." Accordingly, the state will henceforth provide one-time financial assistance to underage victims of human trafficking in the amount of 250,000 drams. Lump-sum assistance was provided to 5 people in 2019 under the aforementioned program.

In accordance with the Prime Minister's decision, the Ministry approved the composition of the task force entrusted with the reform of the child adoption system in the Republic of Armenia. The task force is supposed to implement fact-finding activities. Some 230 children returned to their biological families from 3 liquidated boarding schools and one orphanage. 1130 families were provided consulting services and in-kind support to prevent their children, including 28 newborns, from being sent to orphanages, boarding schools and other

such institution.

In a bid to raise the standard of living and improving the social status of citizens, a new concept of the social assistance was developed, a conditional allowance program was introduced, several procedures were simplified, and recipients of family and social benefits were given the opportunity to work on a seasonal basis. A draft law is being developed on amending the Law of the Republic of Armenia "On State Benefits," according to which a new economic stabilization benefit will be introduced to phase out poverty.

In order to mitigate the negative trends of demographic development, promote birth rate and support young families and families with small children, the amount of the lump-sum child birth allowance has been revised: for the first and second child 300 thousand drams will be set instead of the previous 50-150 thousand drams.

The size of the allowance for caring for a



child under the age of two years has been revised – 26 500 drams instead of the previous 18 thousand drams. A state-funded housing program for young families and families with small children has been developed for 2020-2023.

In 2019, benefits were marked up for about 89,300 citizens, including military and labor pensions. The amended law On State Pensions introduced a new term of "minimum pension," equal to the extreme poverty line.

At the government's initiative, the banks conceded about AMD 1,300 million-worth loans granted to repressed people and their first-degree heirs on preferential terms. In 2019, the process of issuing apartment purchase certificates to 300 graduates of children's homes started, 1,9 billion drams have been allocated for that purpose. Since August 1, 2019, the monthly award for the

Great Patriotic War veterans has doubled, reaching 100 thousand drams. Salaries for those employed in organizations providing care and rehabilitation services to people with mental problems increased by 30%. At the moment, the decision concerns 152 people. Thanks to the effective optimization of the system, in 2020 it became possible to increase the salary of 930 employees of 24-hour child care and elderly institutions by 5-61%. Through the mediation of the State Employment Agency 13 thousand 513 people were employed.

It was emphasized that after the non-violent velvet popular revolution of 2018, budget allocations in this area increased dramatically by 75.4 billion drams, or 18.1%. The Gender Policy Implementation Strategy for 2019–2023, the Program of Activities, as well as the Comprehensive Plan for the exercise of children's right to live in a family and for harmonious development for 2019–2023 were approved. The strategy to develop labor and social protection for 2020–2030 and the government's employment strategy for 2019–2023 are nearing the stage of completion.

Prime Minister Pashinyan expressed satisfaction with the work done by the Ministry in 2019 and stressed the importance of adopting the aforementioned strategies as shortly as possible and including the programs and activities presented in them in the state budget of the Republic of Armenia.

The Premier stressed the need to modernize the activity of the State Employment Agency and to cooperate with the high-tech ministry and the State Revenue Committee in order to implement an electronic employment platform. According to the prime minister, the platform should contain the necessary information about both vacancies and job seekers.

Nikol Pashinyan emphasized the importance of providing quality education for children coming from orphanages, which will make them more competitive. The Prime Minister expressed satisfaction with the results of the anti-crisis measures undertaken by the Ministry and instructed to make the work of the department more dynamic and intensive.

## Armenian-American organizations slam Turkey's renewed genocide denial attempts

The Armenian National Committee of America – Western Region (ANCA-WR) and coalition partners slammed Turkish President Erdoğan and his government's renewed attempts to deny the veracity of genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkish government against the indigenous Christian Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian nations from 1915-1923, whereby over 3 million innocent people were massacred or deported. Republic of Turkey, the legal heir to the Ottoman Empire and its Turkic proxy Azerbaijan, are the only two countries to actively deny this crime against all of humanity.

On June 16, 2020 the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey issued a statement sharing details from a five-hour closed-door meeting of the High Advisory Board chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, where they discussed the next steps of Ankara's century-old genocide denial policy.

“The recent 5-hour closed door meeting chaired by President Erdogan on a new strategy to deny the Armenian Genocide firstly speaks to the overwhelming success our community and our partners have been able to achieve worldwide, with the most recent addition of the unanimous passage of genocide affirmation resolutions by both chambers of U.S. Congress,” remarked ANCA-WR Chair Nora Hovsepian, Esq. “This also highlights the importance of our work ahead aimed at rejecting denialism as well as unequivocally affirming the historical truth and seeking full justice for this crime.”

