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Official report of debates

Address by Mr Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia

Mr Michele NICOLETTI (Italy, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr President, it is a true honour and a real pleasure to welcome you in this Chamber. The Council of Europe is an Organisation of 47 European States, and our Parliamentary Assembly is and remains a pan-European platform for political dialogue, where the views and aspirations of the leaders of all our member States should be represented. Therefore, your visit today is very important for us.

Mr President, you visited Strasbourg in October 2013, when Armenia was chairing the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and when you had just started the first year of your second presidential mandate. You shared with us at that time a clear and ambitious political programme aimed at consolidating and strengthening further Armenia's democratic institutions. A lot of progress has been made since, and this morning we had an opportunity to discuss together the numerous steps your authorities have taken, including the constitutional and the electoral reform, as well as the strengthening of the independence of the judiciary and the stepping up of the fight against corruption. The political transition to a new parliamentary political system has now been almost complete, but a number of reform issues remain on the table and I would like to assure you, Mr President, of the Council of Europe's and our Assembly's full support on this front.

Mr President, you are well aware of the challenges the Council of Europe faces today. I strongly believe that these can be effectively overcome only if all member States, and all Council of Europe institutions and stakeholders, reaffirm their commitment to the ideals of European unity and to the values and principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. From our discussion this morning, I know that Armenia's commitment to these ideals and principles is strong. Therefore, we are looking forward to hearing your views.

Mr President, thank you for being here. You have the floor.

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: Honourable President of the Parliamentary Assembly, honourable Secretary General, distinguished members of the Assembly, at the outset I would like to warmly greet you and to congratulate you, Mr Nicoletti on assuming the high office of President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. You have indeed embarked upon this mission in rather challenging times. I strongly believe that your extensive experience and strength are exactly what is needed for the future success and reputation of our Organisation. I also wish to commend Ms Kyriakides for her excellent performance when she was President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

In this report:

- speeches in English are reported in full;
- speeches in other languages are reported using the interpretation and are marked with an asterisk (*);
- speeches in German and Italian are reproduced in full in a separate document.

The last time I had the honour to speak from this high podium was in 2013, when Armenia held the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. That mission served as a key landmark in our integration within the larger family of the Council of Europe. I trust that we met expectations while carrying out that mission.

Tomorrow is 25 January, the day on which we acceded to the Council of Europe exactly 17 years ago. At the time of joining this Europe-wide structure, we were fully aware of the path that lay ahead of us. We were also fully aware that building and strengthening democracy would not be easy without the support and direct involvement of the Council of Europe. Indeed, through political will and joint constructive engagement, we managed to overcome numerous obstacles and achieve profound improvements.

As I stand before the Assembly today, I can proudly state that we have honoured the main commitments made to the Council of Europe in terms of Armenia's democratisation. Moreover, that is not just our assertion. Our achievements in consolidating democratic institutions have been recognised by the monitoring reports of Council of Europe bodies. We firmly continue efforts to join the Europe-wide legal framework, and Armenia has already signed close to 70 conventions. For us, this process is not simply about honouring the commitments we undertook. In doing so, we are primarily implementing our own credo and convictions. We shall continue in that vein. Moreover, our country's progress on the path of reform will gain new momentum and accelerate in April, when the amendments adopted under the reformed constitution will enter into force, and we will embark upon the implementation of activities envisaged by our comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement with the European Union.

Any democracy is a living organism. Throughout our quarter-century-long efforts in State building, we have aimed to nourish this organism. We have been fully conscious that democracy constantly requires attention, review and advancement. It cannot afford a standstill and must keep up with the rapidly changing times in order to remain viable. By that logic, we undertook constitutional reform in Armenia, which received wide support from the Council of Europe. Those constitutional reforms will enter into force in April. We have a clear commitment to the pillars of the Council of Europe – to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We have decided to implement a parliamentary system of government, as I announced from this podium.

