

## **Siranush Sargsyan: "In Artsakh we now live under the threat of genocide"**

Siranush Sargsyan is a freelance journalist based in Stepanakert, Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh, covering human rights and politics in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Siranush has published in various global and regional publications, including Newsweek, IWPR, and The Armenian Weekly. Reporting from the ground since the start of the lockdown on December 12, 2022, Siranush has been interviewed and quoted in global outlets including CNN, Le Figaro and El Periódico. His Twitter includes daily updates on the needs and challenges facing the citizens of Artsakh.

**The Republic of Nagorno Karabakh, despite the fact that it has not been internationally recognized, has been a reality since 1991, with its own institutions, with its schools and hospitals, and an economy that attracted foreign investment and also began to be an attractive destination for tourism. , especially Armenian and Iranian, but also European. All that changed with the Azeri invasion of 2020. But, until then, what was life like in Stepanakert, your city?**

To describe it very briefly, it was a little paradise. Of course, after the first Karabakh war, even after the victory, we passed a difficult road, at the cost of many human sacrifices, and then a long road of state building, which was not smooth and despite Artsakh being unrecognized and rejected by most of the world, with all its consequences, we believed that we were building our destroyed and wounded home and we were doing it with the desire for peace, we lived with that desire and we were happy.

**Since the war in which the Azeri army occupied three quarters of Artsakh, including its second city, Shushi, life has changed radically for the population of the small republic, but even so, most of them decided to continue in their homes, in their land, "We are our mountains", say the Karabakhs proudly. How great is the determination of the inhabitants of Artsakh, to decide to continue on their land, despite the continuous threats of a new Azeri attack?**

Life for us is now divided into two parts, before the war of 2020 and after the war. All my positive memories and experiences were before the war, I understand that it will never be the same again. Almost every family suffered a loss in the war/my sister lost her husband/, if we include the first war/my uncle was killed/ and the four-day war of 2016, then we really sacrificed too much to live in our homeland. Hence, "We are our mountains" is It is not just a statue, it really characterizes the nature of our people, our roots are half buried in the soil like a statue, perhaps it is appropriate to mention the words of the hero of the first Artsakh war, Vardan Stepanyan, when he said, "The soil of Artsakh hugs my feet and says, 'Don't leave me alone". Now that land has embraced us all and says don't leave me alone.

**After the ceasefire agreements, Russia has remained as guarantor of peace, with a military force that, in principle, should protect the population of Artsakh, however, the Azerbaijani army has not stopped provoking, is it being Are Russian peacekeepers really effective in the role given to them by the agreements that ended the 2020 war?**

According to the ceasefire agreement of November 9, the Lachin Corridor which will ensure communication between Artsakh and Armenia will remain under the control of Russian peacekeepers and by closing the road Azerbaijan has violated that agreement. Just after the war, Azerbaijan constantly makes provocations. First, the politics of salami slices, when the small area of Artsakh is occupied one after the other, besides that, it creates unbearable conditions for living, shootings on the border, regular interruptions of gas and electricity supplies, disconnections of telephone connections and the Internet, and all this is done at the behest of Russian peacekeepers. and with agreement. All this caused the residents' dissatisfaction with the gamblers, and this dissatisfaction became more entrenched after the blockade. Today it is difficult to find people in Artsakh who are not dissatisfied with the peacekeepers, but we must also record that if we still live here, it is because the peacekeepers are here. I can't imagine a situation where we will live side by side with Azerbaijanis alone, it is impossible, at least in the foreseeable future.

**The blockade of the Lachin Pass by Azerbaijani agents, under the false flag of the environmental fight, and which has been going on for more than a hundred days, has aggravated the situation of the population of Nagorno Karabakh, with gas and electricity cuts, communications, and basic supplies and medicines. How are the men, women and children of Artsakh surviving in the face of this blockade, which Azerbaijan does not seem to intend to lift?**

The blockade, now in its fifth month, is having very serious consequences indeed. Endless queues for the most basic necessary goods and even standing in a line in many cases we go home empty-handed. Almost no heat we experienced in harsh winter conditions, unemployment, doubling and tripling prices of existing goods is really hard. But first of all, the blockade is heavy from the psychological and security point of view. If there are only material problems and deprivations, our people had a very difficult fate and during the first war they lived in a blockade under bombings for almost two years, in uncertainty, almost every day in the border villages and also Under fire near Stepanakert above all now we live under the threat of genocide,.