The following national organizations joined the ANCA Western Region in endorsing the statement, immediately following the reports emerging of the infamous meeting in Ankara:



1. A Demand for Action
2. American Hellenic Council
3. Assyrian American Association of Southern California
4. Assyrian Genocide and Research (SEYFO Center)
5. Genocide Watch
6. Greek Genocide Resource Center
7. Hellenic American Leadership Council
8. In Defense of Christians
9. Israeli-American Civic Action Network
10. Israeli-American Civic Education Institute
11. Jewish World Watch
12. Philos Project
13. Together We Remember

Full text of the statement is provided below:

*On June 16, 2020 the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey issued a statement sharing details from a five-hour closed-door meeting of the High Advisory Board chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, where they discussed the next steps of Ankara's century-old genocide denial policy.*

*The first modern case of genocide perpetrated against the indigenous Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian nations was a centrally planned and systematically executed deportation and murder of over 3 million innocent people by the Ottoman Turkish Government from 1915 to 1923. The Arme-*

*nian Genocide is fully documented in the U.S. archives and through an overwhelming body of first-hand, governmental, and diplomatic evidence as well as thousands of real-time mainstream media reports. Aside from Turkey and its Turkic ally Azerbaijan, no other country actively denies the veracity of this international crime against humanity.*

*Despite overwhelming documentation by historians and condemnation by over 30 countries worldwide, an unrepentant Turkey seeks to both enforce an international gag-rule against truthful affirmation of the Armenian Genocide and to obstruct a just international resolution of this still unpunished crime.*

*Recognizing that silence and denial of genocide creates a veil of impunity by which states avoid responsibility for not only their historic crimes, but contemporary human rights abuses, we condemn in the strongest possible terms the continued genocide denial policy by the Turkish government and its proxies, calling on all who are committed to upholding and ensuring the protection of universal human rights to fight against genocide denial and commit to exposing genocide, confronting denialism wherever it occurs, deny a public platform for hate, and empower communities that have experienced or are suffering genocide.*

*Understanding that denial is the final stage of genocide, enforcing the erasure of a peoples' history and suffering, we call on people of good conscience to bring awareness to the plight of the victims of genocide both past and present, to hold accountable those who seek to distort historical truth, and ensure that never again will the world watch on in silence while genocide is perpetrated. Armenia hosts a considerable*

## Armenia strongly acknowledges the value and potential of refugees – FM

number of refugees and secures for them access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by its own citizens, Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan said in an address on World Refugee Day.

“The Government of Armenia strongly acknowledges the value and the potential of refugees and displaced populations, their power of integration and contribution to all aspects of our public life,” the Foreign Minister said.

“Refugees in Armenia have demonstrated extraordinary capacities of achieving self-reliance and progress in local integration,” he added.

***The full text of the Foreign Minister’s speech is provided below:***

Millions in the world continue to face desperation and struggle to save their lives, their families, their children, to forcibly leave their homes and communities, to flee their homeland and find refuge in a foreign land.

Charles Aznavour, a prominent French-Armenian and a global humanist, once memorably observed “What is happening with the refugees has affected me very much, I imagine my parents in this situation, when they left home to come to France. This is why I will always take the side of the ones who knock on the doors, not the ones who shut them.”

History of every refugee is a history of despair and anguish, often of suffering and exclusion, of denial of protection and rejection of human dignity. Today we renew our solidarity with all those beset by man-made or natural disasters, we honor their courage and resilience and support their hope. We join and pay tribute to all those who extend their helping hand and embrace refugees in their communities. We also renew our adherence to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Armenia hosts a considerable number of refugees and secures for them access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by its



own citizens. There are many on-going conflicts in the world, which are a major cause of rising global forced displacement. About 22.000 persons displaced due to the conflict in Syria have sought protection in Armenia.

This new wave of displacement adds to similar challenges faced by Armenia, already hosting and integrating hundreds of thousands of refugees from Azerbaijan and thousands of refugees displaced not so long ago from Iraq. Global insecurity, instability in various, including neighboring regions, unresolved conflicts remain a source of major concern, including in the context of deepening refugee crises.

With this in mind I would stress two important points. The first concerns the principle of international solidarity, which is also mentioned in the preamble to the 1951 Refugee Convention, recalling that grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution to this problem cannot be achieved without international co-operation.

Against this background it is important to reinforce our commitment to effective multilateralism and consolidated global support to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. The UNHCR Office in Armenia is a firmly established partner to Armenia, which we highly value and respect. Under the leadership of the High Commissioner and over many years the Office set a strong record of assistance and cooperation in Armenia in addressing the plight of refugees and displaced persons.

This cooperation will continue. International cooperation for effectively addressing humanitarian challenges, and the plight

of refugees in particular, should have no limits and should be genuinely inclusive. The UNHCR, as well as other specialized agencies, should have unimpeded access to Nagorno-Karabakh in order to live up to the commitment of leaving no one behind.

