

THE SPEAKER

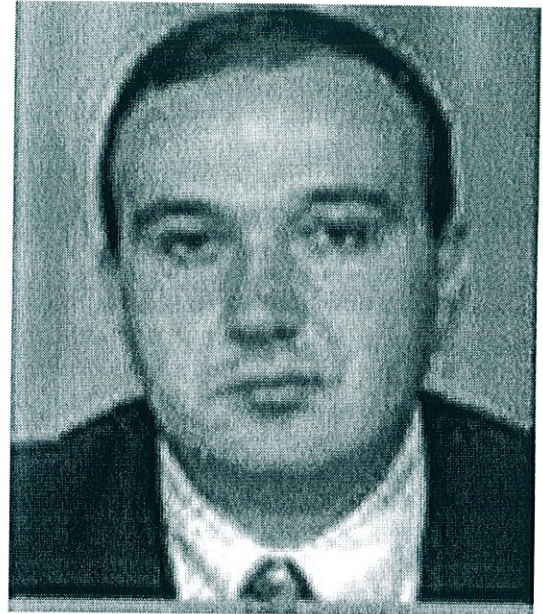
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EDUCATION REFORMS

LEVON MKRTCHIAN

Minister of Education and Science, Armenia



This is, in fact, my first attempt to present the education reforms project that needs to be further developed. The Ministry and its agencies engaged in education and science, have a long way to go before the reform process is put on the right track.

To familiarize ourselves with the education system in general and to have a better understanding of the situation, I think we have to begin reviewing some sociopolitical implications having to do with Armenia's place and role in the region. As well, we have to identify the objectives of the nation's educational, scientific, and cultural development and the constraints that hinder our reaching these goals. We have to be clear on the degree to which we can make international practice our own, given present conditions. It is also relevant to know what the distinctive features of our education system are as compared with the education systems of our neighbors, or other countries.

To begin with, I will try to give a brief overview and, for the time being, raise the issues that determine the policies of education reforms. I will discuss Armenia's geopolitical situation in the light of education and civilization, and our heritage. This is crucial for the implementation of education policies. Then I will discuss our experience of the eight-year period of independence, noting both successes and failures that have determined the

need for a concrete reform policy. I will point out the major principles of that policy and their characteristic features, after which I will try to outline the major directions of the reform.

We should base ourselves on the fact that for centuries, Armenia has been a unique region in the Near East. It is at the crossroads of political and education links. The most important are the political realities, relevant ideologies and influences that, for centuries, have had their impact on this region and that have undergone substantial change over time. They were eventually entrenched in the Near East from the beginning of the 19th century. The civilizations that formed under these circumstances are important. We have developed a unique civilization although our region has constantly been at the crossroads of powerful -- and sometimes antagonistic -- civilizations.

This is the reason why enclaves have always been an ever-present issue. Isolated due to serious communication barriers, the development of civilization in Armenia has always (and necessarily) based itself along a unique continuum. This has had its impact not only politically, but has also left its mark on our mentality, culture, education, and values.

Thus, we can note that today, as a nation, we are under the influence of several strong civilizations that exist in Armenia. Most importantly, Armenia is a melting pot of eastern and western cultures. In addition, the influence of northern civilizations is also strong here, since they have been impacting us for about two hundred years. As citizens of this nation, we face the issue of the identification of our heritage in this melting pot. We have to decide to what extent we can use or reject it. Indeed, can it possibly be rejected?

Presumably, we can break down our educational and cultural heritage into several large divisions. First comes the scientific-educational layer that dates back to the past millennia and has its deep influence on our nation's mentality. There are few nations in the world as committed to education as is Armenia. This is indeed an important factor not to be overlooked in our educational policy. In Armenia, often, a simple peasant will sell the last that he has -- a cow for example -- to send his child to receive an education.

The other events that had a huge influence on our nation in the last two centuries were the cataclysms in which our nation frequently found itself. In particular, starting in the second half of the 19th century, these catastrophes culminated in the Genocide and its immediate consequence: the loss of our territories. This has had a serious influence on our national psychology. As a nation that has been forced to have a migrant population, it has endeavored to make up for its physical losses through intellectual accomplishments. This explains the nation's strong feeling and love for education, its orientation to-

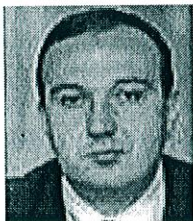
wards science and culture.

