

**Testemony for the hearing of the US Helsinki Commission about the democratic reforms in  
Armenia**

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Thank you Chairman Veasey, Chairman Hastings and Co-Chairman Wicker for holding this important hearing, and for inviting me to testify about Armenia's Velvet, non-violent Revolution and the progress the new government has made since coming to power in May of last year.

Briefly about myself. I grew up in Armenia and got engaged in civic activism at a young age. In 2008, after the disputed Presidential elections that saw then-President Serzh Sargsyan claim to power, many of us were arrested and harassed to an extent that we were forced to leave the country. It wasn't all bad during those years — I got married to my wife, Sonia Shahrigian, who was born across the river in Virginia. Both of our kids were born in Sibley Hospital here in the District. Throughout the 2010s, I worked for Voice of America's Armenian service before my wife, who works for the Millenium Challenge Corporation, was assigned to the Republic of Georgia as deputy mission chief for the past five years. While in Georgia, I founded a media organization that focuses on the Armenian community living in Georgia and Armenian-Georgian relations.

Now onto the topic of today's hearing. I think it will be apt for the Members of this Commission to re-live the marvelous events of last year for a few minutes.

Last spring, when a small group of our friends alongside Nikol Pashinyan started walking from Armenia's northern city of Gyumri towards Yerevan, the capital, almost no one believed that in a span of weeks, Armenians would shake off decades of lethargy and hopelessness and begin finding themselves and believing in themselves. Our march was a protest against plans by one man to rule Armenia indefinitely. And prior to the start of our march, we said that in addition to not allowing the indefinite rule of a failed regime, we intended to defeat and uproot suffocating levels of pessimism, disengagement and hopelessness that had overwhelmed the people of Armenia.

We knew and said as much that without liberating ourselves from the corrosive and arresting notions of apathy, we cannot overcome and resolve Armenia's pressing public policy challenges. We walked through Armenia's cities and villages where we were again reminded of the failures of her successive governments. But we also sensed and were inspired by the resolve and perseverance of our citizens. We encouraged others to "Take a Step" and join our movement. On the 14th day of the march while entering Yerevan another group of civic-

minded citizens who were doing their part to protest the former Prime Minister-cum-President from solidifying his one-man and one-party rule.

Together, we walked into universities' quads and lecture halls and with malfunctioning bullhorns and coarse voices called upon students to shed their apathy, pessimism and resignation and commit to democracy, justice, freedom and fairness and engage in this civic movement that puts at its core citizens' dignity and rights. Students heeded our calls in droves, as did thousands of others.

We continued marching through the streets of Armenia and in days ahead, sensing the unprecedented pent-up demand for wholesale change in Armenia, and seeing the surging of believers and doers adding to our numbers, we declared the start of a Velvet Revolution.

Inspired by the words and guided by the deeds of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and Armenia's own men and women who stood against the Soviet Empire in the late 1980s and defended Armenia's sovereignty, and building upon the legacy of previous pro-democracy movements of Armenia, we set in motion a peaceful revolution.

We engaged in acts of civil disobedience saw the closure of streets, shutting down of public transportation and bridges, blocking entrances to government buildings, boycotts of businesses tied to the regime, sit-ins and more. Our numbers grew and grew, and we walked more. By April 23, Armenia's longtime ruler resigned, which only increased the numbers of Armenians who believed in themselves. We made it clear that the people's demands must be met unconditionally and that Armenia must have new leadership, one that has the backing of the people and not the few dozen Members of Parliament of a morally bankrupt political party in power for almost two decades.

After a few more political shenanigans by the party in control of parliament, which were promptly answered by more demonstrations of people power of an entire nation and its diaspora, the once all-powerful ruling elite relented.

This was a remarkable display of people power that was resolute, peaceful, tolerant, courageous and persistent which in turn inspired the world. An incredible level of optimism and confidence took over the hearts and minds of our people - and until today, that self-confidence and optimism inspires and motivates people remain engaged.