Second, in the spirit of the Convention, it remains an imperative to exclude politicization of humanitarian crises and the suffering of refugees. Under no circumstances

should we tolerate instrumentalization of refugees and displaced persons for political objectives, whatever such objectives may be. Durable solutions must be framed and maintained as strictly humanitarian issues. This message is particularly important today when the world faces COVID-19 pandemic.

The Government of Armenia strongly acknowledges the value and the potential of refugees and displaced populations, their power of integration and contribution to all aspects of our public life. Refugees in Armenia have demonstrated extraordinary capacities of achieving self-reliance and progress in local integration. As just one example, relevant to present challenges, our compatriots, Syrian-Armenian women are producing masks and helping the Government to fight COVID-19.

Armenia strongly supports the United Nations Global Compact for Refugees. With its critical focus on inclusiveness, on multi-dimensional range of concerns, flexibility for cooperative action in the human dimension and unwavering determination of leaving no one behind, the Compact represents a valuable and highly relevant framework for global cooperation.

About a century ago a Danish missionary Karen Jeppe campaigned for introducing an item concerning economic support to the Armenian Genocide survivor refugees in the agenda of the League of Nations. Some observed that it was of so little use. Karen Jeppe delivered a very short yet most compelling response. She said: “Yes, it is only a little light, but the night is so dark.”

## Armenian Robin the Robot to comfort kids at U.S. clinics starting July

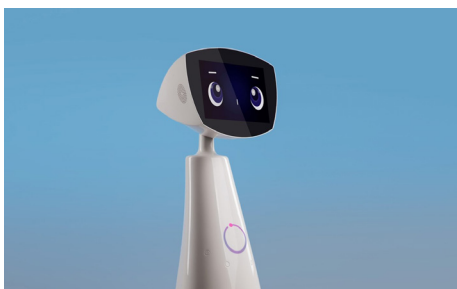
Kids like robots. And sick kids can benefit from robots in the hospital. A robot companion named Robin has been tested in a pediatric clinic in Armenia, and researchers report an increase in young patients' appetites and cheerfulness after interactions with the robot. Robin is due to comfort kids at a U.S. dental clinic starting in July, *Forbes* writes.

"We aim to change kid's perception of medical treatments, where they will no longer feel isolated, lonely and scared," says Karen Khachikyan, CEO and founder of Expper Technologies.

Robin is 47 inches tall and made of recyclable bioplastic which can easily be sterilized with ultraviolet light or other disinfectants to minimize the risk of spreading viruses.

"It is the first of its kind that uses peer-to-peer interaction in order to help children overcome stress and anxiety," the CEO says. "Robin utilized our AI-based patent-pending technology to build peer-to-peer emotional interactions with children."

The technology analyzes facial expressions and the context of conversations. It moves with an omni-directional wheel system and uses its "face" to display emotion with a variety of expressions. This all



means the robot can react naturally to situations and interactions with children, its creator says.

As for the "making kids feel better" factor, Expper says a two-month pilot study involving more than 100 kids at Wigmore Clinic, Nork Marash Hospital and Avanta Clinics (all in Armenia), collected behavioral, observational and procedure data, along with information on stress and pain levels in young patients.

"All the kids who have once interacted with Robin have shown interest in meeting it again. There were cases of improved appetite and an increase in cheerfulness after interactions with Robin," he says.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, children are much more isolated at hospitals. Visitations are limited, along with interactions by medical staff.

"Hospitals are looking for solutions to help children cope with isolation, loneli-

ness, and stress," the CEO says. "As Robin has already proven its effectiveness in reducing stress and anxiety and supporting kids, hospitals can now provide better emotional support to the children without any direct human contact. Besides, Robin is there for children 24/7 to support any time."

Khachikyan says the technology allows Robin to behave like a peer. He can play interactive games, tell funny stories and jokes ... and explain complicated (and scary) medical procedures in simple ways.

Robin will be rolling around at ABC Kids Dental Group in Los Angeles, California, followed by UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital, Expper says.

Expper has a goal to deploy Robin in major hospitals and dental clinics in California this year, allowing the locations to use Robin for a monthly subscription fee.

"Partnering with UNDP, we are planning to deploy Robin in public hospitals in Armenia," Khachikyan says. "This collaboration can impact thousands of children yearly bringing comfort and joy to them during the daunting process of hospitalization. We are planning to launch the project within a few months."

## Israel signs agreement with Moderna for potential COVID-19 vaccine



Israel has signed an agreement with Moderna Inc chaired by Noubar Afeyan for the future purchase of its potential COVID-19 vaccine, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on June 17, Reuters reports.

