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The Armenian Opposition in 2004

Aram Karapetyan, Nor Zhamanakner (New Times) Party
Jorj Hakobyan, Social Democratic Hnchak Party

**Russia and Eurasia Program
Caucasus Initiative
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On March 2nd, the Caucasus Initiative of the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS hosted Aram Karapetyan and Jorj Hakobyan in a seminar entitled “The Armenian Opposition in 2004.” Cory Welt, Visiting Fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program, chaired the seminar.

Jorj Hakobyan discussed the history of the Social Democratic Party, the party goals, and the Karabakh issue. The Social Democratic Party, founded more than a century ago, was one of the first parties to register in independent Armenia. It joined nine other parties to form the Justice bloc that contested parliamentary elections last year. Hakobyan contended that if those elections had been free and fair, the bloc would have won a majority of seats.

According to Hakobyan, the Social Democratic Party seeks to turn Armenia into a true democracy. It opposes the current political system in Armenia, not just individual politicians. The party also seeks to promote a strong social justice system. It wishes to improve foreign relations, communication, and trade with neighboring countries and wants Armenia to become an industrial and economic force that can encourage investment and increase employment. On the question of Karabakh, the Social Democratic party seeks active negotiations and a just and peaceful solution.

Aram Karapetyan discussed the platform of the New Times party. The party was established in January 2003. It has a presence in eighteen towns and villages throughout Armenia, and Karapetyan claims the party enjoys the support of thirty thousand Armenians. The party is based on four principles: democracy, free-market economics, pan-Armenianism, and the concept of Armenia as a crossroads of civilizations. The party makes use of the Armenian diaspora to promote its platform overseas. It criticizes the existing system of governance in Armenia as ineffective and argues that Armenia obtained its independence before it was prepared to do so. Karapetyan argued that the population’s dissatisfaction with economic clans, corruption, and the lack of a free market will lead to early parliamentary and presidential elections.

The New Times party also promotes cooperation between Russia and the United States. Such cooperation is the only way for Armenia to maintain an equilibrium between its geopolitical and economic concerns.

On the issue of Karabakh, Karapetyan noted that any attempt to change the status quo will result in war, since neither the governments of Armenia nor Azerbaijan are willing to compromise. Citing the example of Cyprus and the European Union, he held out the hope that the status quo could evolve into peace if intermediaries assist in negotiations.

Finally, Karapetyan addressed Armenian-Turkish relations. Normal economic relations with Turkey do not exist. There are three issues that help define the Armenian-Turkish relationship. Turkey wants Armenia to renounce the Armenian Genocide, recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, and return all the territories it won during the war with Azerbaijan. No Armenian government or political party is prepared to accept these demands.

The seminar then opened for discussion. Karapetyan was asked about his party's relationship with the Justice bloc, and why he thought it was important to start a new party instead of working with the existing opposition. The New Times Party, Karapetyan argued, stands side-by-side with the Justice bloc. He cited the example of Georgia's National Movement, headed by President Mikheil Saakashvili, which originally stood as a strong, separate party and then merged with another party to create a powerful force for change in the country.

Regarding Armenia's relations with NATO and the EU, Karapetyan expressed his belief that Armenia should not rush into anything. As far as military cooperation, he favors whatever is effective, although Armenia needs to exercise caution on military matters because of Russia's military presence. Hakobyan added that Armenia participates with the NATO Partnership for Peace initiative, although it has had problems with Azerbaijan regarding the participation of Armenian representatives in Azerbaijan-based meetings.

A series of questions were asked about government-opposition relations and political freedoms. What sort of crisis would cause the government to step down? Can opposition parties operate freely? Do they enjoy statewide media access? Karapetyan replied that the opposition does indeed enjoy political freedoms. He believes that if the public embraces the opposition, they will be able to pressure the government to step down. If an opposition movement has a good agenda and platform, it will be effective and will not require a revolution. Although the New Times party does use television, more media access is necessary in order to reach out to every citizen. The government can halt the operation of the media at any moment.

In response to a question regarding Russia's relationship with the government and how it would react in the event of a serious political crisis, Karapetyan emphasized that Armenia is an independent country, and nobody has the right to interfere in its internal affairs. He believes that in the event of a change in government, relations with Russia will still be normal. He has frequent meetings with Russian politicians and will continue to do so in the future. According to Karapetyan, the Russian government would never interfere in Armenia's internal affairs.

When the recent murder of an Armenian officer by an Azerbaijani officer during a NATO-sponsored stay in Hungary was brought up, Hakobyan said that the murder was especially unacceptable given the context. He indicated that it was a result of Azerbaijani anti-Armenian sentiments and that the controversy is detrimental to negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh. Karapetyan remarked that he holds no animosity towards the Azerbaijani people but that it is not right for a murderer to become a national hero. In his view, the two states are not ready to resolve the Karabakh conflict and emphasized that both sides need time before they will be able to solve the problem.

On a question regarding privatization, Hakobyan criticized the way privatization was carried out in Armenia—specifically, that privatization was begun while the national economy was too weak. Due to considerable debt, the government surrendered 5 strategic enterprises to

Russia. The water system was sold to the Italians, energy distribution to the British, telecommunications to the Greeks, and cognac to the French. These industries ought to have been privatized as joint ventures.

Karapetyan was also asked about his party's attitude towards Iran. The New Times supports friendly relations with Iran, which houses a large Armenian diaspora. His party supports the creation of a gas pipeline from Iran to Armenia. Iran needs to sell its gas regardless of who is in power. Iran can also give Armenia access to the Middle Eastern market.