For the last three decades our nation experienced great challenges. From military conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, to massive economic decline, a transition from the Soviet centralized to market economy with a continued blockade of our borders two of our four neighbours. However, since our independence in 1991 our people never stopped their struggle for their fundamental freedoms, civil and electoral rights. We do realize that the path to freedom is not an easy one, it is a bumpy road but in our view Armenia and the Armenian people have no other choice but to have a country with fully functioning democratic institutions and a strong civil society.

While Armenia's non-violent Velvet revolution is yet another example of great positive transformation and a hope for democracy for the world at this time of crisis, I have to admit that there are great challenges we have to deal with. The new democratically elected administration of our country, headed by the leader of our revolution and currently the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, has introduced its reform agenda with big emphases to fight against corruption, building state institutions, ensuring fundamental freedoms and liberties of our citizens. While, the current ruling party received a very high (70%) vote of confidence from Armenia's citizens during the snap parliamentary elections in December 2018, the new administration in Yerevan is now dealing with fundamental changes in the state governance in order to insure the prosperity for its citizens and security for the state. Years of corrupt governance eroded the state apparatus, created an oligarchic and kleptocratic system, where all of the resources of the country were utilized to benefit a tiny minority of strongman and criminals.

Since the early 90s the American people supported Armenia in its path to democracy, market economy, as well as helped build the country's civil society and free media. I would like to note that this continued support has been instrumental in our success before and during our Velvet Revolution, as without free media and a vibrant civil society this transformation would not have been possible. Hence, it is time to move forward and continue strengthening our democratic institutions and the country of Armenian as a whole.

Since its inception, the democratically elected parliament and the government of Armenia has announced about a wide range of reforms in the country. One of the key areas for this reform is the fight against corruption. I can state, that at this point systemic corruption in the country is practically eliminated, as the political elite which came to power as a result of the revolution through free and fair elections, is a group of young and educated idealists, who are true believers of fundamental human rights and have the best intentions to make their country a fully functioning democracy. However, it is evident, that good intentions are not enough for changes of this scale, so we do need your assistance at this critical time.

The government of Armenia has announced about its policy of fighting against corruption, which will soon be adopted by the country's parliament. The policy includes a wide range of changes in the areas of judiciary, tax and customs, reforming police and public security system, as well as education, health care and social security. The United States can and has already showed interest in supporting the Armenian governments in all of these areas, however it would be a great sign of support from Washington if this interest translated into concrete

actions. While with the great help of the friends of Armenians at the US Congress the financial aid to our country has grown for the next year, earmarking the funds allocated to our country like it is done with our neighbours Georgia and Ukraine would be a great sign of wider political support. Meanwhile, in my view „from aid to trade” should be the philosophy of Washington DC with regards to Armenia. Hence, making OPIC funds bigger would encourage American businesses to enter Armenian market with more interest and confidence. Last but not least, supporting Armenia in the area of security can and should be discussed further. Our military is present in Iraq and Afghanistan within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Considering the unresolved conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and the changing security architecture of our region, continued and deeper training of our security forces is of crucial importance. It would be a terrible missed opportunity if this self-empowerment and renaissance is not supported by concrete actions by the United States. The American people have been generous towards Armenians for over a century. They had our backs during the Armenian Genocide, they welcomed the refugees here and gave them a new home, they opened their hearts and wallets when Armenia became independent again in 1991, and they should now embrace Armenia as she renews herself.

That said, you should also raise your expectations of what Armenia and the Armenian government can and should do in the months and years ahead. You should not explain or excuse away our failures because of geopolitics or the legacies of the past. Yes, Armenia's challenges are decades in the making, but just like the people's apathy and seemingly all-powerful political monolith, the challenges can be overcome and resolved. Much is at stake, and we have got to get this right. The people who believed in themselves and the strength of the universal ideals of freedom, fairness and pursuit of happiness, deserve nothing less.

I once again thank this Commission for organizing this important hearing and will be happy to address your questions.

Thank you for your attention

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