Prime Minister Pashinyan's interview to AFP

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Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan gave an interview to Agence France-Presse, which is presented below.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli – Mr. Prime Minister, do you believe in lasting peace with Azerbaijan?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – If I didn't believe, there would be no point in taking part in the negotiations at all, but believing does not mean that the result is guaranteed, because, understandably, it depends not only on me, naturally, it depends also on the positions of the President of Azerbaijan, let alone that we are not generally negotiating in a vacuum. There is an international situation, there is a geopolitical situation, there is a humanitarian situation, there are various human factors, which may emerge at any point and time. Everything influences the process, but of course, the greatest impact on the process have the direct negotiators, I mean, the President of Azerbaijan and myself.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - What can you personally do in negotiations with President Aliyev in order to guarantee the dignity of the Armenians living in Karabakh, what keys do you have to determine the outcome of negotiations?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – You know, generally the conditions are very important. If we just step aside from the substance of the negotiations, because for an impartial observer of what's happening in the negotiations room, one might think that in principle, everything is fine, that there is really nothing extraordinary happening, but then, after that, we need to come back and observe the actions and statements that are being made. The most important thing, which in my opinion impedes the progress of the talks, is Azerbaijan's continued aggressive rhetoric, hate speech towards Armenians and anything that is Armenian, hate actions, and of course, the policy of revenge in relation to Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh and obviously, the policy of ethnic cleansing.

Look at the situation that we now have in Nagorno Karabakh. We have a humanitarian crisis there. When we say humanitarian crisis, for many people it may seem like a political term or a headline for news, but let's delve into its substance. It means, for instance, absence of essential goods, there is no vegetable oil in Nagorno Karabakh, no sugar, there are no hygiene supplies, there is no butter, there aren't several types of foodstuff. The people of Nagorno Karabakh are hard working people of course, and in this agricultural season some products are produced, but because of the absence of fuel, the delivery of the goods to the potential consumers is almost impossible. In Karabakh,

there is a certain stock of grain, but because of the absence of fuel, it cannot be delivered to the flour mills, if in any way it is possible to deliver it to the flour mills, then it cannot be delivered to the bread bakeries because of absence of fuel, and if somehow it reaches the bakeries, it is impossible to bake the bread at industrial volumes because of the absence of electricity and fuel, but if it is somehow possible to bake it, then it is impossible to deliver it to the shops, and if somehow it is possible to deliver to the shops, people have transport limitations for reaching the shop to buy the bread, and if somehow they reach the shop to buy the bread, they do not have the required financial means to purchase the bread because they are deprived of employment.

If all these layers, all these difficulties are placed upon one individual, all that burden becomes obvious and understandable. Under these circumstances, it is clear that in the Republic of Armenia and also of course in Nagorno Karabakh, pessimism is growing day by day, which, however, does not change our policy in any way, because we are convinced that the method of resolving issues through negotiations has no alternative. And on the other hand, if issues are not resolved through negotiations, in the public these negotiations may be perceived as just waste of time, or creating the impression in the media that something is being done. These are all risks that can directly or indirectly affect the process.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli – What are your red lines in this process?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – We have said this a number of times: Armenia's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the rights and security of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh. By the way, there is an important point to be made: rights and security on this level are terms, for people they are just terms. It's very important that the terms be reflected in a way that people will be able to use, apply them, to have the rights and the security that would enable them to live, to self-realize in their environment, in their family, to develop within that environment.