The third important factor that, especially today, cannot be overlooked when implementing education policies, is the existence of the Diaspora. It has strong ties with the land of its ancestors. Even when the Soviet Iron Curtain existed, the Armenian Diaspora was exhilarated by its homeland. The links between the Diaspora and Armenia now have two implications. One is adaptability in a positive sense. It is the wish to quickly understand the situation in Armenia. The second is isolation. This is

apparent as we look closely at the activities of communities in the Diaspora and at the development of education in these communities. Naturally, both these trends have their impact on the current processes in Armenia.

The Soviet period, which began in 1921-1922, had a substantial influence on our reality. During that period, our nation was able to make qualitative changes in the understanding of education and the system of education. These qualitative changes can be divided into positive consequences on the whole, and some negative consequences. Through ensuring adequate financial and economic prerequisites, the Soviet government supported our nation in its devotion to education and science. It is well known that the Soviet Union was an ideological Empire and as an ideologically consolidated country, it needed to justify its ideological principles through a concrete policy. If for example, a communist dignitary in Moscow needed to state that, thanks to communism and socialism, in faraway Armenia, we were already looking at the stars, all necessary funds was provided. A person such as Victor Ham-

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Levon Mkrtchian was born on 18 March 1965, in Yerevan. He finished Yeghisheh Charents School in 1981 and, in the same year, entered the History Department of Yerevan State University. He graduated with honors in 1986. From 1986 to 1989, he undertook post-graduate study in Modern Armenian History. In 1990, he defended a candidate thesis on "The 1895-1896 Rebellion of Zeitoon." Since 1990, he has been lecturing at the Armenian History Department of Yerevan State University (he was conferred the title of Dean in 1993).

Mr. Mkrtchian has participated in entrance examinations. In 1997, he was Chairman of the History Board of entrance examinations. He has participated in the activities of the university management reforms under the TEMPUS-TACIS PRE-JE 03077/96 international project.

In 1992, he became a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party (in Armenian: Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun - often abbreviated to Dashnak). From 1993 to 1995, he was member of the Central Committee of Armenia's Dashnak Party, first heading the Department of the Armenian Cause, then as co-ordinator of the activities seeking an alternative version of the Constitution of Armenia. Since 1995, he is Chairman of the Center for the Armenian Question and Genocide. From January to June 1996, Mr. Mkrtchian was representative of the mandated body of Armenia's Dashnak Party. In 1996, he was a member of the Central Committee of the Armenian Cause of the Dashnak Party.

Mr. Mkrtchian is the author of a book and scientific articles. He is married and has one child.

bartsumyan would be invited to Armenia, a modern observatory -- with the latest equipment -- would be constructed and we would really be looking at the stars. We used this to our advantage. Powerful scientific, educational and cultural systems were put in place and were extensively developed. In other words, just as in the rest of the Soviet Union, Armenia developed quality based on quantity. This definitely created a favorable situation for our society, since we were able to ensure compulsory ten-year secondary education, higher education was free of charge, and we created a powerful scientific potential. These, beyond any doubt, had their favorable influence, though from the outset, they contained serious dangers. As a matter of fact, all these accomplishments were achieved through funding from Moscow and had nothing to do with the financial and economic potential of our country.

An important negative influence, which we still cannot rid ourselves of, is the main cause of Armenia's present grave political situation. It concerns the destruction that this centralized ideology inflicted on education in the humanities and our national values. Initially, we had a generation of teachers committed to values. As individuals, they had strong feelings for the nation. They thought independently and had developed personal values. Yet it was impossible for them to educate individuals who, though studying universal achievements of civilization would also be committed to their own national values. The education of a young citizen committed to national values was entirely geared to the goals and objective of the ideological empire. As a result, we prepared a generation with a unique system of values to serve concrete ideological purposes. Today, we must show respect for the system that brought up and educated that generation.

Then the third important period followed, involving the process of independence. The Soviet Union collapsed and, as a result, the nation suffered serious convulsions with the legacy it inherited. These convulsions are still continuing. In this region, more and diverse conflicts will come. It would be advisable for us to consult lessons learnt from our ten-year old experience before we start doing anything radical.

