

REGIONAL POST

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SMEDA: SUPPORTING
CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
IN ARMENIA



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JOHN MALKOVICH AT ARARAT SPEAKERS NIGHT: “I WOULDN'T REFER TO ME AS AN ARTIST”

ARARAT
SPEAKER
NIGHT



One of the brightest American theater and film actors of his generation, John Malkovich, spent few days in Armenia this October. Being here within the frame of Aram Khachaturian V International Festival and the unique project implemented jointly with the artistic director of the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia Sergey Smbatyan, Malkovich shared his experience of bringing new cultural elements to the traditional theatrical paradigm as well as about revealing the facets of theatre and new forms of capturing the attention of easily-distracted spectator as a speaker of ARARAT Speakers Night's second episode

TEXT : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN /
PHOTO : ARSEN AVDALYAN

The second episode of ARARAT Speakers Night series took place in ARARAT Museum on October 10th. This time the event was devoted to theatre and called "The new facets of theatre". ARARAT Speakers Night Episode II explored the current problems of the contemporary theatre, its tendencies regarding different branches of art and new theatrical practices. Particularly, Malkovich talked about difficulty to bring audience to the theater halls: "I have directed many plays in the last ten-fifteen years. When we're selling the tickets before we open with half price we have full house. As soon as we start to charge a full price you don't have it. That's a real difficulty. I myself am not very good at marketing and I can't say what theater needs to do to be marketable. All I know, in my experience if you're genuine, if you do really good adoption, people will buy it." When talking about the mission of theater and how high it must be as compared to its audience, acclaimed actor mentioned, that it's not a matter of high or low culture, but rather a matter of how one makes something that is as compelling as possible. He quoted famous American writer William Faulkner, who said that poets and writers should write about love, pity, pride, compassion and sacrifice. "Many modern forms are not very hospitable hosts for thousand kind of notions, unfortunately. But people will have learn how to deal with it and visual art will have to find away," said Malkovich, adding that that's the job of the artist is to find a way through the dark forest of modern times to express things that are profound, that have real value and real, universal meaning: "It's not an easy task, but I'm not pessimistic. Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Mozart, everyone else had to find their ways, too."

Continuing discussion about the relationship between artists and the public, Malkovich compared his work in the-

ater as surfing: "You turn your back to the wind, the audience, and wait for the wind. The wave is not created by you, it's created by the collision between the material and the public. You just ride the wave. You have to be prepared and know how to do it, and be ready that you may fall down and metaphorically drown. With a good material and good public there will a great ride. The audience is absolutely fundamental critical part of that, at least in theater. Movies are different because movies aren't living. The movie that you saw twenty years ago will never change, it won't be altered. Theater and classical musical is a living, ephemeral organic form, an extent living organism. It really doesn't exist if the public isn't there."

During the evening a lot was talked about music. Though John Malkovich is mainly known as a Hollywood star and an iconic theater artist, he's also passionate about music. "Music is absolute necessity for me. I can't imagine my life without it," he recalled, "Because there's nothing that compares. And that's why it's both of delight and the challenge to do pieces within that system. I'm probably lot less interested in images than most people of my age or younger, but I'm very interested in the collaboration or the mixing of music and text. I like images very much, but I feel a little over bombarded my images." Music was also the art form that made possible the meeting of Armenian audience with John Malkovich. The project shown in Yerevan within the frame of Aram Khachaturian V International Festival started a few years ago when Malkovich was approached by Croatian pianist Anastasya Terenkova. "She brought this piece of Shnitke's, the Third Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, and asked me if I thought we could make something from it. It wasn't very easy, I thought, but then changed my mind, and thought to combine it with a book called "On heroes and tombs"

by Argentine writer Ernesto Sabato. The particular part of that book was very powerful, poetic, quiet paranoiac. It was like something in search of its twin. This twin would be Shnitke's music, they made a very good pairing." The part that Malkovich used was called "Report on the blind". It's about a character who believes that the blind rule the world and it's his duty to reveal to the world how this secret sect of blind people who are incredibly powerful control everything we do and say. "It's both very creepy, very poetic, very amusing", said Malkovich, "As well as because although he is wrong in the details, he is right in the premise. It's just not the blind who can't see, but the blind who refuse to see. So, we did it. It was a fantastic experience and a truly international project: Soviet composer, Argentine writer, Armenian conductor, American actor..." The project was first performed in Seoul in 2015 and later in Buenos Aires in 2016.