It's also very important to record that our position is that the issue of rights and security of the people of Nagorno Karabakh should be addressed in a dialogue, talks and discussions with the participation of the people of Nagorno Karabakh. We call that Baku-Stepanakert dialogue, but given the disproportion of strength between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, we think that if we leave Stepanakert and Baku face to face, Baku will have the opportunity of either turning that agenda into oblivion, or have a monologue and not a dialogue. And that's why our perception is that that dialogue should take place in the context of an international mechanism, where the international community will be the witness. Armenia's role here is difficult because Armenia's interest in this process is perceived and interpreted by Azerbaijan as so-called encroachment or aspiration upon Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Because of that perception talks in this format have not turned out to be constructive, and this has been demonstrated by the whole history of negotiations.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - Armenia is seeking certain international mechanisms that will guarantee the security and rights of the Armenian population of Karabakh. What kind of international mechanisms do you imagine?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – You know, these are working-level issues that depend not only on our perceptions. That's why I wouldn't like to limit the future conversations by outlining any particular vision, or that would make limitations for us in those conversations. Our main issue is that for that conversation, that dialogue to take place and to be genuine, to have an actual conversation, because it is through conversation that its is possible to overcome the lack of confidence, hate, and even tensions, or even to better understand one another.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - Do you think that Azerbaijan is threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Armenia, particularly considering the situation in Syunik, also the fact that the city of Jermuk came under fire last year? Do you consider this a threat from Azerbaijan to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Armenia, and what do you think, can there be war again?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – In general, so long as a peace treaty has not been signed, and such a treaty has not been ratified by the parliaments of the two countries, of course, war is very likely. And generally, anywhere on the planet, where there is conflict situation that has not been resolved by a treaty, has not been addressed anywhere anytime, war may erupt. We need to know this. There are different scales of probability, but we should take this as a rule. Azerbaijan's obvious aggressive rhetoric, hate speech is added to this, the current geopolitical situation is added to this, where essentially the world order that some time ago was presumed to somehow exist, we now see it doesn't exist by and large. This is also contributed by the breaching of the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and so on and so forth.

And of course new escalations, new wars are always likely, which does not mean that it is going to happen, but it also does not mean that it is not going to happen. By the way, every day, literally, violations of the ceasefire regime occur on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. During my term as Prime Minister, in more than five years, there might have been a maximum of three days during which the ceasefire wasn't violated. Can you imagine this? During the five years with the most inflated assessments we may have not more than three days without ceasefire regime violation. One of these days was November 11, 2020, so if we exclude this, two days remain, and one questionable.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - After signing the cease-fire agreement, which no one likes in Armenia, I'm sure neither you like it, how do you justify staying in power?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – Through elections. Based on the decision of the people, because what I have said and I have done is that I bore and I bear the responsibility for it. You know that after November 9, 2020, I resigned for the purpose of having snap parliamentary elections to answer exactly the question you ask. Not only others, but I and our political team also ask that question. After November 9, 2020, if my memory serves me correctly, in December, so basically, a month and a few days later, we publicly proposed to our opponents and our critics to have snap parliamentary elections. We could have done that snap election in November or even in December, but

everyone understands that chaotic situation, when nobody was ready for elections, nobody had planned elections, the Government would be best prepared for an elections.

In December I publicly proposed, but we had a situation when the opposition said that the power should be transferred to the opposition, meaning to them. Our position was that the power or the mandate to govern is not our property, we cannot just give it to somebody. We received that mandate from the people and we agreed to give that mandate, but to give it only to the people. And we are obliged to put in place conditions for the people to decide to whom that mandate should be transferred.

Our most important obligation in that situation would be to ensure the free expression of the people's will, to have a free, fair, competitive and transparent election. After that the election took place in a very tense but democratic atmosphere. By the way, very importantly, before the election, the civil society demanded and we changed the electoral code, switching to a fully proportional representation electoral system, and the context was such that there was an election of the Prime Minister. Under the old context and the new context that was the case.

Snap parliamentary elections took place in a very difficult environment, often charged with hate speech. So there was a vote and I was elected the Prime Minister, which was essentially a direct election, because with those numbers in the election, under our Constitution the candidacy of the Prime Minister is not discussed in the parliament. The power that gets the majority, and our party received constitutional majority, immediately appoints the Prime Minister. Importantly, the whole international community unanimously said that the election was free, fair, democratic and transparent. Now, whether the people made the best choice they could is a question that only people can answer in the upcoming election.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli – Obviously, Russia did not meet Armenia's expectations during and after the war. How do you justify close ties or trust towards Russia?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – That same question could be asked about any country, "how do you justify your good relationship with any country when in Nagorno Karabakh human rights are violated, there is a humanitarian crisis, ethnic cleansing is being prepared and those countries are not reacting properly?", even the countries that consider human rights and the UN Charter, democracy and ethnic tolerance to be priorities for them.

So now you want to say that all those countries with which we have good relationship are doing their maximum to overcome the humanitarian crisis in Nagorno Karabakh? My direct answer to you will be no for a variety of reasons: some of them are buying gas, some are buying oil, some are thinking about their banking systems, and others have other concerns. But it would not be correct to say that they doing nothing.

