

THE ARMENIAN LOBBY IN RUSSIA AND THE POWER OF THE MEDIA

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 Analysis

Swift adaptation to new circumstances or environments has long been one of the mainstays of the Armenian national character. Perhaps it is precisely this peculiarity that accounts for the strength of the Armenian diaspora extending its global reach with an increasing number of supporters. There are about 10 million Armenians in the world and only one third of them live in the Republic of Armenia. USA, France, Georgia, Syria and Lebanon are the leading countries with the largest concentrations of Armenian population, but Russia is the country that has the largest number of Armenian population, though it often goes unnoticed. Today, around 2.5 million Armenians live in Russia.

Historically, one of the largest Armenian diaspora was based in Russia. As a consequence, Armenians today find ample representation in almost all aspects of the Russian society. With a presence in almost every Russian city, about half of the Armenians live in the southern regions of

the country (Krasnodar, Stavropol and Rostov). In Moscow alone, there are more than 100,000 Armenians. Moreover, agencies and cultural centers of the Union of Russian Armenians are active in 65 of the 85 federal subjects of Russia and 642 cities. The Armenian community in Russia is almost seamlessly integrated into the Russian society. Indeed, Armenians, who today hold important positions in the Russian public domain, enjoy a very privileged position. Therefore, the Armenians undoubtedly have a palpable impact on the Russian policy-making machinery.

Armenians in Russia, who identify themselves as Russian patriots at every opportunity, also make a point of maintaining their ties with their homeland. Therefore, the permanent positioning of Armenia as an ally of Russia and the influence of the Armenian lobby on Russian politics are inseparable.



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For example, Sergey Lavrov, who has been Russia's foreign minister since 2004, is of Armenian stock. However, Lavrov has so far only made one statement about his ethnic origin. Lavrov, who met with the students of the Russian-Armenian University on February 17, 2005, said "Clean Armenian blood flows in my veins" in response to a question on his ethnic origin.

Armenians also have an important place in Russian economy. Eight businessmen of Armenian origin have been included in the list of the 200 richest people in Russia, published by Forbes magazine in April 2019. These businessmen also maintain close ties with their homeland Armenia. For example, Samvel Karapetyan, the 29th richest person in Russia, became a member of the Investors Club of Armenia, which made headlines in 2017 with its intention to invest more than \$3.2 billion in Armenia. Likewise, Ruben Vardanyan, who has a personal fortune worth \$950 million and makes important donations in education, has major investments in Armenia.

In 2015, on the 100th anniversary of the deportation of Armenians, Vardanyan led a large-budget project called 100 Lives in collaboration with famous Hollywood stars and human rights activists. The project was held to explain to the world about the deportation of Armenians, with the aim to portray it as "genocide". The project also included the awarding of an annual international humanitarian aid prize called *Aurora*. The winner was selected from persons who risk their lives to save others. The prize was awarded in memory of Arshaluys Mardigianian, who moved first to Russia and then to the US during the Armenian deportation in 1915 where she took the name Aurora Mardigianian. Ruben Vardanyan put Svetlana Mironyuk, a prominent figure in the media industry and also former executive editor of the news agency RIA Novosti, in charge of the 100 Lives project to manage and supervise all the work done under the project.

Russian media is the sector where the Armenian diaspora is at its strongest. Its effects were

seen very clearly in November 2015 during the fighter jet crisis between Russia and Turkey. While there were serious discussions on certain Russian TV programs after the crisis, there were also "hysterical cries" calling out for a full-scale war against Turkey. It is no secret that the propaganda machine of the Armenian lobby played a part, either secretly or overtly, in the creation of this hostile climate portraying Turkey as Russia's historical enemy where it makes sure that it never misses an opportunity to remind the public of past Turkish-Russian wars.