The most important task set before the newly independent country was the maintenance of the system. Paradoxical as it may seem, the system cannot be maintained as it is. It must either evolve or disintegrate. Educational, scientific and cultural systems do not stand still. That is why the leadership of the new state was faced with a difficult choice. All attempts to maintain the old system led to destruction because it was impossible to implement. On the other hand, there was no experience, no regulatory framework, and no financial resources.

Objective and subjective factors hindered the development of the education system. The objective

constraints were, in the first place, the existence of an extensive system which we continue to be faced with today. We have a huge network of educational, scientific, cultural, school, extra-curricular and sport establishments. Armenia, given its scarce resources, is not in a position to maintain them all.

Other factors, no less detrimental to the development of the education system, were subjective. They involved several aspects. We all are well aware of them, however it is worth mentioning them now. A major pitfall was the absence of formulating the aim and programming of the development of education and science. Over the eight to ten years of this republic's existence, there were many attempts to come up with a common aim, goals, objectives, and a common direction.

These attempts, however, were either very weak or unprofessional. Consequently, they always remained as pilot undertakings. I explain this by the fact that the leadership of Armenia was unable to formulate a basis that would replace the Centralized Soviet Ideology. It failed to seek and come up with the basic values from which aims, goals, and objectives should be formulated and implemented.

This resulted in quite a sad picture. Within seven years, we had seven ministers of education. One day we would announce one principle. The next day we would launch a new experimental, adventurous policy. The third day we would cancel all classbooks in use and introduce new ones. We tried to ideologize and politicize education. We tried to find salvation through education. This caused a continuous destruction of the system. It is still continuing.

No less destructive was the tendency to mechanically imitate foreign practices. Unable to assess our heritage and our situation, we compared our education to that of France, the USA, and Japan. One mission would go to Germany and bring the German education model and try to use it in Armenia. Another mission would visit the USA and try to implement it. As a result, we are now in an overall mess and cannot understand where we are going. We do not know the model we should adhere to, and try to implement.

In this sense, education reforms have indeed become imperative. Today, we need crucial qualitative changes. They must be implemented as a result of serious deliberation and at a moderate pace. Furthermore, when piloting some project or taking some experimental steps, we must not ruin what we have in place. We must rather try to at least add something to the existing solid values.

In this respect, the situation is very sad indeed. Today, the system is fed by state funding. Allocations for education and science make up around 11 percent and 2-3 percent of the budget, respectively. This is quite an impressive indicator for a country at our level of development. It is obvious that our country cannot afford to

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allocate more for education and science. In other words, the possibilities of our development are to be found within the reasonable and efficient utilization of our internal resources. We are, unfortunately, very far from such principles.

If, according to many international standards, one teacher instructs 25 students, we now have one teacher for every eight to ten students. Ironically, however, we have 1 380 vacancies for teachers (if I am not mistaken) for village and town schools. Yerevan State University, for a student body of 7 000 to 8 000, has a faculty of 1 500 and a technical staff of about the same size. In no other university in the world, will you see such a ratio of students to faculty. In the system of secondary vocational education, we have one full-time teacher's position for every three students. In our small country, we have 15 government-run establishments of higher learning where many of the specialties are duplicated. We have specialties from the Soviet period. Today their existence is unthinkable.

I could provide you with a long list of such examples. Teachers that used to teach scientific communism, now teach political history. A considerable number of those who taught atheism, now teach the history of religion. We have no problem with these teachers: they can teach. But they are doing so using exactly the same programs and methods! It is only the names of the subjects that have changed ... Finally, every year the quality of our education - including the university level - is showing a serious decline.

This has become the focus of education reforms, involving two major principles. One is the integrity and continuity of education. It is one of the most important principles of our education policy. This principle means that we need to have an integrated education system, beginning from pre-school education to post-graduate study. This is a process that should be viewed as a unit. An important condition is to ensure continuity, smooth shifts from one level to another. Here we are faced with many problems that have become social problems: admission examinations, graduation, and the examinations to go from one grade to another.

The second important principle is that of rationalization and optimization. This involves a whole series of very complex, socially dangerous steps, likely to cause an explosion at any time. Several attempts to mechanically introduce rationalization and optimization resulted in failure. One of the principles of reform, therefore, should be the clear justification of each measure and publicized approval of education policies open for public discussion. These problems are not only the problems of the Ministry of Education and Science. They do not concern just the universities. They belong to the whole nation. If we continue at our present pace, we will have yet another four universities in Gyumri with such pompous names as

Mesrop Mashtots and Anania Shirakatsi. There are academies in Gyumri whose educational level is akin to that of the sixth or seventh grades. Ahead of us is a difficult process. We either have to tell the nation that we are faced with this fact and that we have to find a way out, or, by turning a blind eye to these issues, we will simply fade out of Civilization.

