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Armenia's Opposition: The Next Steps

Speech by Stepan Demirchian,
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Dear Ladies and Gentleman:

First of all, I would like to say that I highly appreciate this opportunity to speak at CSIS—one of the world's leading policy centers. It is an honor to be here. It is institutions of this caliber that provide the knowledge and information for nation-states to correctly plan and strategize their futures, address problems, and offer new approaches to global challenges.

I would also like to thank NDI for its assistance in organizing this visit. Our cooperation with NDI has been useful and its contribution to democracy building in Armenia is appreciated.

I would like to begin by providing my assessment of the domestic situation in Armenia.

To better understand the present situation, it is necessary to consider the last presidential elections and post-election developments. The results of the 2003 presidential elections were falsified and, as noted in the OSCE final presidential election report, "the failure of the 2003 election to meet international standards lay not in technical or procedural lapses, but in a lack of sufficient political determination by the authorities to ensure a fair and honest process."

Both after the first and second rounds of elections, more than 100,000 people gathered in peaceful protests against the election falsifications in central Yerevan. Protest rallies took place over the course of several days. Over 200 people were detained and 80 citizens received 15-day jail sentences—just for participating in peaceful rallies.

Despite the demands of the OSCE, the Constitutional Court of Armenia and the Council of Europe that Armenian authorities undertake measures to hold criminally accountable those responsible for violating the election law, nobody was punished.

After the second round, we brought a complaint before the Constitutional Court. Our arguments were not refuted. Although the Court in its decision did not invalidate the results of the election, the indignation of society was so strong, that the Court, in its same

decision, recommended the newly elected National Assembly make changes to the Law on Referendum and hold “referendum of confidence” within one year.

The Court’s decision was ignored by the majority in the National Assembly and subsequently, the opposition opted for a parliamentary boycott. (Incidentally, last year’s parliamentary elections, following the presidential elections were also falsified.) Our demands to make changes to the Law on Referendum and to hold a referendum of confidence were qualified by the authorities as an attempt to seize power and an absurd criminal case against hundreds of thousands of people.

Protest demonstrations continued into this year. On April 13, peaceful demonstrators were violently dispersed by Special Forces.

During these protests, more than 600 people were arrested, including Members of Parliament. Several journalists were beaten. Political party offices, and even a museum were raided and ransacked. Despite the demands of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, nobody was called to account for these acts of violence. The authorities placed themselves out of the constitutional framework and at the same time cynically declared that they were protecting society from extremists.

It must be noted that all previous elections in Armenia, with the exception of the first presidential and 1999 parliamentary elections, were falsified. The 1999 parliamentary elections awakened hope in the people, but the October 27, 1999 terrorist attack in the National Assembly killed that hope. The last decade can be defined as a time of unrealized opportunities for democratic development in our country.

Authorities explain recent events as have been impacted by Georgia’s Rose Revolution. But in reality, as you can see, what happened in Armenia during the last few months was caused by falsified presidential elections, and peaceful demonstrations in Armenia had started before the Georgian events. People also protested against impunity and permissiveness, widespread poverty and social polarization, flourishing corruption and clan systems, unjust privatization and high unemployment. The power today in Armenia serves the interests of a group of people and in the meantime is a hostage in their hands. There is a huge gap between those in power and society, and we see the bitter consequences of the “power at all costs” principle.

It is obvious that Armenia needs changes. To meet the challenges facing Armenia today, we should first of all overcome the crisis of confidence and consolidate society. Only legitimate power is able to effectively fight against corruption and clan systems. Only a non-corrupted, effective state can contribute powerfully to the reduction of poverty, provide social justice, and equal economic opportunities.

Fundamental problems include the weak accountability of the executive to the legislature and the powerful influence of the executive over the judicial system. Today, the main role of the parliament is merely to stamp governmental decisions.

Armenian authorities like to repeat that our country should become the most organized state in the region. But in reality, we see that this so-called “organized state” means organized falsifications and violence, controlled media, and a decorative opposition.

Our vision for Armenia is a modern democratic country, a rule of law based state, with a strong civil society, and we will continue our struggle for democracy, because it is the choice of the Armenian people. Some political analysts consider that Armenian society is not ready for democracy and free and fair elections, but that is simply not true. Armenians, by their nature, cannot tolerate unfairness and the recent demonstrations in Yerevan reaffirm that. What is taking place in Armenia today is not just the opposition’s struggle for power, as the authorities attempt to present, but Society’s fight for dignity and justice. International observers have also noted that the people of Armenia are ready for democratic elections. The existing authorities are an obstacle for democratic development in Armenia. We should establish a precedent of peaceful and democratic transition of power in our country. We believe that the means are as important as the goals.

Authorities falsify the elections while talking about the long way to democracy and the need to improve the electoral code. (How long will it take them to understand that ballot boxes should not be stuffed and people arrested? How much time is needed to get the independent A1+ TV station back on the air?) They violate the Constitution, yet talk about constitutional changes, open a criminal case against the opposition, and then call the opposition for dialogue. They declare economic growth, but the enrichment of a few is the result of this so-called growth.

Time is one of the most crucial factors, if we want to take part in progressive developments in the global community.