While answering the questions of ARARAT Speakers Night's guests, Malkovich humbly noted that he wouldn't refer to himself as an artist, "because if I am artist, then what is Mozart, what is Rembrandt?" And talking about he's way of working in art, he said: "I've always let my curiosity caring me whichever way the wind was blowing. Not in terms of fashion, but in terms of what I was curious about. I'm ok to keep doing that."

ARARAT Speakers Night is a special series of meetings and discussions, an intellectual space, where the professionals from different spheres including experts, artists, opinion leaders, journalists and representatives of contemporary art will present their thoughts on urgent issues. The speakers of the first episode of ARARAT Speakers Night were Zelfira Tregulova, director of the Russian State Tretyakov Gallery and Danilo Eccher, curator, contemporary art critic; and one of the primary faces in the Italian art.

ARARAT SINGLE CASK

THE SHORTEST PATH FROM THE CASK TO THE GLASS

In the year of 130th anniversary of the Armenian brandy production and the very eve of a new age in history, Yerevan Brandy Company presents a new unique product – ARARAT Single Cask issued in limited quantities and individually hand numbered bottles.



The new drink made exclusively from the premium spirits of Yerevan Brandy Company and aged in the unique climate conditions of Tavush region is a result of creative quest. Symbolically released at the 130th anniversary of the Armenian brandy production ARARAT Single Cask is an absolute innovation and a sign of crossed new historical milestone and future that demands to be open and ready for modern solutions.

The process of double distillation and aging in one barrel without further blending turns the Single Cask into a more complete and primeval reflection of the region's terroir. Special conditions of aging in the underground cellar ensure the unique delicacy and versatility of spirits. ARARAT Single Cask is the only product from the entire ARARAT range that skips the stage of chill filtration providing the opportunity to preserve more notes of taste, flavor and emphasizes the authenticity of the drink.

ARARAT Single Cask is distinguished by its unique color, which the expert panel named "the color of chilly Armenian sunset of the fall". It has a strong, voluminous, multifaceted and rich taste. The character of the drink is manifested in deep woody and smoky notes with a soft hint of vanilla and spicy cinnamon.

Only three barrels were selected for the limited edition of ARARAT Single Cask. Each bottle of the innovative series bears a unique handwritten number traced out by a specially invited calligrapher indicating the barrel where the alcohol was kept.

The quintessence of the new product of YBC embodies the luxury of minimalism and the craft concept which finds its reflection through the modern wooden packaging. The composition of the labels frames the bottle with the iconic outline of mount Ararat and emphasizes the luxurious color of the drink.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE IS COOL

Hartak Workshop Festival to Set
Gyumri Alight the Second Time.
Hartak Gyumri 0.2 will take place
on June 9-10, 2018.



“Why are you doing this, what’s the point?” everyone’d ask us a little puzzled. “Because sharing knowledge is great!” was our answer. We were running Aeon – Armenia’s first anti-café – for two years already, and often invited people coming our way to spend an hour or two sharing their knowledge with our community. Soon, it seemed, this culture of exchange, the spirit of the place grew bigger than the physical space itself. The idea of Hartak popped up naturally.

We organized the first Hartak in October 2015. 3 days – 9 venues – 70 workshops! It was incredible and, of course, incredibly exhausting. The festival had (and still has) four main directions: Technology & Design, Arts & Crafts, Health & Lifestyle, and Food. Making chocolate, boosting start-ups, traveling penniless, writing stories, doing aikido and yoga, sewing toys, cutting pasta and learning to choose wines...Both indoor and outdoor workshops on a variety



of topics turned Yerevan into a huge crowded platform during Hartak days.

The idea to hold Hartak in Gyumri came up when one day we were hanging out at Rob’s Home and just felt it was the right time: Gyumri was calling!

This time around we offered a whole city to be experienced. Getting to know Gyumri through its unique people, idiosyncratic event venues, and atmospheric walking tours was eye-opening for many Yerevantsis. Gyumri is now awakening. Youth takes responsibility for the city and makes significant changes. The city has just been branded. There’s a promise of a positive shift in terms of opportunities in the air. Hartak Gyumri 0.2 will take place on June 9-10, 2018. For updates check out the festival website www.hartakfest.com and join the official Facebook page facebook.com/HartakFestival.

ARMAS ESTATE HARVEST AND HARMONY FESTIVAL

The end of September in Armenia was full of jazz vibes and wine flavours: one of the leaders of Armenian wine industry, ArmAs Wines, held Harvest and Harmony Festival to celebrate its 2017's harvest. Dozens of guests gathered in company's estate in Nor Yedesia village to enjoy a sunset dinner and taste ArmAs' fine wines, accompanied by a live performance by Armen Hqusununts with Time Report.