In this respect, we have started implementing a three-part reform project for secondary schools. The first is a policy addressing the contents of education, a management policy, and a curriculum and methodology policy.

For almost a year, educational policy has followed a set path. Its cornerstones are the autonomy and collegiate management of educational institutions. If a rector or a strong director heads an educational institution, the power of that strong director has to be counter-balanced by a scientific, pedagogical, or some other council where all must have a vote. This is the only way for an autonomous educational institution to develop internal democracy. As to the contents of education, we have serious problems in creating curricula and methodological guidebooks. We have to be able to ensure a clear chain and clear links. All educational institutions must have development programs that state their mission, plans, objectives, implementation policies, the

measures in place to attain goals, and evaluation policies. Only if the chain is complete will a serious policy become a continuum.

All the more serious is the problem faced by the secondary vocational system. In the USSR, it had a clearly articulated objective: to

meet the country's social-economic needs by providing specialists for agriculture and industry. Presently, we are in a similar social-economic situation but these institutions are facing a grave crisis. Thus, we must first ensure that they provide the basis for going from secondary general education to higher education. This is one of the functions of a college system. Secondly, they ought to provide graduates with an average quality of specialization to meet the present needs of Armenia. This project is still in the process of development and we do not have funding for it. We hope that next year we will receive a credit from the World Bank to reform the system of secondary vocational education.

The issue of reforms in higher education is more complex. A special council has been created in the Ministry. Schools of higher education have two problems to solve. They must ensure the proper quality of graduates for the social, political and cultural development of Armenia as well as retain the schools existing in the University. The system of higher learning institutions is geared to meet the socio-economic needs of an area. In Armenia, the system of higher learning institutions can set autonomous objectives for itself. If we have a school of fundamental mathematics that prepares good mathema-

... One is the integrity and continuity of education. It is one of the most important principles of our education policy.

ticians that may currently find no employment in Armenia, it can tailor its projects to maintain the school, while at the same time exporting the values of the school. This is, indeed, an important principle whereby the system of higher education is provided with serious development opportunities. This implies a sharp increase in the quality of the system of higher education. It is impossible without mergers. In Wales, which is highly developed and has the same population figure as Armenia, there are no more than four universities. In Armenia, however, there are currently 15 government-run and 84 "private" universities. Of the latter, just five or six may approximate a university quality. That is why higher education reform must necessarily involve the principle of competition. If a school of higher learning is an autonomous unit, it must be competitive based on the quality it provides. Our policy is that not only the American University of Armenia ought to continue to operate in Armenia, but also French and Russian Universities - for which we already have agreements. Several American schools of higher learning will also start to operate. These schools of higher learning will stimulate the development of the system of higher education in Armenia. Schools of higher learning have no alternative but to exert efforts to become serious institutions. They must either implement educational programs, or we will have another 300 such schools with the result that one day we will have to confess that we do not have a system of higher learning as such.

Education reform must have a serious financial basis. Reforms will be impossible if the existing budget funding principle continues to be used. Today, the Government provides budget allocations in a centralized way as budget-line items. Educational institutions are not free to engage in any activity at their discretion. Only after a big struggle may they win the right to have extra-budgetary accounts enabling them to engage in non-budgetary functions and activities. The Government has approved a pilot project under which, in 1999, 150 schools will receive funding from the budget according to a new principle. Funding will be provided on a per student basis. This principle may have a favorable influence on the system of higher education and secondary schools. Through negotiations with the World Bank, we managed to settle one more concern of ours. Regardless of any factor, schools in mountainous and rural areas will operate with losses because they often have just thirty to forty students.

The Government will approve the number of such schools and will provide them with subsidies from the budget. This will allow them to continue. Funding based on a per student line will allow directors of educational institutions to implement their own budget policies allowing them to be flexible while considering the share of salaries as well as the share for maintenance and other necessary expenditures.

