

## **War of Words in Yerevan**

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Was Vardan Oskanian's faux pas a slip of the tongue or a shrewd political calculation?

Opposition leaders are calling for Armenia's foreign minister to resign after he dropped a resounding political clanger on national television.

In an interview with the A1+ channel, Vardan Oskanian described the region currently controlled by the Nagorny Karabakh army as "occupied" territory.

And triumphant political rivals wasted no time in claiming the remark betrayed the government's "defeatist" stance over the ongoing conflict.

From the Armenian viewpoint, the territories wrested away from Azerbaijan during the six-year conflict have always been described as "liberated" - an extension of the belief that they are historically Armenian.

But Oskanian's faux pas was immediately interpreted as a tacit admission that the Nagorny Karabakh army had illegally occupied land which is still internationally recognised as Azeri.

The foreign minister argued that he had simply meant territories "held" by Karabakhi troops - but the opposition had already seized the chance it had been waiting for.

Aram Sarkisian, leader of the Democratic Party of Armenia, said, "In the light of his recent statement, we consider that Vardan Oskanian can no longer carry out his duties as foreign minister and should be dismissed from office."

He added that statements of this kind could destabilise the situation in Armenia and provoke the Azeris into renewing hostilities. "[Oskanian] has put Armenia's sovereignty under threat," said Sarkisian.

Other opposition leaders agreed that the remark pointed towards a climb-down by Kocharian's government and even moves to return the "occupied" territories to Azerbaijan.

Sarkisian pointed out that this would leave Nagorny Karabakh completely exposed to attack, since these regions were the breakaway enclave's only guarantee of security. "By returning these territories, we would provide the enemy with a direct road to Stepanakert," he concluded.

The argument centres around seven regions - Lachin, Kelbadjzr, Agdam, Fizuli, Zangelan, Kubatly and Djebail. The most important of these are Lachin and Kelbadjar which provide a geographical corridor between Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh.

The future of these regions - and the thousands of Azeri refugees who fled their homes there during the fighting - depends on the outcome of the peace process which will be continued on June 15 in Geneva.

The Armenian foreign minister was quick to accuse the opposition of resorting to linguistic semantics when, in fact, Yerevan had no intention of making compromises.

"Usually I say these territories are 'held' or 'controlled' by us," said Oskanian. "In contrast to the patriotically minded Armenian parliamentarians, I find myself unable to succumb to temptation and describe these territories as 'liberated'. I have been dealing with this problem for eight years and no one has the right to give me lessons in patriotism."

The foreign minister insists that Armenia will only consider returning the territories if Nagorny Karabakh is granted acceptable political status. Yerevan, he said, was insisting on a "horizontal" relationship between Stepanakert and Baku but would not countenance political dependence.

Oskanian is also adamant that the final decision will lie with the Armenian people and the public will be invited to comment on any final resolution agreed by the two sides.

However, he has also told the Western media that it would be preferable to resolve the question of Nagorny Karabakh's political future on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis. A muddy definition of the enclave's exact status would give Azerbaijan a chance to save face whilst appeasing nationalist forces in Armenia.

Meanwhile, President Kocharian was quick to silence his critics who claimed that Oskanian had deliberately used the expression "occupied territories" in order to pave the way for future compromises.

On May 11, the Associated Press quoted Kocharian as saying, "Nagorny Karabakh was able to stand up against Azeri aggression and is today building a free and sovereign state."

But, while few people in Azerbaijan and Armenia are ready for compromise, Armenian opposition leaders say it will be a long time before the people get their say.

Babken Ararktsian, former speaker of the Armenian parliament, who retired in February 1998, said that Kocharian was eager to draw out the peace talks for another year in order to "ensure a favourable outcome to the 2003 presidential elections".

Ararktsian believes the peace talks are merely masking "a geopolitical reconstruction of the region which was agreed by Kocharian in 1997, when he visited Paris as Armenia's prime minister".

Certainly, the peace talks have taken their toll on personal relationships. When Kocharian was officially baptised in the early 1990s, it was Babken Ararktsian who was invited to be his godfather.

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