While there were voices in the Russian media advocating a more astute and prudent attitude towards the crisis between the two countries, the Armenian lobby feeding off anti-Turkish sentiment was bending backwards to "remind" the Russian public that Turkey is a "historical enemy". The seething anti-Turkish sentiment was not just limited to TV screens; it also spread to print and digital media platforms. It is also no coincidence that "experts" like Sergey Kurginyan, Gevorg Mirzayan and Armen Gasparyan of Armenian origin or pro-Armenian figures like Semen Bagdasarov and Yevgeniy Satanovskiy were invited to prime time talk shows. It is understandable that these names have in one way or another connections with the Armenian lobby.

Some important media channels in Russia have turned into a kind of Russian propaganda network, due to their domination by the Armenians. The best examples are undoubtedly the Russia Today TV channel, whose executive editor is Margarita Simonyan of Armenian origin, and the Rossiya Segodnya International News Agency (MIA Rossiya Segodnya). The largest Russian media group, MIA Rossiya Segodnya, broadcasts in more than 30 languages, including English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic, Chinese and Turkish. There are various news agencies like Sputnik, *RIA Novosti*, InoSMI, and Prime under the umbrella of the most cited Russian news agency, MIA Rossiya Segodnya.

The influence of the Armenian lobby is clearly visible in the news that appears on RIA Novosti. For example, Azerbaijan's occupied territory

is defined as disputed territory in news reports about a topic as sensitive as Nagorno-Karabakh is made with reference to comments and arguments borrowed directly from the Armenian media. And the region is referred to as the “Republic of Astrakhan” instead of Nagorno-Karabakh. News sources of RIA Rossiya Segodnya cover the Karabakh issue from a completely pro-Armenian perspective by distorting the facts instead of breaking down prejudices in a manner that goes against professional journalism.

Another example is Aram Gabrelyanov, head of the LifeNews TV channel, which is part of the News Media group. In a written statement in January 2016, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry criticized the channel saying that LifeNews journalists were broadcasting provocative programs based on lies and slander against Azerbaijan. However, as the station continued with its unchanged broadcasting policy, the concerned journalists were deported from Azerbaijan in April of the same year. By hacking into the email account of Aram Gabrelyanov in 2017, the Russian hacker group known as Shaltai Boltai made public a series of correspondences revealing the activities of some Armenian journalists in Russia against Azerbaijan. In these correspondences, the executive editor of MIA Rossiya Segodnya, Margarita Simonyan was also mentioned. In one of the correspondences in question, Simonyan apologized to Gabrelyanov on behalf of her news agency for its report about Azerbaijan’s criticism of the broadcasting policy of LifeNews.

REGNUM is another news agency that seems to be in the grip of the Armenian lobby; it produces a constant stream of defamatory news that target Turkey. Established in 2002, the agency is manipulated by the Armenian lobby, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. In June 2014 most of the agency shares were sold, and so the management changed hands. Although Vigen Akopyan, who was appointed executive editor in 2009, resigned in October 2014, nothing has changed about the Turcophobic broadcasting policy of the agency, as the new management of the organization is directly linked to the

Armenian lobby and the current government in Russia. Yuliya Krijanskaya, who was appointed director general of the agency, was the former deputy chairwoman of the executive council of the United Russia Party, which rules Russia. More importantly, she is currently involved in a social movement called the *Essence of Time*, led by Sergey Kurginyan, at a management level. Sergey Kurginyan, whose nickname is “aggressive patriot”, is the greatest Armenian propagandist, constantly spewing bile and Turkophobia on Russian television.

