

## Starting positions of the Armenian lobby under US President D. Trump ARVAK Center comment, 26.11.2024<sup>1</sup>

On November 9, 2024, the Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), Aram Hambaryan, announced that 90% of the candidates supported by the Armenian organization received mandates in the US House of Representatives. This concerns about 80 politicians whose support the ANCA provided after a detailed review of their “*track record*” within the Armenian agenda. The organization operated with more than 40 criteria, such as these politicians’ participation in Armenian community events, their level of activity in holding Azerbaijan accountable for the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians, public statements in defense of Artsakh residents, their letters, votes on relevant pro-Armenian resolutions, and even past trips to Stepanakert.

According to Hambaryan, “*ANCA conducted this work wisely*” and achieved very impressive results. “*We were able to come out stronger than we entered [the election process]*”. Hambaryan particularly noted that the ANCA did not support any of the presidential candidates, instead focusing on creating “*political costs for those who step over the Armenian community and who condone the Genocide of Armenians*”.

Thus, Aram Hambaryan stated that during the last elections, the National Committee completely changed its strategy and, instead of supporting presidential candidates, it focused on creating a favorable background in both legislative chambers and, in fact, in the entourage and team of the future head of state.

It became officially known on November 4, 2024, that the ANCA preferred not to spend its resources on the presidential race when Hambaryan publicly announced that neither D. Trump nor K. Harris personally deserved systematic support from the ANCA or guidance for the Armenian electorate. Hambaryan directly stated that D. Trump, during whose first presidential term the 44-Day War in Artsakh occurred, did nothing to stop it, and K. Harris, as the Vice President of the United States, ignored the events of September 2023, during which Artsakh was finally occupied and subjected to ethnic cleansing. At that time, A. Hambaryan advised Armenian voters to follow their individual opinions and vote accordingly. Systematic support for one of the presidential candidates, at least at the public level, was excluded. As for the elections to the Congress and its Upper House, it turned out that the Committee did an exceptionally large amount of work and directed the preferences of Armenian voters in individual states.

According to the statements of the Armenian diaspora structures and Americanist experts from the Republic of Armenia, the new strategy was more than justified. The number of elected Senators and Congressmen from both parties who have taken on tacit commitments to support initiatives aimed at protecting the interests of Armenia, Artsakh refugees, and American Armenians allows the ANCA to gain more tangible levers of influence on Capitol Hill and, consequently, in the White House.

In addition, Armenian Americans can also count as an asset the significant circumstance that the ANCA's decision to systematically abstain from the presidential race forced D.

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 24.11.2024.

Trump to try to establish direct contact with Armenian centers and influential figures trusted by the National Committee and shaping sentiments in the Armenian Diaspora. In particular, on November 4, 2024, D. Trump called Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia Aram I, which should be interpreted as an attempt to gain the support of the spiritual leader ahead of the elections. The Cilician Armenian Catholicos is highly respected in the ANCA and is known for his connections with the Armenian party “Dashnaksutyun” (ARF) which still holds strong positions in the US Armenian diaspora. According to the press release of the Cilician Catholicosate, the conversation mainly revolved around the Artsakh issue and matters related to the return of Artsakh Armenians to their homeland. Therefore, it can be assumed that Aram I placed this issue at the forefront of his demands in exchange for supporting D. Trump. The Artsakh issue is currently the main topic on the agenda of the American Armenians and is decisive in shaping their positions regarding the election race.

It is noteworthy that on October 24, 2024, D. Trump posted on his social media page “X” a statement condemning Kamala Harris for inaction during the period when “*Armenian Christians were persecuted and forcibly displaced*”. In this post, he used the Armenian toponym “*Artsakh*”, while the campaign headquarters of K. Harris and her running mate, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, in their statement of September 23, 2024, in support of Armenians, referred to the region as “*Nagorno-Karabakh*”. However, shortly thereafter, Trump's post about Artsakh was deleted from his page, which apparently influenced the ANCA's final decision to withhold systematic support from the Republican candidate. Considering that, according to exit polls, D. Trump and K. Harris were “*neck and neck*” until election day, the Republican headquarters took urgent measures to gain the favor of Armenian voters.

According to US Armenian media, the votes of Armenians in several key states potentially had a decisive impact on the outcome of the presidential ballot. In this regard, Trump, who once again raised the issue of Artsakh in the last days, managed to secure their votes, while Harris' team did not make significant efforts on the “*Armenian track*”, being confident in their overwhelming victory due to the traditional, stable electorate.