Besides, educational institutions will have the possibility to provide paid services, engage in various international grants, and keep their resources in non-budgetary accounts. We believe this is the only way we can revitalize our 1460 schools.

At the end of the first phase of reform that will probably take place in two years' time, we hope to have 1460 development projects: one for each school. They will include the specifics of a school, the cost of rehabilitation, and practical ways to meet the objectives of a development project. This requires quite an effort and we are convinced that if properly implemented, we will be able to define clearer policies. These principles are provided in the Law on Education. Through the creation of an adequate normative base, we will ensure that education policy does not depend on the whims of individual officials or executives.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we should understand that educational reform is a continuous process: it needs years to be carried out. Here, it is most important that a correct principle be chosen and that we implement it step by step, building on results rather than demolishing them. The second important principle is to keep the reform process out of political abuse and influence. Any such encroachment would deal a hard blow to the newly formulating system. Finally, the principle of protection is indeed very important for education. The state has to protect education since, in a poor country with many social problems, it may be one of the vulnerable areas exposed to abuse and misuse. This policy must be non-populist. It involves high social risk and can be implemented only under the protection of the Government. It also has to be Government policy.

These are the main principles defining our educational policy.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- I have put the following question to the Minister of National Security, Mr. Serge Sarkissian, and the Speaker of the National Assembly, Mr. Khosrov Harutiunyan. Frankly speaking, I was not satisfied by either of the answers. My question is - Do you have a clear program on how to stop corruption in your system?

- I do not think I will give you a satisfactory answer, but I will try. It is impossible to prevent bribery in an individual, a separate entity. I fear that in trying to do it we can only have temporary achievements. We have to accept that as long as the Government is unable to give salaries adequate for proper livelihood, as long as there is no system in place to provide for people's needs, combating bribery will resemble the hero who fought windmills. Of course, persons involved in a publicized case must be punished in a most severe way.

But, say we are talking about a teacher whose monthly salary is 5 dollars. Should she be punished for giving paid classes to students in the same class she is in charge of? This matter, although hard to solve, needs attention. The Government should be able to perform its responsibilities, and only after take punitive measures. I am not in any way trying to evade your question. I just believe that to prevent bribery, we need a Government project and a policy applied at all levels and spheres.

- It is a well-known fact that only by studying with private instructors outside school, is entering a school of higher learning possible. Is it possible to organize free consultations for those who want to continue their studies in higher education?

- This is another sore issue. We just have to understand that nothing is free of charge in the world. The Government, despite its limited resources, pays for all unpaid services to the public. Here we are faced with a certain problem. Given the decline of quality in secondary school education, schools of higher learning are concerned with maintaining their quality of education. Therefore, they have higher entrance requirements. These allow for additional paid studies to be taken parallel to unpaid secondary school studies. It is not a secret that a private course of study costs 400-500 US dollars. This year, we had 12000 students who had applied to join schools of higher education. At least half of them had taken private lessons. This means that the sum paid for private classes totalled no less than nine million dollars.

The Ministry of Education and Science should take into consideration that the public is ready to pay (yearly) ten to fifteen US dollars for children to be able to continue their studies in schools of higher learning. The Government has to organize things in a way that this money goes not to individual pockets, but to university or school budgets.

- Will students who finish school with honors have privileges on entering higher education schools this year?

- Students, finishing school with honors, already have a privilege. With such scores, they are given preference. Next month, within the range of entrance examination issues, we will review this question very seriously. Of course, we will define approaches while making sure that no student's interests are entrenched upon. If we do not make it by November or December, the old regulation will be in force. I hope that we will undertake measures that will improve the existing mechanism.

- Please clarify the relationship between national education and world education.

- It is quite a complex issue. As a historian by profession, I will try to illustrate it by a concrete example. The world has seen several revolutions in civilization that, generally speaking, have greatly influenced the destiny of humanity. One of them was the emergence of Hellenic civilization - a unique synthesis of various cultures that existed after the conquests of Alexander the Great. When the powerful Western civilization met the not less powerful Oriental civilization, our national Hellenic education system emerged. Essentially, these systems matched the interests and mentality of the people but they also contained elements common to world education systems.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 1998

NIKOLAZ NIKOLOZISHVILI

Ambassador of Georgia in Armenia

THE CURRENT STAGE OF ARMENIAN-
GEORGIAN RELATIONS

Thursday, December 17, 1998
At 6:00 PM

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