Since acceding to the Council of Europe, our country has heard the criticism and encouragements of the Council of Europe. I have no doubt that both have contributed strongly to Armenia's progress. This whole time, we have co-operated closely with the Venice Commission and, based on its expert opinion, we refined the constitutional reforms package. In an atmosphere of mutual trust, that efficient engagement continues to date through a process of implementing numerous new legislative solutions under the reformed constitution. That was best manifested in deliberations on Armenia's new electoral code, which resulted in the adoption of the code in a transparent and inclusive process with the participation of various political actors across the board.

We opted for something unprecedented. For the first time in history, we published the signed voter lists after the election. As you know, that practice is not common, especially in the light of personal data protection concerns. However, we decided to do so to achieve greater public trust in the elections. The new electoral code clearly proved its viability in the 2017 April parliamentary election, which was observed by a large number of invited observation missions, including a delegation of this Assembly. It is important to underline that the new electoral code also resulted in the allocation in the national assembly of a certain number of seats that are exclusively for representation of the national minorities. That is yet another step towards more participatory and inclusive governance.

We are currently reforming our judicial, criminal and criminal procedure codes, as well as the referendum law and the law on the constitutional court. We are well aware that the rule of law can be safeguarded only by having an effective, independent and corruption-free judiciary. In that context, we highly appreciate the important role of the European Court of Human Rights, the jurisprudence of which plays an essential role in enhancing the quality of justice in our country. Based on the jurisprudence of the European Court, we have implemented a number of legislative reforms and improved legal practices. Those are important steps for consolidation of human rights protection in our country. Those efforts have not gone unnoticed.

The Republic of Armenia is a leader among Council of Europe member States in terms of proper and consistent implementation of the judgments of the European Court. We are convinced that proper protection of human rights and consolidation of democratic values cannot be effective without a relentless fight against corruption. The fight against corruption must be prioritised at all social and political layers. Armenia is contemplating a new toolkit in that respect. In 2017, the Armenian Parliament unanimously adopted a number of laws that create the first ever national entity for the prevention of corruption, in line with all international standards. The entity will become effective in 2018, and our parliament will elect its members.

The anti-corruption package resulted in the adoption of a law on whistle-blowing and the protection of whistle-blowers. We have also criminalised illicit enrichment. We are determined and committed to continuing our systemic and persistent everyday efforts to eliminate the evil of corruption.

Since accession to the Council of Europe, our country has taken on the profound responsibility of honouring our obligations and respecting our collective commitment to the fundamental values of this Organisation. However, in recent years, we have witnessed an unfortunate and unprecedented crisis of values in this Organisation due to the irresponsible conduct of some MPs who have acted contrary to the core mission of the Council of Europe and inflicted a heavy blow on the Organisation's reputation. The greater family of the Council of Europe has faced perhaps the most serious challenge since its foundation, as cases of Assembly members being bribed and resulting dishonest voting were exposed.

Since 2014, a number of politically biased and egregious reports and resolutions triggered a sharp change in the attitudes of Armenian society towards this Assembly. However, we hope that such corrupt practices are short-lived. Eventually, they will rise to the surface, rendering the resolutions thus adopted unnecessary and discrediting the individuals and powers responsible. I am convinced that the report of the independent inquiry body looking into the exposed instances of corruption will eradicate those defective practices and help to strengthen member States' trust in our Organisation.

On accession to the Council of Europe, Armenia undertook a commitment to pursue efforts to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means only and to use its influence over Artsakh to foster a solution to the conflict. Although the Council of Europe is not a conflict resolution platform, I believe that it is appropriate briefly to touch on the issue in light of our aforementioned commitment.

Exactly 30 years ago, on the surface everything seemed calm and peaceful in Artsakh. However, the surface image was deceptive. We had never accepted Stalin's decision to annex Artsakh to Azerbaijan. Throughout those years, the people of Artsakh were extremely anxious, because the Baku authorities did their best to drive Armenians from their historic cradle. According to the 1926 census, Armenians accounted for over 90% of Artsakh's population. As a consequence of Baku's policies, by 1988 the percentage had declined to just 77% of the population. I was among the Artsakhis who were worried about those developments.