Thus, an interesting configuration emerged where the ANCA left the work for the votes of ethnic Armenians on the presidential candidacy to D. Trump, achieving the initiative and maximum effort from him, while focusing on the congressional elections, which allowed the Committee to achieve success in forming a new core of pro-Armenian forces in both Houses.

Presumably, the ANCA's strategy has several reasons, including the need to publicly emphasize the Armenian diaspora's cool attitude towards K. Harris and D. Trump, as well as towards the US executive branch in general. It has become a tradition that American presidents absorb the public and financial resources of Armenian structures during the pre-election period and then forget their promises, citing domestic political circumstances and “*changed foreign policy realities*”. In this configuration, at least one of the presidential candidates, and the most odious one, publicly confirmed his interest in “*Armenian support*”, thereby strengthening the positions and authority of the Armenian diaspora in the US political field and confirming the commitment to keep the Artsakh issue on Washington's foreign policy agenda. However, it can be assumed that the main motive for the ANCA's change of strategy in refusing to support any presidential candidate was the Committee's

precaution, reasonably believing that both D. Trump and K. Harris would be weak presidents if elected. Given that the presidential elections have already taken place, this refers to the Republican candidate.

D. Trump is a personality who claims to be a strong, decisive, and uncompromising leader. However, in reality, behind these qualities hide an eccentricity that is the main reason for his weakness. His declared war on the cumbersome structure of American politics and economics and, if you will, the “*deep state*”, is unlikely to be a “*walk in the park*” for Trump. The system will fiercely resist Trump's radical decisions, boycotting them and even attempting to impeach him during his second presidential term. As Americans themselves predict, D. Trump would be incredibly strong as a presidential candidate, but as an incumbent president, his weakness will be evident. The Senate and the House of Representatives are different matters, where the configuration resulting from the elections may remain unchanged until the end of the term, and therefore it is extremely important for the Armenian diaspora to secure maximum influence and establish new connections here. Perhaps this is why the ANCA has preferred to fully concentrate on working with Capitol Hill, a more stable and predictable institution from a lobbying perspective.

Another critical component of the Armenian diaspora's success is the fact that D. Trump's list of candidates for key positions in the state apparatus includes politicians with a pronounced “*pro-Armenian background*”. Naturally, Armenian diaspora structures cannot be involved in these future appointments, but it is important to note that the ANCA once shaped these politicians' corresponding approaches to Armenian issues and involved them in working in Armenian interests on Capitol Hill.

This refers primarily to Marco Rubio, the current Senator from Florida, whom D. Trump has already announced as Secretary of State in the new administration. Of Cuban origin, M. Rubio has distinguished himself by participating in several legislative initiatives aimed at curbing Azerbaijan's aggressive policy towards Armenians and imposing strict sanctions against Baku. As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on September 27, 2022, M. Rubio, together with the Committee's Chairman, Democrat Robert Menendez, introduced a bipartisan legislative initiative condemning Azerbaijan's recent aggression against Armenia and calling for the immediate cessation of US security assistance to Azerbaijan, as well as the release of Armenian prisoners of war and the imposition of sanctions for committing war crimes. In November 2023, Marco Rubio supported the US Senate's “*Armenia Protection Act*”, which prohibits US military-technical assistance to Azerbaijan. At that time, Rubio stated that “*American taxpayer money should not go to Azerbaijan, a country that has brought instability to the region*”.

Another prominent pro-Armenian figure in Trump's inner circle is Tulsi Gabbard, a lieutenant colonel in the US Army Reserve and a former Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii (2013–2021). Trump has nominated her for the position of Director of National Intelligence, which includes the CIA, FBI, and other intelligence agencies. T. Gabbard's track record in pro-Armenian activities is impressive. During her time in Congress, T. Gabbard voted for all pro-Armenian bills, consistently condemned Azerbaijan's attacks on Artsakh and Armenia, and repeatedly spoke out in support of the Artsakh Armenians' right to freedom and sovereignty. In 2017, T. Gabbard visited Yerevan as part of a pan-Armenian

forum organized by the ANCA, and expressed a desire to also visit Stepanakert, despite warnings from the US Ambassador to Armenia about an expected diplomatic scandal with Baku. As a result of this visit and her speech in the Parliament of the Republic of Artsakh, the congresswoman was included in Azerbaijan's so-called “*blacklist*” banning her from visiting the country. According to media reports, Gabbard is also a staunch supporter of toughening US policy toward Turkey, which she considers a “*source of funding for global terrorism*”.