◀ Time Repor jazz band's performance



◀ Picturesque ArmAs estate, Aragatsotn province



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EVA MARIA NÄHER:

“Creative Industries inspire hearts and minds”

The German Development Corporation Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) has been working within its EU-cofunded project towards developing small and medium enterprise in Armenia (SMEDA) for about a year now. We spoke to the head of the project, Eva Maria Näher, to discover what has been done, what SMEDA plans to do, and most importantly, why everything is the other way around with Armenian startups.

INTERVIEW : KARINE GHAZARYAN

Why do you think it is important to support creative industries?

— This is one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. Take Germany for example: creative industries are playing more and more of an important role in an economy which traditionally has had a strong engineering field. The manufacturing of goods is moving towards more creative and mind-based production. At the same time, in Armenia there exist certain limitations due to the geographical setting with limited transportation routes. Instead, mind-based products would be way easier to transport across borders. Addi-

tionally, we at GIZ actually see a great creative potential here: you have many painters, musicians, composers, and filmmakers of an international standard. Moreover, people are typically well-educated, and for creative production you need a base of knowledge and expertise.

What is also notable is that creative Industries inspire hearts and minds, but the importance of this is not seen in Armenia yet. Often people do not see any chance of Armenia developing its resources. This is where the creative industries may be helpful indeed.

What is the long-term goal you aim to achieve by supporting creative production? >

TAKE GERMANY FOR EXAMPLE: CREATIVE INDUSTRIES ARE PLAYING MORE AND MORE OF AN **IMPORTANT ROLE IN AN ECONOMY WHICH TRADITIONALLY HAS HAD A STRONG ENGINEERING FIELD**



— The overall aim is to build a whole sector of the economy, so that companies and individuals can make a living out of it. I personally think that the creative industries have the economic potential, and their entrepreneurial aspect is often neglected. Artists frequently refuse to sell or commercialize their work, as they do not refer to a piece of art as a product. It is important to show that one can do both: be a great artist, a creative mind, and at the same time being an entrepreneur. In addition to this, we see an essential link between other businesses and the creative sector. Even if you have a precision engineering company you still need to advertise your goods, you need graphic design for supporting products, i.e. you need creative people. This is why we decided to

focus on four areas where we see the strongest links between the creative sector and other economic sectors: advertising and marketing; film production; design; software and games. Compare these areas to a dozen of subsectors such as performing arts, which is much further away from other enterprises.

How exactly do you support SME?

— There are multiple approaches, and it really depends on the needs. We always try to find the solution that will have the most significant impact. For example, we now cooperate with the government and film producers to support the development of the first film law in Armenia. We bring international expertise as there exists a rich

experience on this topic, and we have to use the knowledge of other countries. At the same time, as a result of our round table meetings held in March, an association of fashion designers is being formed – called the Fashion and Design Chamber – who applied for one of our action grants. This project was selected as one project as we recognized this unique consolidation of artists and the potential within this sector. The one-year grant will be used to provide training and workshops for their members, as well as to organize the first fashion design forum in Armenia. In general, we support initiatives which in our opinion may have a long-term impact, as sustainability is a key principle for GIZ.

In which sectors of creative industries do you see the biggest potential of this long-term impact?

— There are actually many of them. Like music with internationally recognized young Armenian talents; or cinema, or software and games – as there are many activities in Armenia strengthening IT. I personally think there is huge potential in design, not only fashion, but product or interior design. This is a quickly developing field both in Armenia and Georgia, different from mainstream trends that one sees in Europe or the US. You have a different history and environments, and this of course influences the creative process. However, unlike Georgia, Armenia I think is more technology-oriented. But many benefit when you bring together technology and creativity. This is what big corporations do – like Apple with its huge design department. This is precisely why we provide design-thinking training, promoting the global trend of the user-centered approach. This vision came from 1960s architecture, and it's basically looking at what customers need while designing a product.

What are the most common obstacles that you encounter?

WE DECIDED TO FOCUS ON FOUR AREAS WHERE WE SEE THE STRONGEST LINKS BETWEEN THE CREATIVE SECTOR AND OTHER ECONOMIC SECTORS





— The creative sector is often not perceived as a “real” economic sector. Parents are usually reluctant when their child decides to become an artist as they do not see how he or she can make a living from it. This is not Armenia-specific; it's a global cultural and social problem. In some countries, creative groups are additionally seen as people who question things, and not everybody is happy when certain things are questioned. In Armenia, such an approach is not existing, and I was very glad to discover this. A person needs to be independent to be able to create a painting, or a software application, or a movie. Of course, in addition to this, access to quality education is essential.