In February 1988, the Artsakhis rose against Baku's policies and tried to exercise, by peaceful means, the Artsakh people's right to self-determination. I was at the forefront of the uprising. The Parliament of Artsakh took the decision and people went out to join peaceful rallies. Azerbaijan's reaction was not simply negative; it was to massacre Armenians living in the town of Sumgait, hundreds of kilometres away from Artsakh. That was an act of revenge against Armenians for the decision adopted by Artsakh. On one side of the scale were the parliament's decision and peaceful demonstrations while on the other side were violence and massacres. Everyone dealing with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must clearly comprehend that fact.

All attempts to put the parties to the conflict on an equal footing are inherently futile. Such an equation is nothing but false impartiality. It represents an equal sign between the perpetrators of the Sumgait massacre and their victims. On 27 February, we will commemorate the victims of the Sumgait massacre. Massacre went on to become state policy, as Azerbaijan unleashed a war aimed at the complete annihilation of the Armenian population of Artsakh. Given the deficit of justice and the threat of extermination, Artsakh had no choice but to resort to self-defence. Yet again, I was at the forefront of that and I have never had the slightest regret about the choice that I made then.

The time is ripe for resolution of this conflict. That requires strict respect for the established cease-fire regime and the honouring of all the agreements reached in the past. Settlement must be peaceful and must overcome the deficit of justice. No matter where I find myself, I will always be at the forefront of this matter. The parties should assume joint responsibility for the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and find a compromise, middle-ground settlement. The negotiation process under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs is the only internationally agreed format for the resolution of the conflict. The international community, including the Council of Europe, has reiterated its support for this format on numerous occasions.

The commitment undertaken by Armenia and Azerbaijan requires a joint and concerted effort of all the parties to the conflict. However, Azerbaijan is obviously not ready for that. The aggression that Azerbaijan unleashed against Artsakh in April 2016 was characterised by egregious violations of international humanitarian law against peaceful civilians and prisoners of war. It struck a heavy blow against the negotiation process by reawakening dreadful memories of the Sumgait massacres.

Unfortunately, this Assembly has at times allowed developments that turned a blind eye to the aforementioned facts, following those who are not interested in the peaceful settlement of the conflict. I call on all members of this Assembly to comprehend the potential negative consequences of careless or biased language for the fragile security in Artsakh.

Facing a permanent threat of war, Artsakh continues to build democracy and to promote respect for human rights. In all those initiatives, Armenia will provide full support to Artsakh. Armenia will tenaciously defend the rights and interest of Artsakh and help to strengthen Artsakh's security. As the Secretary General of the Council of Europe noted, there must be no grey areas in Europe in the protection of human rights. I hope that in the not-too-distant future this Organisation too will stand by the side of Artsakh, with all its expertise. A person living in Artsakh deserves that. The people of Artsakh have long earned that right.

The protection of human rights is a priority for the Artsakh Government. As for the fundamental documents of the Council of Europe, Artsakh has unilaterally subscribed to the European Convention on Human Rights and has undertaken to implement it fully. Commendably, Nagorno-Karabakh has achieved all this on its own, without tangible support from any international organisation. That proves once again that, in Artsakh, respect for and protection of human rights are not mere words but a conscious and determined choice. Artsakh cannot stay out of international processes simply because Azerbaijan is opposed to it. The authorities of Azerbaijan commit flagrant violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, not least in the criminal prosecution of opposition figures and even their abduction from another country's territory.

That brings me back to the work of the European Court of Human Rights. The ECHR has examined applications by Azerbaijani citizens that relate to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. I understand that the ECHR has taken up this issue with the sole purpose of safeguarding human rights throughout Europe. Nevertheless, the political language and assessments in the decisions of the ECHR can have a direct negative impact on the negotiation process. Therefore, it is necessary for the ECHR to exercise extreme caution in its assessment and to avoid political language.