Constitutional changes are important and the principle of separation of powers should find its place in our political system. But first of all, we should establish the tradition of respecting our Constitution. The best electoral code is not a panacea if the political will to hold free and fair elections is absent. Dialogue is possible when the authorities act within the constitutional framework. The enrichment of a few people does not mean development. Fruits of economic growth should be spread around to produce a successful society. Development results in the transformation of society, providing equal opportunities for all and improving the social conditions for the poor (currently more than half of the population is estimated to be below the poverty line).

Privatization should be transparent, contribute to an efficient economy, and create a middle class. This, in turn, will create a stable foundation for sustainable development and economic security.

As Albert Einstein observed, the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.

The fight for security, prosperity, and justice can no longer be won on any one nation's ground. It is international; it requires agreement on values. It is predicated on an acknowledgement of interdependence. Armenians share common values with Europeans and real integration into European structures is our priority. Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are included in the European Union's Wider Europe and New Neighborhood initiative as neighbors and it gives new prospects to Armenia and the South Caucasus. The European Union can play a constructive role in promoting peace and security in the region, and the South Caucasus can play an increased role in strengthening international security. A mutually beneficial partnership with the European Union may stimulate democratization and regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. We are convinced that none of the peoples of this region wish the South Caucasus to remain a field of constant confrontation. Present conflicts can be resolved in accordance with democratic practices and principles.

One of the main and dangerous conflicts in the region is the Karabagh conflict. The solution of the conflict should be achieved only by peaceful means, via negotiations. To resolve the Karabagh conflict without the participation of Karabagh is not realistic. Karabagh's right to self-determination cannot be ignored, and Karabagh should be an active participant of the negotiation process. Any dictated solution of the conflict will not establish peace and stability in the long-term. I would like to emphasize that the promotion of democratization in the region will provide more chances to successfully resolving the conflict.

Unfortunately, Turkey continues to make the Karabagh conflict a precondition for normalizing relations with Armenia. It is obvious that Turkey's position is conditioned by pressure from Azerbaijan.

We consider that we should start the process without any preconditions from either side. Opening the border, even just the railways, would be a step towards normalization.

Concerning the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, I would like to indicate that it has been on the agenda of the Armenian nation for decades. Therefore, it is natural that our newly independent state supports this quest for justice with the continuous efforts of the Armenian Diaspora.

But, having the genocide issue on the agenda does not make it a precondition.

Security, for Armenians who have experienced the pain of genocide, is not just a word. Armenia should be part of those security structures which provide the best security guarantees for the Armenian people. We view our security in the wider context of regional security. That is why, first and foremost, we should normalize relations with our neighbors.

Historically, Armenians have linked their security with Russia. At present, taking into account Turkey's unilateral approach to the Karabagh conflict and its existing

blockade against Armenia, a strategic partnership with Russia has for Armenians not only a practical, but also a psychological meaning. We stand for a strategic partnership with Russia, but we are against deals like “equity against debt.”

In the meantime, we are ready to expand our cooperation with NATO, taking the Armenia-NATO relationship to a higher level.

I would like to use this opportunity to express our gratitude to the U.S. Government for its assistance in helping us build a democratic state and create an open market economy during this tough period of transition.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of effective governance and widespread corruption, the fruits of U.S. assistance are not tangible for the majority of the population, and it is obvious that establishing rule of law and non-corrupted governance are critical for Armenia.

Relations with the U.S. are very important for Armenia and we are ready to become a reliable partner for the United States.

It is difficult to overestimate the role the U.S. can play in providing security and peace in our region and we believe that the South Caucasus will become a region of stability and cooperation.

As you know, Armenians today are spread all over the world. One of the largest Armenian communities is located here in the United States. They have contributed to the successful development of their communities here in America, yet have not forgotten their ancestry.

The Armenian-American community has contributed to Armenia on many levels, beginning with humanitarian assistance. We believe Armenian-Americans still have a significant role to play in the strengthening of our state, and we look forward to working with the Diaspora as we together build the future of Armenia.

Despite the existing hardships, we are optimistic. We are confident that the Armenian people will win their struggle for their future and Armenia will become a country of democracy and prosperity.

The creative nature and aspiration for justice of the Armenian people worldwide, together with the support of the international community, gives us this confidence.

Thank you.

Question and Answer Session:

On the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, Mr. Demirchian agreed that his party's position is consistent with that of the government—to include the disputed territory in all negotiations, while still emphasizing the need to normalize relations with Turkey. He opposes Ankara's insistence on returning the territories under Armenian control as a precondition for normalizing relations.

Regarding Armenian-Russian relations, Mr. Demirchian emphasized the need for a strategic partnership that ensures cooperation between the two, but does not give the Russians a monopoly over providing security and stability in the region. Moreover, he recognized that stronger relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan are equally important for resolving and managing regional conflicts.

Mr. Demirchian also addressed questions about the government's offer to work with the opposition, specifically through the power to veto legislation on electoral and constitutional reform and to cooperate on corruption and government restructuring. He noted that the opposition would open dialogue with the government if the current administration agrees that it has violated the constitution through false elections and violence against protestors, and allows itself to be held accountable for this. Adding that the opposition's activities will not be limited to demonstrations, he acknowledged that his bloc would consider the administration's options to work with its members in parliament.

Responding to comments and inquiries about his party's platform, Mr. Demirchian cited the party's commitment to fighting corruption starting "from the highest levels", combating poverty and continuing to create a more democratic and open state. He also commented on institutionalizing the relationship between Yerevan and the Armenian diaspora, particularly by attracting more foreign investment and increasing the level of cooperation along economic lines.