Do you work with educational institutions?

— Partially yes because education is a key factor in many aspects. In universities, we provide start-up boost weekends, skills trainings for lecturers and coaches as well as the design-thinking training, I mentioned earlier. Higher educational institutions are not our key focus, but we try to integrate them.

You mainly work with government and professional associations. Why do you target them rather than individuals?

— An individual speaks for a company; an association speaks for a whole sector. Interestingly, during the round tables we organized in March, many of the individual participants mentioned the need for close networking and exchange. At that time, our experts from London presented the also concept of creative hubs. On the one hand, it can help facilitate the creative process by providing services like marketing and an opportunity for live communication. On the other hand, hubs are usually established in old industrial buildings, and this can make a great location for exhibitions, concerts, fashion shows and other activities. So, it's a great concept, but it can only work if the space is lively and animated every single day, not just during major events. At the beginning of 2018, we plan to organize a roundtable to discuss this topic and see whether we can make it happen.

What are the other plans for the near future?

— Well there are many – SMEDA will continue until 2019. It has only been a year since we started our main activities, but some aspects of entrepreneurship are discussed in a different way, so for many companies there are new options now. When you bring Armenian startups to Europe everybody is typically impressed by the technology: these are often not pure applications but there are more fundamental technologies behind the products. Yet marketing and entrepreneurial skills are quite low. You see, usually when someone presents an amazing new invention you ask a few questions and realize that the technology is a mere theory. However, with Armenian developments, it's the other way around: you have great products but there is not good presentation or business skills. Actually, this is very interesting for us as it is difficult to teach creativity, but entrepreneurial skills like developing a business plan, doing proper marketing, finding potential (international) partners – one can learn all of these, and we help with this. ♦



IN

A

CIRCLE



At the beginning of the year, the Support to SME Development in Armenia project (SMEDA) has provided a platform for creative industry professionals to discuss and discover ways to strengthen their fields. The four round table meetings led to a whole series of interesting projects. Part of them has already been implemented this year and others are yet to come.

TEXT : KARINE GHAZARYAN / PHOTO : SMEDA



◀ Fourth annual PR Summit took place between May 19-21 in Yerevan

As part of the EU4Business and EU4Innovation initiatives of the European Union, the SMEDA project was launched in 2016. The project will run until 2019 and is co-funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and it is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

The project is called SMEDA, which stands for Support to Small and Medium Enterprise Development in Armenia. A significant part of the project is dedicated to supporting the creative industries, focusing on four directions: advertisement and marketing, cinematography, design, and software and games. In March, the SMEDA team organised round tables with the activists of the fields to discuss the needs and the challenges they face. Several promising initiatives emerged from the discussions. For example, several fashion designers decided to establish the first professional fashion association in Armenia.

The Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia was initiated by the young and well-known designer, Vahan Khachatryan together with several Armenian young fashion designers. It officially launched in November 2017. Elen Manukyan, the head of the project and co-founder of the “5 Concept” fashion store, notes that this is a one-of-a-kind organisation in the country. “There was no such institution to unite

A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO SUPPORTING THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, FOCUSING ON **FOUR DIRECTIONS**



With SMEDA's support
Armenian designers partici-
pated in Mercedes-Benz
Fashion Days Kiev





designers, as well as to raise important questions and provide opportunities to implement joint initiatives,” she says. “The Chamber will represent interests of both companies and independent designers.” The organisation now has around 30 active members, and their number is expected to grow. After its launch in November, the founders applied and were awarded with one of SMEDA’s action grants. The one-year grant will allow activists to build capacity and attract attention to the field.

In August 2017, SMEDA supported 11 Armenian designers to travel to Ukraine and present their collections at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev. As the team leader of SMEDA, Eva Näher mentions that for many of them it was their first international experience. “When you are an individual, it is difficult to reach out to an international audience” she says. “So, Kiev showed the need for designers to come together.” Three of the brands, LOOM Weaving, Z.G.Est, and Petoor, were given the opportunity to exhibit their products in Kiev’s fashion stores. A dress from RUZANE was included on the Ukrainian Cosmopolitan “10 best looks from Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev” list. “The trip demonstrated how much we have yet to learn from international experience,” says Elen Manukyan. “It was kind of a push to work together and to travel more with our collections.” Besides the work outside of Armenia, designers believe that there is a lot to do inside the country. At the round table meeting organised by SMEDA, the participants mentioned the importance of the government to be engaged in providing a legal framework and tax benefits, developing standards of quality as well as recognising design as a separate sector of the economy.