Distinguished members of the Assembly, our national economies are more vulnerable than ever in the face of present-day global challenges. As a result, welfare and prosperity are at the centre of public attention. The challenging realities in our region in turn undermine the potential for economic growth. Therefore, we aspire to make the best use of all available resources, including the opportunities available to us through integration structures. Five years ago, in 2013, shortly after Armenia's decision to accede to the Eurasian Economic Union, many people, including a number in this Assembly, expressed scepticism towards Armenia. However, Armenia proved her ability to combine engagement in different integration structures and even to serve as a role model for co-operation. On this day two months ago, on 24 November, on the margins of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels, Armenia and the European Union concluded a comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement that contemplates a completely new quality of engagement. Armenia's fully fledged integration into the Eurasian Economic Union was not an obstacle to that in any way.

Today, we actively continue to extend our international engagement in various other directions. The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie is a case in point. It is, for us, a unique platform for engagement in language and culture and the promotion of human rights. Armenia will host the 17th summit of la Francophonie in October 2018 in Yerevan. The motto of the summit will be *vivre ensemble*, living together, and a pact with the same name will be adopted to strengthen human rights and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. For us, it is not simply a motto. The Armenian nation knows the price of hate speech, intolerance and discrimination, and we fight against these practices on all possible platforms.

Next year, we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Council of Europe. It is a crucial landmark for our greater family, which has been fighting for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Europe for almost seven decades. An Organisation created by only 10 States now unites 47 States of the European family with a population of 820 million. I consider this to be an enormous achievement that should be cherished. No effort should be spared in building a positive agenda and further enhancing the role and significance of the Organisation. The mission of the Council of Europe extends beyond that, however. The Organisation has a great role to play in political and civilizational terms. I believe that the Organisation needs a further stimulus in redefining its role and significance in the Europe-wide political architecture.

The contemporary mechanism and arrangements are truly wanted by our societies to increase this Organisation's effectiveness. For quite some time now, we have been closely following and have kept at the centre of our attention the commendable process of reforms initiated at the Council of Europe. Armenia supports the idea of convening a fourth summit of the heads of State and government of the Council of Europe. I believe that it will be a good opportunity to identify the most pressing problems and issues of our continent and revisiting the vision of a stronger and more inclusive Europe. I am confident that the founders of

the Council of Europe would have been proud of uniting 47 European countries under one roof. This is an achievement whose importance should not be underestimated. This unity needs continuous support from all of us.

Armenia stands ready for the persistent journey towards a more mature form of engagement and co-operation. Armenia stands ready to contribute by all means at its disposal to the success of the Council of Europe, our shared home of democracy and the rule of law.

Mr Michele NICOLETTI (Italy, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Sargsyan, for your interesting address. Members of the Assembly have questions for you. I remind them that questions must be limited to 30 seconds. Colleagues should ask questions and not make speeches. First, I call Ms Schou, who will speak on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Ms Ingjerd SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD): Thank you, President Sargsyan, for visiting the Council. The 10-year term of your presidency is coming to an end. Summarising these years, what have been Armenia's major achievements as regards its European agenda, bearing in mind the recent agreement signed between Armenia and the European Union, which you mentioned in your speech?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: I should note that, in the course of the past 10 years, Armenia has registered serious achievements on the bilateral track with the European nations as well as in a multilateral setting. As I mentioned, in both 2016 and 2017 the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly co-rapporteurs, in their report, recognised the progress made by Armenia. I do not want to speak for too long, so I will illustrate it with just one example. In 2008, when I was elected as President of the Republic of Armenia, we were facing serious challenges and relations were tense with the Council of Europe. Even the threat of sanctions was heard, and now, 10 years later, we are talking about the achievements of Armenia.

As for our relationship with the European Union, as I mentioned, just two months ago, on 24 November, we and the European Union concluded a new comprehensive agreement, which is opening up large horizons for Armenia. We consider ourselves to be Europeans, regardless of whether Europeans consider us to be such. Our co-operation with European nations and structures stems from our conviction and nobody is imposing it on us.