Finally, the third key figure in Trump's team with marked sympathies for Armenians is entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, an ethnic Indian. Trump plans to appoint him, along with Elon Musk, as the head of the future “Department of Government Efficiency”, which will essentially become the new US president’s main tool for reviewing and reforming the state management system and optimizing the cumbersome state apparatus. V. Ramaswamy actively engaged in the process of defending Armenian interests, primarily those of Artsakh, during the presidential race when he ran as a Republican candidate, thereby gaining wide access to the media. In particular, in his interviews with authoritative American journalists Piers Morgan, Tucker Carlson, and others, V. Ramaswamy described Baku's actions in Artsakh as “*atrocities*” and “*state crimes*”. He also widely criticized the US's passive reaction to the persecution of Armenian Christians. Ramaswamy repeatedly stated that if elected president of the United States, he intends to completely change US policy toward Azerbaijan, which, among other things, plunged the South Caucasus region into war and organized ethnic cleansing against autochthonous Armenians with American taxpayer money.

Given the above, it should be noted that the ANCA has optimal starting positions for effective work with Trump's immediate entourage, which will take several key positions in the US state apparatus in January 2025. Nevertheless, due to few significant factors, one should not have excessive expectations about the future results of this work.

**First.** It should be taken into account the traditional tendency in the USA, where the thinking and views of politicians often undergo a metamorphosis after they take a place in the executive branch, gain access to confidential information, and become part of the “system”.

**Second.** Even if we consider that politicians in Trump's entourage have and will continue to have open sympathies for Armenians, it is unclear how they will practically combine these sentiments with steps that contradict Armenian interests. For example, Marco Rubio, like Donald Trump himself, is a staunch supporter of comprehensive support for Israel, including the most radical steps towards Iran. Such a position fundamentally contradicts Armenia's security interests. Additionally, the Jewish lobby interacting with Rubio advocates for Washington's support for Azerbaijan, which inherently weakens Yerevan's positions in the US foreign policy agenda. Or the question arises, what position will Tulsi Gabbard and her department take regarding Turkey if the Pentagon and the US military-industrial complex lobby the White House and the State Department for deepening Washington's allied relations with Ankara? These are questions that, obviously, neither D. Trump nor his team, consisting of representatives from politically and ideologically diversified circles, have answers to yet.

**Third.** It should be understood that despite its weight in the US domestic political field, the ANCA cannot take on the role of a full-fledged partner of the US executive branch and, moreover, demand the fulfillment of certain obligations within the framework of the “Armenian Agenda”. ANCA cannot and does not have the authority to formulate a full-fledged agenda for interaction with the White House, the State Department, and other departments without the support of Yerevan. The National Committee's demands on the same Artsakh issue cannot initially be considered appropriate for consideration by the US executive branch if the Republic of Armenia, as an international entity, avoids this agenda itself. At present, official Yerevan has essentially frozen its interaction with the ANCA and completely distanced itself from joint work in the US domestic policy field, and if these two sides do not reach a consensus and synchronize goals and actions in the near future, the window of opportunity for potential positive changes within the “Armenian Agenda” will quickly be lost.

In essence, the “Armenian Agenda” itself is not formulated, and the expectations of the Armenian community in the USA for positive steps by the future administration toward Armenia are abstract, given the discord and uncertainty of the goals pursued by the Armenian diaspora structures and official Yerevan.

Summarizing the above, it should be noted once again that the preliminary results of the American elections turned out to be unexpectedly successful for Armenians. However, the question is how effectively these developed assets will be used. In the case of consistent participation by official Yerevan in the political capitalization of pro-Armenian sentiments in Trump's entourage and in both houses of Congress, Armenia can gain additional tools to strengthen its security and sovereignty, as well as to formulate its vision for the future of Artsakh Armenians. Otherwise, the victory of Armenian diaspora structures will be ephemeral and will not affect Yerevan's complex and challenging position in the region. In such a scenario, the Armenian National Committee of America will also fundamentally and possibly irreversibly lose its status as an authoritative structure earned over decades and its ability to influence domestic political arrangements in the USA will completely disappear.