

06.09.2015 Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians of Artsakh are fighting for freedom and democracy

They are Armenians, a historical people of the Caucasus, in the part known by geographers as the “lesser Caucasus”, which extends to the border with Iran. Their country is called Artsakh, and it lies on the opposite side of the mountains to the main part of Armenia. Armenia has three million inhabitants, against 150,000 in Artsakh, of whom a third live in the capital Stepanakert. What separates them? A mountain range which, since the dawn of time, united them as all the mountains of the world have brought together peoples engaged in transhumance, in the Alps, in the Pyrenees, in the Caucasus and in Corsica, *pumonte è cismonte*, this side and the other side of the mountains.

In 1921 the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin made a decision from Moscow to create two Soviet Socialist Republics in this region which they had just brought under their political sway: Armenia and Azerbaijan. The mountains then became a frontier, splitting this people, and Artsakh fell under the control of Baku, the Azerbaijani capital of a Turkic-speaking people, with a culture and history entirely foreign to the Armenian people living in the mountains. At the time military theory was held in higher esteem than human geography: a frontier must be a “high point” from which the guns could fire deep into enemy territory, as a plan for some future war. Since the beginnings of powered flight, this theory was absurd, but it was imposed in the Caucasus as in the Alps (consider the Tirol, split between Italy and Austria, or the Aosta valley separated from Savoy, Catalonia split in two by the Pyrenees, and many other examples including several in the Caucasus.)

In 1921 Armenia was just recovering from a shocking trauma, the first genocide in history, perpetrated in Turkey where more than a million Armenians were exterminated on the basis of their language and religion, the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the most ancient forms of Christianity. Their emblem is Mount Ararat, the permanently snow-capped peak more than 5,000 metres high, a constant backdrop to the Armenian capital, Yerevan, and where, according to the bible, Noah and his ark came to rest after the Flood. At the foot of the mountain, from the memorial erected in Yerevan to commemorate the great Armenian genocide, you can see the watchtowers, and the dust put up by Turkish army troop movements. Because an unbreachable frontier now separates Armenia from Mount Ararat: the border with Turkey, where a million Armenians were massacred for no other reason than to remove any risk that the lands occupied by Armenians could be reunited with neighbouring Armenia. References to the Armenian genocide of 1915 are omnipresent in Yerevan, and, despite several abortive attempts, détente with the Turkish regime remains off the agenda.

In Artsakh too there is a strong awareness of danger, faced with the Turkic-speaking majority of Azerbaijan led by one of the most brutal dictators on the planet, Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father in office in a political climate which brings North Korea to mind. From the 1920s to the 1990s, under the communist rule that deported an incalculable number of political opponents to Siberia, the Armenians were subjected to the whims of Moscow. Artsakh was called Karabagh, the name given to that land by the Iranians, a little as if Brussels suddenly decided to call a country called France by its inhabitants “Frankreich” because that is the name in use in Germany. And, for true Soviet effect they added on Nagorno, meaning mountainous in Russian. Thus Nagorno-Karabakh came into being, an Armenian *oblast* (district) of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Nagorno-Karabakh remains, a century on, the official name of Artsakh to the international community.

Additionally, at the same time, Stalin, who was looking further ahead, decided to create an “Azerbaijani

corridor” between the Armenian republic and the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast out of whole cloth, in order to provide a fictional separation between the Karabakhi and the Armenians. An arbitrary decision which, 95 years on, still conditions the political situation as it has developed following the fall of the Soviet empire.

The Armenian Republic was the first of the republics to cast off the Soviet yoke, with a general strike and a general climate of revolt. This time, the Soviet tanks remained powerless, and the democratic revolution was to win the day, establishing a democracy in Yerevan which is recognised by all the international bodies. Azerbaijan also set itself up as an independent country after the end of the Soviet Union, strengthened by its oil wealth in the Caspian Sea off its capital Baku. Here, however, a dictatorship rapidly took power, and has lasted until today, with Aliyev having replaced his own father. For them, Azerbaijan is “one and indivisible”, and Nagorno-Karabakh must “Azerise”, adopt the Azerbaijani language since Russian, which had hitherto served as a lingua franca for communication between the two peoples, was now proscribed, and submit to the law of the greatest number by becoming Azerbaijani and renouncing being Armenians.

