

ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF GREECE

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The Number and Distribution

Due to various factors the size of the Armenian community in Greece fluctuated periodically in the 20th century. In 1923 it reached its peak (120,000 people), which was related to mass migration of thousands of Armenians to Greece due to earlier massacres of Armenians in late 19th century, the Armenian Genocide in early 20th century and Greco-Turkish War (1919–22).

However, later an outflow of Armenian population from Greece was observed both to Soviet Armenia and more developed European countries, as well as USA.

The reason for migration to Soviet Armenia was the Repatriation Policy, which was embraced enthusiastically and actively by the Armenian community in Greece. In 1946 alone, about 5,000 Armenians immigrated to Armenia from Greece [1]. Total 60,000 Armenians residing in Greece made their way to Soviet Armenia during the years of Great Repatriation in 1924-27, 1932-33 and 1946-47 [2].

The migration of Greek Armenians to more developed European countries and USA was mostly caused by socio-economic factors. Currently, although Greece is a member of the European Union, its econ-

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omy is not among the best ones in Europe. One manifestations of this was the recent economic crisis in Greece, which also lead to a government crisis. Consequently, members of the Armenian community in Greece even now tend to migrate to more developed European countries and USA in expectation of a wealthier and safer life.

In parallel to this, after Armenia gained independence, in the last 20 years due to war, earthquake, blockade and other difficulties emigration of large numbers of Armenians from the country is directed to various destinations, including Greece. During the last two decades the number of Armenians who migrated to Greece constituted about 30-40,000¹. According to some data, the migration from Armenia to Greece resulted in about sevenfold increase of the local Armenian community, reaching 70-80,000 people up from 12-13,000².

Armenian community of Greece is spread throughout Greece. However, the cities with the largest Armenian populations are Athens and Thessaloniki, where the numbers of Armenians are 10,000 and 11,500, respectively.

Current Characteristics of the Community

As one of the traditional diaspora communities, the Armenian community of Greece incorporates almost the whole rich gamut and variety of Armenian cultural, spiritual, public and political life. Almost all political, spiritual and social layers of Armenianness are present here along with their structures. The internal diversity of the Armenian community in Greece can be seen mostly in three dimensions – social, political and spiritual.

¹ *Badalyan Arevik*, Greek Armenian Community: the struggle continues

<http://arevik.wordpress.com/2010/06/27/greek-armenian-community-the-struggle-continues/>

² Հունաստանի հայ համայնքը պատրաստվում է Հայաստանի նախագահի հետ հանդիպմանը <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/2279357.html>

In the social dimension the internal diversity factor of the Armenian community of Greece is in its division into traditional and modern Diasporas. The traditional diaspora consists of Armenians that migrated to Greece because of the Armenian Genocide, or before it. The modern diaspora includes those who migrated from Armenia to Greece starting from 1990s. Interestingly enough, the modern diaspora exceeds the traditional one in numbers, with the traditional diaspora constituting around 13-15,000 people, while the rest are the representatives of the modern diaspora. The traditional diaspora tends to decrease in numbers, whereas the modern diaspora grows larger, as the population emigration from Armenia to Greece continues, though not at the same high rates as it used to be.

In the political dimension, two out of the three traditional Armenian parties function in Greece - Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and Armenian Democratic Liberal Party (Ramgavar, ADL). The activities of these two parties ensure the ideological and political diversity in the Armenian community of Greece, as ARF is a socialist party, while ADL is a liberal one. The Armenian National Committee of Greece (the Hay Tad Committee) of the ARF has its own unique place in the community as a political organization.

In the spiritual dimension, although vast majority of Greco-Armenians are adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church, there are also some Catholics and Evangelicals coexisting with them, though in small numbers. Adherents of each of these smaller confessions number in few hundreds.

Currently there are 10 Armenian Apostolic and two of each Catholic and Evangelical churches in the Armenian community of Greece. In addition to Athens, the Armenians of the Apostolic Church

are spread around in other cities and towns of Greece, while Armenian Catholics and Evangelicals are mainly concentrated in Athens.