**"Armenia fully recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan," declared Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, which has been interpreted as recognition of Azeri sovereignty over Artsakh. What consequences can these statements bring and how have they been received in Stepanakert, by the authorities and the Karabakh population?**

It is extremely painful to see the steps taken by the RA authorities. Our parents fought and dreamed that we would join Armenia, because Armenia is our mother, and we have made so many sacrifices for it. Regarding the statements of the RA authorities, our parliament also responded with a statement. The whole problem is that if the RA authorities pay tribute to Aliyev's demands and recognize Artsakh as a part of Azerbaijan, he will not stop anyway, the peace agenda is set, not a single person from Artsakh wants peace, but if it is one-sided, there will be no peace.

**On the other hand, the Azeri dictator has also said: "The separatists must understand that they have two options: either they live under the Azerbaijani flag or they leave." What is the response given by the people**

**of Nagorno Karabakh, and how do you assess that the international community has not reacted to a threat of this type?**

Aliyev's statements for the third time are clear attempts of ethnic cleansing, it is obvious that in the case of such rhetoric it is unnecessary to talk about wine, how can we trust, how can we live with them, if their goal is to depatriate us, expel us from our own country. I am sure that Russia and the Armenian countries are also very well aware of this, and they are trying to dance under Azerbaijan's duduk in every way, because they are not concerned about the fate of 120,000 people, but about their gas deals. They actually sacrifice us for their interests.

**There are other geopolitical actors that are decisive in the future of Artsakh, one of them is Turkey, whose imperialist, pan-Turkism position is a threat to many peoples, not only the Armenian, but also to the Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians and Greeks. Another is Iran, over whom Azerbaijan also has territorial claims. How can these two countries influence the future of Armenia, and how can the war in Ukraine influence the role of Russia?**

The war of 2020 showed that Turkey is not a side of the conflict but a participant, planner and implementer of this war. It is obvious that we occupied our homeland with the direct participation of the Turkish army, with the help of Turkish drone devices. We also understand that for Armenia and for Iran has great strategic importance, and that the acceptance and financing of Aliyev's crimes by the West is an anti-Iranian campaign. It is also clear that Aliyev is taking advantage of Russia's involvement in the war against Ukraine. Russia avoids opening a second front and tries to turn a blind eye to Aliyev's anti-Armenian aggression. And when you look in the context of all this, Artsakh seems like a small coin in bigger deals.

**Recently we are noting that Azerbaijan is organizing tours with Western media, to impose their story. What role are the Armenian media and the diaspora playing in combating the version that the Aliyev regime is giving? What media would you recommend to be really informed of what is happening in this part of the world?**

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan's policy of falsification is not new, and it has been forging history and textbooks for years, and bribing officials working in international institutions. But after the war, all this continued in a more aggressive way, one of the forms of expression of which is paid media tours, when they organize a tour for journalists, influencers, bloggers from different countries, pay all their expenses and present their false story.

On the other hand, after the war, the border of Artsakh is closed for foreign visitors, especially for journalists, even until the blockade, and this creates an additional information vacuum, almost no one spoke about Artsakh, and that was the reason why I myself started to write, to tell what is happening here, just through my daily tweets and articles. About the blockade, almost all famous periodicals covered it, but only with one publication each, while those periodicals have special sections on their websites and columns about Ukraine. Today, the French press is more active talking about the blockade and regularly publishing articles. It is really difficult for me to single out a specific media. Among the English-language media, it is "Armenian Weekly" that publishes news almost every day. Although few, there are also publications in the Spanish-language media. I am grateful for the opportunity of this

interview and also for all the articles you regularly write on your website about Artsakh and the blockade. These are also a small step towards filling that information vacuum.