The Cambridge, Massachusetts-based biotech firm last week confirmed plans to start a trial of 30,000 volunteers of its much-anticipated vaccine in July as the company enters the final stages of testing.

It is one of several vaccines being tested around the world as drugmakers race to combat the pandemic. There are currently no approved treatments or vaccines for COVID-19.

"Israel has signed with the company Moderna an arrangement that will allow us to

buy vaccines," Netanyahu said, according to a statement from his office.

"The company is advancing its development, they claim they can achieve it by the middle of next year, we hope that they succeed," he said.

Netanyahu added that Israel would continue its own efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine through the Israel Institute for Biological Research.

## Australian Senator Hollie Hughes affirms support for Armenian, Assyrian, Greek Joint Justice Initiative



Senator Hollie Hughes, who represents New South Wales in the Federal Upper House, has signed an Affirmation of Support backing the Joint Justice Initiative of the Armenian-Australian, Assyrian-Australian and Greek-Australian communities, which calls for Australian recognition of the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Genocides.

The February 2020 launch of the Joint Justice Initiative at Australia's Parliament House featured the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the Armenian National Committee of Australia (ANC-AU), Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) and

Australian Hellenic Council (AHC), which declares Australia's recognition of the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Genocides as a priority on behalf of their communities.

Hughes, who founded the Country Autism Network, was elected to the Senate in 2019 after a career as a respected adviser to Federal parliamentarians.

A former member of the State Executive of the Liberal Party of Australia and Country Vice-President of the State Party, Hughes has a reputation as a passionate advocate for rural and regional New South Wales, leading campaigns for better transport and health services for the bush.

"The Armenian-Australian, Assyrian-Australia and Greek-Australian communities are fortunate to be able to count a career advocate in Senator Hollie Hughes among our supporters for national recognition of the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Genocides, which was committed by the Ottoman Empire during World War I," said Armenian National Committee of Australia (ANC-AU) Executive Director, Haig Kayserian.

"Senator Hughes joins a growing list of supporters to right what is a wrong position of appeasing the Turkish State's denial of Genocide."

The Joint Justice Initiative has so far announced the support of Hughes, Senator Rex Patrick, Mike Freeland MP, Senator Eric Abetz, Senator Larissa Waters, Senator Pat Dodson, Jason Falinski MP, Josh Burns MP, John Alexander MP, Senator Andrew Bragg and Bob Katter MP, with a promise of more announcements to come.

On 25th February 2020, over 100 Federal Australian parliamentarians, diplomats, departmental officials, political staffers, academics, media and community leaders were treated to cultural performances, food, wine and brandy, as well as the historic signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, which affirmed that the signatory public affairs representatives of the three communities were jointly committed to seeing Australia recognise the Turkish-committed Genocide against the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian citizens of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

## UN Human Rights Council adopts Armenia-sponsored Resolution on genocide prevention

The UN Human Rights Council has adopted by consensus a Resolution on Prevention of genocide, sponsored by Armenia.

"Most grateful to all cosponsors and members of the Council. Armenia continues to promote this important topic in international agenda," Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan said in a Twitter post.

"The resolution is a manifestation of Armenia's continuing and resolute commitment to the international efforts for genocide prevention. It's a call to prevent deterioration of the human rights violations into such an egregious crime as genocide is. It's pertinent and urgent as we all witness gross abuses of human rights in different parts of the world," Armenia's Permanent Representative Andranik Hovhannisyanyan, Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations Office at Geneva, said as



he presented the draft.

"Today it is not enough just to say 'Never Again!'" If pronouncing that motto loud enough should have had any effect, or one that we wanted, there should have been no more instances of the crime of genocide registered anywhere around the globe," he added.

Amb. Hovhannisyanyan noted that "the Council will thus recognize that genocide is

typically preceded or accompanied by widespread human rights violations, patterns of discrimination, statements by public figures that express support for the affirmation of superiority of a group."

"The resolution expresses concern that justification, biased accounts, or denial of genocide may increase the risk of the recurrence of violence. The draft resolution requests the High Commissioner to organize an intersessional meeting on strengthening capacities for the prevention

of genocide. The Council will also invite SG's Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide to an interactive dialogue," he stated.

"Armenia cherishes the international consensus on the need to mobilize our efforts to prevent the scourge of genocide," he stated.

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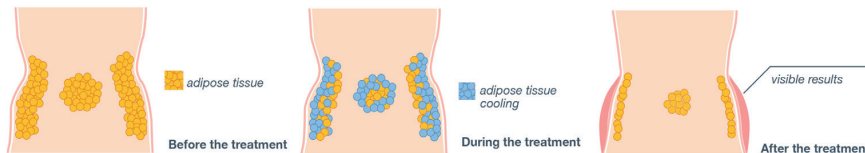
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