Similarly, it is known that REGNUM is part of Gazprom-Media Holding, although this has not been officially announced. This is so because in 2014 almost all shares of the agency were bought by Gazprom. In addition, Alexander Bepalov, the new chairman of the news agency, sat on the management board of Gazprom until July 2019. All these data suggest that Gazprom-Media is led by the Armenian lobby. The most concrete proof of this situation is the meeting that took place in December 2017 between then-Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan and Rafael Minasbekyan, who was general director of Gazprom-Media back then. The meeting was held following reports by NTV, the primary media instrument of the holding and one of the three most watched television channels in Russia, criticizing the relations between Armenia and the Western world that had been gaining momentum over recent years. Sargsyan wanted to meet with the Armenian manager at the helm of Gazprom-Media regarding these news reports. In the wake of the meeting, a cooperation agreement was signed between Gazprom-Media and the Armenian State Corporation of Radio and Television. This makes it clear that Gazprom-Media and REGNUM news agency (controlled by Gazprom-Media) are manipulated by the Armenian lobby.

Another remarkable fact in this context is the interview of Modest Kolerov, who became executive editor of REGNUM as the successor of Vigen Akopyan, with the leader of the Gulen movement Fethullah Gülen in February 2019. The interview in question is intended to give

the reader the idea that it is more profitable for Russia to cooperate with the Gulen movement and not with the Turkish government.

Vigen Akopyan, who was executive editor of REGNUM for four years, stepped down from this position in 2014 to become co-founder and executive editor of Eurasia Daily (EADaily) news agency, founded in 2015. Although Akopyan resigned from his post in 2017, the influence of the Armenian lobby behind EADaily has continued to grow, let alone showing the slightest sign of weakening. To replace Akopyan, Aleksey Demin, who worked as a journalist at REGNUM from 2008 to 2014, was appointed executive editor of EADaily. In addition, the deputy executive editor Mikhail Agadjanyan and the editor-in-chief of the South Caucasus department Anna Beglaryan are also of Armenian origin, like the many others who work at the agency. The Turkophobic publishing policy embraced by the news agency is manifested in almost every article dealing with the Turkish world, and in almost every news item. For example, in an article about Turkey's soft power, Ottoman soldiers who lost their lives in 1918 in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, were described as "war criminals" and the erection of a monument in memory of these soldiers was described as "treason and separatism".

In summary, the Armenian lobby, which presents itself as Russia's greatest patriot, is one of the important actors shaping the consciousness of Russian society with the power it holds in the media industry. This situation, however, raises the question of to what extent does this policy of the Armenian lobby align with Russia's national interests. Indeed, the policies of the Armenian lobby run counter to Russian interests, let alone not chime in with them. For example, manipulative attacks of Armenian "experts" on the Russian media during the fighter jet crisis between Turkey and Russia in 2015, were nothing short of efforts to align Russia's foreign

policy with the interests of the Armenian state and diaspora. Besides, even if Russia's national interests are being jeopardized by this policy, this does not stop the Armenian lobby.

So, while the Armenian lobby, which feeds off Turkophobia, is this strong in the Russian media, how about the diaspora of the Turkic people in Russia? According to unofficial figures, about three million Azerbaijanis live in Russia today. However, the influence of the Azerbaijani diaspora, which is about the same size as the Armenian diaspora, lags far behind that of the Armenian diaspora in the Russian society. In this context, there are hardly any experts in the Russian media who can deflate the anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani propaganda spread by the Armenian lobby, refute their theses and make counter-arguments. This was best illustrated in the fighter jet crisis that broke out in 2015. At that time, talk shows on Russian TV channels that were fixated by the crisis, which had become a hot-button issue, were replete with Armenian experts who kept beating the drums that Turkey had been an enemy of Russia all along and that Russia should declare war, while there were hardly any experts advocating or defending Turkey. During that intense anti-Turkish propaganda in the Russian media, the only figure that stood opposed to such opprobrium was the Azerbaijani Fuad Abbasov. However, Abbasov, who did not get the support he expected from Ankara and Baku, was expelled from Russia in 2019 with the efforts of the Armenian lobby.

Even though the number of Russian tourists coming to Turkey and the number of marriages between Turks and Russians is constantly increasing, the negative image of Turks in Russian society still lives on. If the Turkish world is to counter the attacks by the Armenian lobby, it is essential that it makes the necessary investments and mobilizes the required human resources.