The revolt broke out in 1990 and four years of war devastated Artsakh. On 2 September 1991 the Karabakhi declared their independence under the name most commonly used internationally, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. 2 September was adopted as the national holiday for Artsakh. In December 1991 a referendum confirmed the declaration of independence. The Azerbaijani army then undertook a war that lasted until 1994.

In view of their numerical inferiority the Karabakhi asked for support from Armenia which sent its troops to protect them from the pogroms which were threatening the Armenians in Azerbaijan, with mass killings under way among the Karabakhi communities in Baku and Sumgait, the two largest industrial cities in Azerbaijani territory. The memory of the genocide of 1915 still looms large!

The Lachin corridor, and the whole strip of territory created artificially by Stalin to separate Artsakh from Armenia, were put under Armenian protection to avoid encirclement, and the fighting within the region turned in favour of the Karabakhi. The Azerbaijani strongpoint at Shushi was taken by assault, and the Azerbaijani army, routed, called for a cease fire which was negotiated through the “Minsk group” which brought together the new authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Russia, France and the USA. It was signed on 12 May 1994, and officially remains in force.

However, since then the Azerbaijani army has regularly sought a new military escalation, by organising a pitiless aerial blockade, and multiplying incidents along the front line. A few weeks ago a Karabakhi army helicopter was shot down, and a special forces operation was required to recover the bodies of the three crew. Sporadic clashes have also occurred along the border with Armenia. Recently civilians have been wounded and an Armenian soldier killed by artillery fire. The situation is unstable, dangerous, and Azerbaijan has oil as a means of making its presence felt on the international scene, through corruption or by buying the support of oil-dependent states to isolate the Armenian authorities in Stepanakert and Yerevan.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the independent authorities have set up an outstanding democracy, with regular democratic elections, a noted struggle against corruption, a high profile for women in public life, and total press freedom. The contrast with the dictatorship in Baku is a striking one!

This is why the EFA has decided to give its full support to Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the three parties in power in Stepanakert, the Democratic Party of Artsakh, whose founding president, Ashot Giulyan, was

elected president of the National Assembly, requested membership of the EFA which was granted on a vote at the 2015 General Assembly at Bautzen, in Lusatia (Germany). And, to give meaning to this partnership between the EFA and the democratic forces of Nagorno-Karabakh, I travelled to Stepanakert, as president of the EFA, accompanied by Jordi Sebastià, MEP of the group after his election for the Bloc Nacionalista Valencià, on the occasion of their national holiday, to sign a joint declaration declaring the right of the Karabakhi people to self-determination, and calling for the recognition of its independence by the international community, and by the European Union in particular. The signing attracted a great deal of attention. Our delegation was received by the President of the Republic, and held important meetings with parliamentarians and the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Despite the difficulty of the journey – Stepanakert airport, completed in 2010, has never been opened since it is threatened by Azerbaijani artillery fire, while the connection by a long and difficult road from Yerevan has to cross high passes at altitudes over 2000 metres, the EFA delegation succeeded in establishing a direct link between Nagorno-Karabakh and the European institutions, particularly the European Parliament. For the EFA, things are simple: Azerbaijan must respect the right of self-determination of the Armenian people, and Europe must support those who fight for democracy against one of the most repressive dictatorships in the immediate vicinity of the European Union.

Our support was unanimously appreciated. We met all the political forces, both majority and opposition, of this people whose very existence is under threat and which is fighting for its freedom, as we do in Corsica, in Catalonia, in Scotland, in the Valencian Community and the Val d'Aosta. The EFA and its European Parliament group will serve as a relay from the Democratic Party of Artsakh and the Stepanakert authorities to Brussels, to counterbalance the incessant propaganda from the Azerbaijani dictatorship and the help it gets from very powerful oil industry lobbies. We thus hope to be able to contribute to a sustainable peace in the historic land of Artsakh, with democracy and the respect of the right of peoples to determine their own future.