We are not speaking about political or inter-ethnic conflict, we are talking about ongoing process of genocide, and not just its preparation. Any genocide you know wasn't

like that they woke up one day and started killing people, slaughtering people. Let's go back to the Holocaust, the one that the world knows the best. Did Hitler come to power and the next morning pulled out the sword and started chasing the Jews in the streets? It lasted years, it was a process, which could have been well predicted. It was expressed in rhetoric, it was expressed in policy.

Now in Nagorno Karabakh they have created a Ghetto, in the most literal meaning of the word. I say again, sometimes we do not deliver the terms understandably, we just give people headlines, "humanitarian crisis". Some percentage of our audience well understands all the details of what's going on, but the majority does not understand, that's not their business, that's not their activity.

But Azerbaijan is creating a Ghetto in Nagorno Karabakh today. What's the international community's reaction? Russia asks us how we justify our good relationships with the West, is that what you expect of them to make a semi-statement that the Lachin Corridor should be opened? Yes, the Lachin Corridor has to be opened. The International Court of Justice rendered a decision back on February 22. That is a decision of the highest international court. By the way, Russia really doesn't well recognize the jurisdiction of that court, but the international community, with the exception of Russia, recognizes it as the highest court. And now Russia asks us "Is this what you expected of the West, when establishing such close relations with the EU and other partners, your expectation was that they would say, for example once a week that the Lachin Corridor should be opened?" In the same way as we justify our relations with the West, in the same way we justify our relations with Russia. Like according to the logic of some western circles our relationship with Russia is not justified, because Russia is not fulfilling all its obligations, and is not meeting all of our expectations, similarly, Russia tells us the same about the West.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - The long paradigm of Armenia's foreign policy was complementarity between the West and Russia, but after the Ukrainian war, the situation has changed greatly. Now the countries are unlikely to be able to maintain good relations with both the West and Russia. How does this affect Armenia's foreign policy?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – I think that complementarity is a catastrophic mistake for Armenia. And that is not a new mistake, it's not even thirty years old, it isn't even a 100-year old mistake. That mistake is much older. I am not criticizing the past governments and I am not criticizing anyone, because look, your question is about how Armenia is going to live between Russia and the West. But in reality we are not between Russia and the West, we are actually between Georgia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan. And in reality, the countries of the region are among one another.

In our 2020 election program, the program of our government there is a clause which is called regionalization. I say again, experience and our history shows that this is not about 10, 20, 30 or even 40 years, this is about centuries. We are living here, we are not living between Russia and the US, it's Europe that lives between Russia and the US. We live between Georgia, Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan. And the question is the following –

should we manage our relations with our neighbors, I am sorry to use that word, through Moscow, Washington and Brussels. In terms of the paradigm - no, but in practical terms we lack that political tradition.

Deep down, that's the cause of our whole problem, because what we should me also concerns me, because there are many historical, social-psychological layers here, and this issue cannot be resolved on the level of an individual having power and mandate. It's not so that I have ridded me of this problem. Any person sitting here in this position in the last few hundred years, possible even longer, would have this problem, I am speaking about Armenian statehood.

If we have a problem or an issue with our environment, our first reaction is to check what Moscow, Brussels or Washington can do. Of course, during this period the capitals, their names might have changed over this long historical run. And we comprehend this. But nothing has changed in our life, because we also lack that culture, they also lacked it. And we lack that because of a certain historical tradition, and they lacked it because of a certain historical tradition.

When the time comes, and there is a chance, an opportunity, or maybe a realization that another paradigm should be applied for solving the issues, a different logic emerges in our environment – well, you have come to resolve issues with us, wasn't that you that brough Washington, Moscow or Brussels on us for a long time? Ok, come over here now. You asked me about the paradigm, our paradigm is not between Moscow and Washington.

But on the other hand, in the 21st century, or even in the 19th century, it was not possible to pursue a policy bypassing the geopolitical centers, and that's no needed and not even reasonable. The challenge here is that we are trying to change the name, saying a balanced and balancing policy is what we need. We do not want this new paradigm, which is so far still a theory, I tell this directly, we realize this, but we are still unable to implement it. And that's because of us, because it's one thing when you know what you need to do, and it's another thing that the tradition is not that.