Ms Doris BARNETT (Germany, SOC): Talks with representatives of your country, as well as of Azerbaijan, have shown that both sides would like to see an end to the conflict that has been dragging on for the past 26 years. The whole package and individual steps do not diverge too far from one another. We stand for dialogue and reconciliation; what can we do to assist you, as the president, as well as the Parliament of Armenia, to try to resolve the conflict to spare people further suffering and to guarantee a rosier future?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: Thank you for your question. Indeed, we and the Azerbaijanis would like this conflict to end as soon as possible, but the problem is that there is a huge difference between those two desires. You ask what you can do and what the international community can do, and I believe that the main obstacle is Azerbaijan's maximalist and unrealistic expectations vis-à-vis the outcome of the negotiation. If the international community could help Azerbaijan rid itself of those illusions and arrive at a realistic juncture, we could achieve great success in a short time. Indeed, this conflict is an obstacle to the development of our nations. It takes away human lives, it inflicts great financial and material loss, and there is truly a need for this conflict to be resolved.

The negotiations are also hindered by the unfortunate fact that the agreements are not carried out. As you know, in 2016 Azerbaijan unleashed a large-scale military operation with the aim of returning Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan by use of force. Since then, we have had meetings in Vienna and St Petersburg, followed by meetings in Geneva, and in the course of these meetings – in the first two at least – high-level officials were represented. Mediators from the co-chair countries were there and we agreed that the best way to continue the negotiation was to build some elements of trust. In that sense, we decided to create an international mechanism to investigate violations of the cease-fire, and in some way to widen the mandate of the personal representative of the OSCE chairmanship-in-office, and to give the personal representative additional tools for de-escalation.

Unfortunately, that did not materialise, because immediately after those meetings, Azerbaijan's highest officials uttered statements saying that these were not their words but those of the co-chairs, and that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a domestic matter for Azerbaijan. Under those circumstances, to anticipate a swift resolution or intensive progress in the negotiation would be unrealistic. Turning to your question, I would like to say that our appeal to all of us is to get the parties to be realistic.

Mr Yıldırım Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ (Turkey, EC): Mr President, although there was a protocol between Armenia and Turkey, I recall it not being on anyone's agenda. Does this mean that the stagnation in Armenian-Turkish relations will continue in the foreseeable future? Is it possible for Armenia to act in any way that will show its intentions to normalise its relations in the region after the presidential elections in your country in March?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: We do not really understand very well the demand by the Turkish side to do something. In 2008, after I got elected, I initiated publicising the Armenian-Turkish talks, the result of which was a set of meetings between me and the President of Turkey. The negotiations continued intensively, and in Switzerland in the presence of the foreign affairs ministers of permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations, we signed two documents on the establishment of relations between Armenia and Turkey. Before the launch of the negotiations, those documents very clearly stated – and they still do state – that these relations are to be established without any preconditions. Unfortunately, after signing the protocols the Turkish side has constantly tried – to date, it is in fact still trying – to come up with preconditions.

In our international experience, we have not come across similar examples. All terms are negotiated before a deal is signed. After a document is signed, basic morality requires compliance with the requirements of the document. Nine years down the road, we keep hearing again from the Turkish side about the need to allegedly take some steps. Should the establishment of relations between countries require some gestures, some concessions? The document clearly states that relations are to be established, after which all of the existing wrinkles between the two countries should be discussed. But the Turkish side, let me reiterate, is coming up with preconditions. We never can accept any preconditions.

Turkey is a powerful state. Indeed, Turkey has enormous potential, and Armenia's potential is not to be compared with that of Turkey. But that does not mean that Turkey should speak from a position of power or in the language of preconditions. If that were the case, there are countries much more powerful than Turkey in terms of population and economy, and those powerful States would speak with Turkey from a position of power or in the language of preconditions. The Turkish authorities and the Turkish people would never accept such an attitude. Similarly, we do not accept such an attitude. It would simply be highly desirable, irrespective of the fact that these protocols will, in the near future, sometime before the spring, be voided by Armenia because they are pointless. I believe it would be appropriate and correct for the Turkish side – to maintain the fragile stability in the region – to give up on its biased position of unequivocal support for Azerbaijan.

