

Opening Remarks to the U.S. Helsinki Commission  
By Member of Parliament, the National Assembly of Armenia Hamazasp Danielyan

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Thank you, Mr. Veasey, and thank you to the Helsinki Commission members. Let me start with thanking the honorable members of this distinguished Commission for organizing these hearings and bringing Armenia's democratic transformation under the spotlight. Your interest towards democratic developments in Armenia is very encouraging and the support is very much appreciated. I should say that, as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation of Europe, we have established a good working relationship with the US delegation and its distinguished members. Though, I believe that there are still opportunities to further deepen our cooperation across all three dimensions of the OSCE.

I believe today's hearing will contribute to that aim, especially in the direction of human rights and democracy. I also believe that Armenia's recent experience with its peaceful democratic transformation has much to offer for many countries in the region and across the globe. This experience and commitment to democratic values and human rights was recognized only a few days ago when Armenia was elected by over 140 UN member states to become a member of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations.

Now, coming to the process of democratic transformation in Armenia, there are many aspects I would like to present. Instead of immediately diving into the texts of the reforms that are underway in Armenia, I thought it was important to provide some highlights of my personal experience over the last decade. It is a journey that is directly intertwined with the changes that are happening now in Armenia.

Let me begin with the February 2008 presidential election that took place in Armenia. I was working in Yerevan for an important organization headquartered in the United States called IFES, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Our office supported the democratic elections in Armenia and was an observer to the systemic level of election violations that occurred. I cannot forget the efforts of a brave American woman by the name of Linda Edgeworth, who intervened on behalf of one of the local observers that was being harassed in a local precinct. There are about 2000 precincts in Armenia and, unfortunately, they were not enough Lindas to prevent this systemic level of vote rigging. After this election, for ten days, citizens of Armenia protested peacefully on the streets. These protests culminated in one of the darkest days of modern Armenian history, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, when fatal force was used by police and ten people were killed on the streets. Only a few months later in the summer of 2008, I remember conversations I had with my friend and fellow panelist Arsen Kharatyan here in DC about the democratic prospects for Armenia. Those were not very hopeful conversations. The prospects were not very bright. Despite that, I returned to Armenia with the hope of contributing to the continued democratic development of the country. One of the best and most secure ways to do so was joining USAID efforts. I spent most of my career working with different USAID projects aimed at the democracy and governance sector in Armenia to strengthen democratic institutions.

Over the next years, I was hired as a country expert to review USAID's five-year strategy and after a number of failed attempts to make changes, it seemed Armenia was moving in the wrong direction. An important negative milestone in Armenia's autocratization was the adoption of constitutional changes in December 2015, which paved the way for that president, first elected in amidst the gunshots of 2008, to extend his rule beyond the two term limit by changing Armenia to parliamentary model, where he could stay on as Prime Minister. I clearly remember drafting the annual report for Freedom House in 2016, distressed at another year of stagnation for Armenia and that my country was approaching indicators that would likely soon see it downgraded to the classification of "Not Free", despite all the efforts of civil society, international partners and the handful of marginalized change makers within the government. I must admit that there were moments that when I started to doubt if I would ever witness genuine democratic changes or even a single free and fair election in Armenia during my lifetime.

As we all expected, President Sargsyan was nominated to continue as Prime Minister in 2018. I had those same doubts in mind, even as I joined the protesters on April 14 in Freedom Square, the gathering place that had been the epicenter of all important developments in modern Armenian history, including its struggle for independence from the Soviet Union. At first, there were only a couple thousand of us protesters. I remember fellow panelist Daniel Ioannisyan there with his drone, documenting the event. In a small chat with Arsen, we spoke about the necessity of raising our voices against this final step in Serzh Sargsyan's well-planned strategy to stay in power, even if it did not affect the final result. We did not want to see Armenia become another post-soviet country that is indefinitely ruled by a single person and a single party. It was to our great relief that that message resonated widely with the Armenian people. Only a few weeks later, we witnessed the protests grow so large it brought the country to a standstill, and successfully forced Sargsyan's resignation and the installation of protest leader Nikol Pashinyan as the new Prime Minister.

Soon after, in July 2018, Prime Minister Pashinyan created a commission of experts, led by Daniel, that was tasked with recommending a package of changes to the Electoral Code ahead of snap parliamentary elections. I was a member of that Commission, returning to Yerevan from my work with the Smithsonian Institute here in DC for last year's Folk Life Festivate, featuring Armenia. After a couple of months of work, this commission presented its final package. It was actually exactly one year ago today, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, that the parliament rejected the bill that would have enacted those recommendations. The outgoing party of the previous regime still held a majority in Parliament. Thus, in December 2018, an early parliamentary election was held anyway, under the previous Electoral Code. I can say that they were the first-ever genuinely democratic elections since Armenia's independence as was also reflected in the assessment of the OSCE ODIHR observation mission. I am honored to be a member of this new Parliament. Interestingly, had the previous government's members voted in favor of our more inclusive electoral rules, they would still have retained a few seats. Instead, they were completely shut out by their own system.

Our attempt at electoral reform is thus still underway. In March 2018, a tri-partisan working group was formed to design and draft electoral changes with input from all three parties represented in parliament. This working group has prioritized a number of areas for the reform, including changes to the Law on Political Parties. Just last Friday, we held a day-long public hearing with participation from all major stakeholders to discuss how we can both cut red tape for party organization in Armenia but also increase transparency because we consider this to be an important anti-corruption measure.

I will conclude by stating that we have no illusions that the task of creating strong and democratic institutions is simple. There will be a lot of challenges ahead but the effort will be well worth it if our generation can achieve the critical task institutionalizing Armenia's democratic statehood. In fact, it is the only way to enable Armenia to meet its domestic and foreign challenges.

I want to say that this is a big struggle for a comparatively small nation. Its focus is not geopolitics but the individual people who wish to restore their sovereignty and are doing their best to make their homeland a place where they can pursue happiness with respect for human rights and freedoms. This is the struggle that we all hoped to emerge from for the past decade.

I look forward to diving into the specific directions of the reforms during our conversation today.

Thank you.