But on the other hand, this policy should not be perceived as a policy of bypassing or ignoring the geopolitical centers, but we are also trying to take steps. When I went to participate in the inauguration of the Turkish president, there were both positive and negative reactions in Armenia. These reactions reflect this whole tangle. And the challenge is when we speak about paradigm, to what extent are we going to be in the mode of cooperation, rather than in the mode of monologue, because this is not easy for anyone to perceive and realize that in this region for example, this political map should continue to exists for centuries to come. Some people put a question mark after this sentence. Some people frankly want to find justifications so that this political map can stem from the interest of all the regional countries without contradicting the interests of geopolitical centers. I, for example, bear this second belief, but that's not enough.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - You quite straightforwardly criticized the CSTO. Do you see a theoretical prospect of leaving this organization one day?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – No organization in the world is eternal, and every country makes decisions in accordance with its interests. The issue here is that we had and we still have an issue in terms of the effectiveness of the CSTO and the implementation of its commitments. We have discussed this issue transparently with our partners. But in terms of paradigm, I have publicly referred to this on a number of occasions.

The question is not whether Armenia leaves or will leave the CSTO or not. The question is whether the CSTO is leaving or exiting Armenia. I will say directly, there are many experts in Armenia, independent experts, who regularly send me reports stating that these processes demonstrate that the CSTO is exiting Armenia.

Moreover, there are many experts whose assessment is that Russia is exiting the region. This may seem like a science fiction, but unfortunately, our people have seen this in history. After all, a consequence of what was the 1915 genocide of the Armenians, when Russia essentially had to exit the conflicting region under its domestic burden? And the Armenians, that had made a clear geopolitical choice, were left to face Turkey. And naturally, this analysis has intensified because of an event that recently happened in Russia, an even that we all know very well. True, it lasted one and a half days, but dozens of analytical statements were sent to me during the one and a half days, saying that this is the 1915 scenario.

1915, 1917, 1918 – years of instability in Russia, Russia having to withdraw from the region and the genocide carried against the Armenian people. But now the problem is that in 1915 the Armenian people did not have a state, a statehood that would have the obligation of safeguarding its own people. Now the Armenians have a state, and the policy of the state must be built in accordance with this logic, because the likelihood that one day we will see Iran or Turkey leaving this region is zero, there is no such likelihood, but the likelihood that any geopolitical center which is currently present here, we may wake up one morning and find they have left, that likelihood is greater than zero, not necessarily with the intention of doing harm, not necessarily with the reluctance to carry out their obligations towards anyone, including Armenia.

I repeat, this is not a current day problem, not a problem of the last 10 or 30 years. This is the problem of the last 100, 150 years. And today our situation is very challenging, very difficult, but unlike 100 and more years ago, we currently have a state, which is considered a democratic state, which is considered a developing state, which is considered developing, which is considered capable of negotiating. We have a chance to understand the risks and manage them. However, we need to understand them, which is not going to be easy.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli - The United States and Europe have suspended or limited the sale of cars to Russia. Armenia has become the main re-exporter of cars to Russia. What is your government doing to ensure that the territory of Armenia is not used by Russia to circumvent sanctions?

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan – In the issue of sanctions we are closely in touch and cooperate with the EU special envoy and the representative of the US, to make sure that we act as a responsible member of the international community. It may seem stange to you, but we are transparent on this point as well. We are a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia is our main trading partner, and naturally, from the very first days we understood that the sanctions that are being imposed by the West and other countries upon Russia would create certain problems. We also understood that Russia will have expectations from us to help to the best of our ability in this difficult economic environment, because, imagine the volume of Armenia and the volume of Russia.

And we also understood that the West will be expecting that we help them, in complying with the sanctions. When talking with our Russian partners we said the following – we understand your expectation and we stand ready to address, to meet your expectation, but up to the point at which Armenia would face the threat of sanctions, because if an endless country like Russia can perhaps afford to face the sanctions, but Armenia, especially in this military-political environment, cannot afford anything like that. And this is also the same text that we communicated to the West, as proven by the fact that I am saying this in front of cameras.

This is the rule that we follow. Of course, there are known forces that always want to and they are lobbying the American and European press to make it look like that Armenia is a black hole in that sense, but currently, on the official level we do not have any objections or complaints by the European or American partners, or by Russia, because we do not want to play tricky games with our partners, we are saying this clearly and our position is legitimate.

This is not to say that everything is perfect. There is another thing that the sanctions regime often changes, and in reality, even if something had to be done, it wouldn't necessarily be done by the government. It is the private sector that is moving goods around. We are doing our best to make sure that everything is done in accordance with the rule that I just mentioned. It's my opinion and also the opinion of our international partners that we are able to do this and we will continue to do this.

Agence France-Presse Irakli Metreveli – Thank you Mr. Prime Minister.