I remind you that during the hostilities in 2016, Turkey was the only country in the world that expressed support for the military action. In four days, Turkey's President and Prime Minister issued five statements in support and in defence of Azerbaijan. What can we do under these circumstances? It would be an insult for our people to make one-sided concessions for establishing relations.

Ms Melisa RODRÍGUEZ HERNÁNDEZ (Spain, ALDE): Going beyond theory and talking about the association agreement between Europe and Armenia, what key measures have been taken so far in combating corruption, violence and crime, and against terrorism? Talking about the current agreement, which we think will be more ambitious, what is the difference between this and the previous one? What are the key elements which are more ambitious and what elements are there in this agreement which will make it a reality?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: In my speech, I addressed the efforts that we have made in Armenia towards eradicating corruption, and I ought to say that unfortunately our efforts have not borne too great results. This despicable phenomenon exists in Armenia, as in other countries. As I said, last year we enacted a law to create a corruption prevention commission. This legislation is fully in line with European best standards. Members of the commission are to be elected by the Armenian Parliament after 9 April, once the amended constitution provisions come into full force.

As I said, we adopted a law on whistle-blowing and the protection of whistle-blowers. We have criminalised illicit enrichment, and, if my memory is correct, nearly 500 Armenian officials will be required to submit declarations of their assets and income. For a country as small as Armenia, that is a huge number. Armenia's vibrant civil society is making a contribution to exposing, solving and preventing such crimes.

On the issue of punishment, every year the number of criminal cases initiated and judgments pronounced on corruption offences multiplies several-fold. If you are asking me about general crime and criminality, in 2017 the serious crime rate in Armenia reduced by about 20%. That includes murder and other serious crimes. Armenia's law enforcement system is fighting criminality intensely.

On your question about the differences between this agreement with the European Union and the previous one, there are many more opportunities in this agreement. We agreed an action plan with the European Union, and the European Union and the Council of Europe have supported us in the reform process by providing expert advice and technical assistance. The current agreement – the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement – is a legal document that needs to be ratified by the Armenian Parliament and the national parliaments of the remaining 27 European Union member States. CEPA covers all walks of life, and is legally binding. We are confident that our co-operation with the European Union will deepen, because we co-operate with the European organisations not to show people that we are co-operating but because we consider ourselves bearers of the European value system.

Mr Georgios PSYCHOGIOS (Greece, UEL): First, what impact will the transition to a parliamentary system have on the rule of law and the protection of human rights? Secondly, what impact will the privatisation and liberalisation policies in the new constitution have, given that neoliberal policies, wherever they have been applied, have increased inequality and led to the violation of socioeconomic rights? What countermeasures will the government take in that context?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: I believe that the transition to a parliamentary form of government is a logical next step in the reforms under way in Armenia. We are profoundly convinced that parliamentary government ensures inclusive, transparent governance, and is more in line with our vision for the consolidation of democracy. I did not get the second part of your question. We believe that the parliamentary form of government will help to develop democracy and human rights protection in our country. It will have a great impact on civil society, and will enable greater accountability and closer co-operation with our European partners.

Mr Bernard FOURNIER (France, EPP/CD)*: How is Armenia going to reconcile its membership of the eastern partnership of the European Union with its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union? What is the current state of relations between Armenia and the Russian Federation?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: I think we are already reconciling the two. We have no doubt that, by acceding to various integration structures, one can certainly move forward confidently. Since 2009-10, we have been negotiating a new agreement with the European Union. That period overlapped with our negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union. Officials in the Eurasian Economic Union and officials in the European Union clearly knew that we were negotiating with both integration structures. In the initial phase, both welcomed our position, but there came a time when our colleagues in the European Union said that membership of the two integration structures was irreconcilable, so we were forced to make a decision to accede to the Eurasian Economic Union, because 1 000 strings attach Armenia's economy to the economies of the Eurasian Economic Union member States. We have many centuries of history together, and we have historical friendships. The vast majority – up to 80% – of Armenia's citizens support the notion of closer co-operation with the Eurasian Economic Union.

