SIPA Graduate Hoping to Help Economic Growth in Native Armenia

The suffering the Armenian people faced in the 20th century weighs heavily on Kristine Grigorian, who emigrated from Armenia to the United States in 1994. But in looking to improve conditions facing her native country, Grigorian eyes the future.

“The Armenian Genocide is obviously a very big part of my life—it’s a very big part of every Armenian’s life,” Grigorian said of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923, during which an estimated 600,000 to 1.5 million Armenians died at the hands of Ottoman Turks. “But what I really want to do is help economic growth through reform in Armenia and other states in the former Soviet region.”

To prepare herself for this undertaking, Grigorian came to SIPA today with a master’s degree in international affairs and a certificate from the Harriman Institute of Post-Soviet Studies. In June, Grigorian begins work at the Eurasia Group, a research and consulting firm that focuses on political-risk research and consulting and that works in Armenia and other states in the former Soviet region).

Grigorian described conditions during this period as “horrific.” But Grigorian, who is fluent in Russian, says economic reform will not occur by itself—it must be accompanied by legal and political reform as well as improvement on Armenia’s human rights record, all of which Grigorian says are keys to the nation’s stability. “Armenia is not the best country when it comes to human rights violations,” she said, adding that other countries in the region also have poor human rights records. “If the country is going to make it, it needs to get its own act together.”

Human Rights Watch reported in December 2001 that law enforcement and security agents in Armenia “enjoy broad impunity for abuse, including for torture and deaths in custody. Torture by these agents is widespread in Armenia, but few perpetrators are held accountable, in part because victims fear coming forward.”

Grigorian experienced many hardships in Armenia, including the 1988 earthquake in Leninakan, measuring 6.8 on the open-ended Richter Scale, killed at least 25,000. In addition, from 1988 to 1994 the country was engaged in a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, a largely Armenian ethnic enclave in Azerbaijan. Blockades by both Azerbaijan and Turkey slowed the delivery of needed supplies to Armenia during this time. Grigorian described conditions during this period as “horrible.”

Before a cease-fire was declared in 1994, Grigorian and her family sought to escape Armenia and moved to Salt Lake City. She attended Brigham Young University, graduating with a degree in political science in 1999. Grigorian knows her preparation for helping to bring about reform in Armenia is far from complete. To get the legal training she needs, she plans on attending law school in a few years.

—James Devitt