The relations between Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical communities are mostly built upon tolerance and cooperation. At the very least, no confessional based conflicts had been known so far.

Community Structures

The viability of the Armenian community in Greece is founded on its organized nature, which is ensured through activities of community structures. In addition the traditional parties and three Armenian Churches (Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical) mentioned above, there are many other structures and organizations.

The leading structures of the community are the Armenian (National) Prelacy and the National Administration. The Prelacy represents the Armenian community before the Greek government.

Other organized structures can be divided by their origin in two groups:

- *Local branches of pan-Armenian organizations.* Pan-national organizations, such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), Homenetmen (Armenian General Union of Body Culture), Hamazkayin Armenian Cultural and Educational Society (Hamazkayin), Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, and others have their branches in Greece.
- *Community organizations.* Along with the local branches of pan-Armenian structures, there are also various organizations of community origin, among which the following can be highlighted:

1. *Information structures.* Armenian information structures in Greece consist of printed and electronic mass media. Printed media

include Azat Or daily, Nor Ashkhar weekly, Hayastan, and other periodicals.

With the technological progress, especially wide penetration and use of internet, printed periodicals are now supplemented by electronic media and internet sites. In addition to Armenian Apostolic Church Diocese of Greece website (www.armchurch.gr), there are also community websites (www.armeniancommunity.gr, www.armenika.gr).

Printed and electronic media reflect the life of the Armenian community in Greece, other diaspora communities and Armenia, as well as cover pan-national events.

2. *Educational institutions.* Armenian educational institutions have traditionally functioned and continue to function in the Armenian community of Greece. Among them Levon and Sophia Hagopian, Zavarian, Kalpakian schools stand out.

3. *Cultural structures.* There are some prominent cultural structures, such as the Hayastan Centre, Araks Cultural Union, etc.

4. *Social structures.* The activities of Yerevan Union are well-known as a social structure that is involved in solving everyday life issues of Armenian military cadets studying in military academies of Greece. The Hayastan Centre also implements vigorous public activities in addition to its cultural activities.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Armenian community of Greece comes under impact of both positive and negative factors, as it is the case with many other diaspora communities. The positive factors are those contributing to strengthening the community and boosting its viability. The negative factors weaken the community.

The following negative factors and challenges are currently present in the Greco-Armenian community's life:

1. *The economic crisis*, which prompts migration of Armenians out of the country.
2. *Diocese problem*, the issue of affiliation of the Armenian Apostolic Church Diocese of Greece, i.e. whether it belongs to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin or Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia. Established in 1920, the Diocese of Greece initially was subordinated to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. However, in 1958 it transferred under jurisdiction of Antelias Catholicosate. Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin did not put up with this situation and established its own diocesan structure. These two structures currently continue to coexist and claim leadership of the community. Although this circumstance produces unwholesome competition, to date it has not caused strife in the community.
3. *The language problem*. Although there is a number of Armenian educational institutions in Greece, as with the other diaspora communities the problem of preserving the language in the Greco-Armenian community remains a serious one [3], which can be inferred, for example, by the fact that the community websites (www.armeniancommunity.gr, www.armenika.gr) are in Greek language only. A sizable part of Armenians in Greece do not speak their mother tongue. The process of losing the national attributes, including the language, progresses fast in the Armenian community of Greece.

The Republic of Armenia can be considered a positive, energizing factor for the community life of Greco-Armenians. Armenia's dec-

laration of independence in 1991, establishment of diplomatic relations between Greece and Armenia, opening the Armenian Embassy in Greece (1992) gave a momentum to the viability and vivacity of the Armenian community in Greece. The community tangibly felt it was backed by the motherland state. The influence of this factor increased with establishment of the Ministry of Diaspora (2008) in the Armenian government.