To the credit of European Union officials, much has changed in their way of thinking over time. By the time of the eastern partnership's Riga Summit, it was decided to have a differentiated approach. It was decided that it is truly possible to reconcile membership of the different integration structures. We then launched intensive talks, and as you see we arrived at the right destination. On 24 November, we signed an agreement with the European Union, too.

I believe that reconciliation requires something very simple: one needs to be candid with one's partners. One must not conceal the negotiation process and the undertakings. If in one integration process you have commitments that do not contradict your commitments under another document, why not reconcile them? We

had a similar experience with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, as a member of which we co-operate with NATO. This history dates back years. I believe that in future there will be close co-operation between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union. The future is all about that co-operation. The problems that currently exist, or that may emerge tomorrow, are no good for development. These problems are absorbing enormous resources that could be diverted towards bettering people's lives.

Mr Samad SEYIDOV (Azerbaijan, EC): You said that you were a leader in the war against Azerbaijan. Why did you not mention the Khojaly massacre, in which approximately 800 kids, elderly people and women were killed by Armenians? Why did you not mention the ethnic cleansing – 100% in Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding regions? And now you try to mislead the international community. How can you organise your policy if you are not ready to implement what the resolutions of this Organisation and other organisations – the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union and all international organisations – have said about the occupation of Azerbaijani territories? You are not ready to accept anyone from this Organisation. Is this how Armenian goes about integration?

Mr Serzh SARGSYAN (President of Armenia)*: I first ask you to calm down and be cooler, and not to distort my words. I did not announce that I was a war leader – I did not have that honour. I was a participant in the just struggle of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. Why did I not mention the incidents in Khojaly, which you call a genocide? It was for the simple reason that immediately after those painful events, Ayaz Mutallibov, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, stated, in great detail and an informed way, facts that clearly showed who actually organised and carried out those massacres.

Genocide is not a good thing. Surviving a genocide is not an honour; it is a suffering. I very much regret the trend in Azerbaijan to want whatever the Armenians have had. This is impermissible. Why do you need to call something that never occurred – and, in particular, that was not carried out by the Armenians – a genocide?

As to those international organisations, the commitments we assumed and our fulfilment of them, you are simply wrong. There is no international organisation that would have adopted a decision that would have been rejected by Armenia. You tried to recall the United Nations Security Council resolutions. My advice to you, when you go into a topic, would be to really go into it and study it. The world knows that the United Nations Security Council has never discussed the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1993, the United Nations Security Council adopted four resolutions on stopping hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh area. After each resolution, Azerbaijan said it would not stop the fighting. It attempted new offensives and attacks, but as usual it suffered losses. In those four resolutions, the only commitment on Armenia was to use its reputation, authority and influence to get the hostilities to stop. To the credit of the then Government of Armenia, we honoured this one commitment. Azerbaijan – the one responsible for the hostilities – failed to stop the fighting.

As you know, in 1994, the cease-fire agreement was signed, but it was signed under the influence of other factors, not the United Nations Security Council resolution. Unfortunately, the provisions of that cease-fire agreement are not being honoured. The agreement clearly states that the hostilities need to stop, and for a political solution, an extensive process of talks must be launched. As your own words clearly illustrate, you want the most in this process of negotiation – you want what is impossible. You want to return Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, xenophobia in Azerbaijan has gone so far that you are explicitly saying that you need Karabakh, but without the Armenians. That is impossible. It is never going to happen.

The essence of the struggle of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh is very simple. It is a struggle for liberty and self-determination, and I am sure that that struggle cannot have anything but a positive outcome.

Mr Michele NICOLETTI (Italy, SOC, President of the Assembly): We must now conclude the questions to Mr Sargsyan. On behalf of the Assembly, I thank you most warmly, Mr President, for your address and the answers given to the questions.