The impact of the Republic of Armenia on Armenian community of Greece is related to the activities of the Armenian Embassy, Ministry of Diaspora, visits of the Armenian and Artsakh presidents and other high-ranking officials, and many more. These factors positively influence the community as follows:

- *Energizing the community life.* The Armenian Embassy provides impetus to the community life by organizing and implementing various events. For example, the event dedicated to the 20th anniversary of Armenian Army on January 26, 2012 was quite noteworthy¹.
- *Strengthening the ties with motherland.* Armenia's independence and establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Greece strengthened the ties between Armenian community of Greece and the motherland. For instance, the Greco-Armenian community is actively involved and participates in "Ari Tun" Program organized by RoA Ministry of Diaspora.
- *Coordinated and targeted assistance from Armenia.* As a state, the Republic of Armenia through its Ministry of Diaspora contributes in various manners to problem solutions in the Greco-Armenian community. In this respect preparation of textbooks for schools, training of the teachers and other activities are important.

¹ Հայոց բանակի կազմավորման տոնն Աթենքում <http://armchurch.gr/archive.php>

The Armenian community as a factor

As one of the traditional and well-organized communities, the Armenian community of Greece plays an important role for Armenia and Armeniacy, despite the difficulties. As an integral part of Armeniacy, the community contributes to the solution of pan-national problems through its activities, by making its potential available for achievement of the national goals. The preservation and development of this resource has a serious significance for the potential of Armeniacy.

The Armenian community of Greece is viewed as a factor in the following dimensions:

1. Political: The struggle for resolving the national problems [4] is an important aspect of the Armenian community in Greece as a political factor. The Armenian community in Greece conducts lobbying activities to contribute to the solution of these problems. The ARF Armenian National Committee is the main Armenian lobbyist structure in Greece. Thanks to its lobbying efforts, in 1996 the parliament of Greece adopted a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide. However, the struggle of Armenian community in Greece is not over with that, as long as Turkey does not recognize the Armenian Genocide and the issue of reparation is not resolved. This is the very direction that the Armenian community in Greece continues to struggle for. In particular, Armenians of Europe spare no effort to raise the issue of the Armenian Genocide recognition and condemnation [5]. Since Greece is an EU member, its stance has a key significance for Turkey's membership. The Armenian community actively works with the Greek authorities on this matter. It is a serious factor during the elections and political forces in Greece cannot ignore the community's stance with regard to various, including foreign policy issues¹.

¹ *Badalyan Arevik*, Greek Armenian Community: the struggle continues
<http://arevik.wordpress.com/2010/06/27/greek-armenian-community-the-struggle-continues/>

In September 2014 the Armenian community of Greece achieved another success in the cause of Armenian Genocide recognition and condemnation. The parliament of Greece adopted a law criminalizing the denial of the Armenian Genocide in the country¹.

The next important pan-national issue to solution of which the Armenian community in Greece contributes to, is the Artsakh problem. As far as it is possible, the Armenian community tries to facilitate the Karabakh conflict's peaceful resolution for the benefit of Armenians. In this respect, the protest rally against Azeri militancy and ambitions was noteworthy, which the Armenian community in Greece organized during the Azerbaijani president I. Aliyev's visit to Greece in 2009².

2. Economic: Despite the economic crisis, the community also actively participates in projects for assisting the motherland, mostly through activities of the local branch of Hayastan All-Armenian Fund. For example, during the 2011 Phoneathon the community donated about Euro 35,000 to the Fund³.

3. Civilizational: The Armenian community of Greece ensures the presence of Armenian civilization in Europe and particularly, in Greece through various cultural events. In this respect the exhibition of ancient Armenian books and graphic art dedicated to celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Armenian typography was a remarkable event organized on December 28, 2011 at the Armenian Embassy in Greece⁴.

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¹ Հունաստանը դարձավ ԵՄ 2-րդ երկիրը, որը քրեականացրեց Հայոց ցեղասպանության հերքումը, <http://www.mediamax.am/am/news/foreignpolicy/11549/>

² See: Azeri President met with angry Armenian protesters in Greece <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/world/news/28661/>

³ Hayastan All-Armenian Fund's 12th European Phoneathon raises 1.35 million euros <http://himnadram.org/index.php?id=23817&lang=1>

⁴ See: Exhibition marks 500th anniversary of Armenian typography <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2011/12/29/ingreecearmenianembassy/?sw>

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