THE SUGGESTION TO JOIN THE DISCUSSIONS ON THE FILM LAW WAS MADE DURING THE ROUND TABLE MEETING BY A NUMBER OF FILMMAKERS

The SMEDA team tries to engage professional associations and governmental bodies in its activities. SMEDA cooperates closely with the Ministry of Economic Development and Investments and offered its support to the Ministry of Culture to develop the first law regulating cinematography in Armenia. The suggestion to join the discussions on the cinematography law was made during the round table meeting by a number of filmmakers, who also drew attention to the lack of professional networking and funding for shooting, production, and distribution.

Just like the design initiatives, the idea of an independent filmmakers’ club came up during the meeting. “The non-formal club lists 10 to 15 participants who meet once a month just to communicate and to keep in touch,” filmmaker Melik Karapetyan says. “There already is a plan by SMEDA to organise European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) training in spring.”

Along with EAVE, SMEDA provides an opportunity to bring many more kinds of professional expertise to Armenia. For example, a British expert on creative consultancy, Andrew Erskine, traveled to Yerevan to provide creative



writing workshops for local journalists. Online, broadcast and print media journalists attended a four-day workshop in October to develop their reporting skills on economic, business, innovation and startup issues. The main idea was to “write figures and make it attractive.” While all the topics mentioned above are often difficult to present in an easily digestible manner, all of them are of great importance for society, and it is crucial that people can present them clearly.

Other training on simple and interesting presentation of content included graphic recording workshops. This technique allows complex discussions to be broken down and to be presented in a visual report. This way, large amounts of information becomes easier to memorize.

SMEDA also supports the organisation of professional meetings on a larger scale. One of them was the fourth annual PR Summit which took place between May 19-21 in Yerevan with the participation of American, European, Lebanese and Russian experts. The summit was organized by Deem

Communications, an active participant from the Armenian advertisement and marketing field.

One of the main outcomes of the summit was the first city branding activity which is now operational. The Gyumri branding initiative was offered by Deem Communication to increase tourism in the city and attract new investments. Six months later, the new brand of the city was presented to the general public by Deem Communications. SMEDA invited an Icelandic place branding expert, storytelling and communications strategist, Hjörtur Smarason, to provide training on city branding as a development tool for local businesses, media, government agencies and non-governmental organizations. The team leader of SMEDA, Eva Näher, thinks that the creation of a strong and positive image of the city could mean more businesses opening up offices in Gyumri, thus contributing to the decentralization of the business environment.

Although the round table meetings made it clear that there exist serious challenges in the field of software and games,



Round tables with the activists of the fields are organized by SMEDA to discuss the needs and the challenges they face



SMEDA specialists mention that significant efforts are being made toward developing IT, and it is one of the fastest growing sectors in Armenia. However, game developers drew attention to the large gap between what educational institutions offer and what the labor market needs. This and other issues push SMEDA to maintain a number of activities in IT, and first of all, support to Armenian startups. Game developers, as well as almost all other participants of the round table meetings especially highlighted the importance of more networking and exchange. During the creative writing training, creative consultancy expert Tom Fleming suggested the concept of a creative hub. This may become an idea SMEDA will be working on in 2018. Fleming notes that a hub could provide a vital development function for the creative industries in Armenia. It could help convene creative talent, giving it presence and providing opportunities for collaboration and scale. Moreover, it might help repurpose old industrial buildings to signal a new economic age. "In our research and consultancy across the world, it is clear that creative hubs are of huge significance to the health and dynamism of the overall creative economy. They enable micro enterprises and freelancers to come together – to collaborate, trade and exchange ideas. They open up opportunities to access markets and larger firms; and they provide a practical infrastructure model for the delivery of business support,

DURING THE CREATIVE WRITING TRAINING, CREATIVE CONSULTANCY EXPERT TOM FLEMING SUGGESTED **THE CONCEPT OF A CREATIVE HUB**

training and investment readiness. They are also often relatively safe and affordable – where creative talent feels free and enabled to develop critically engaging work and where rents are structured to ensure different types of business and organisation can afford to participate."

Usually functioning in old industrial buildings, creative hubs provide an excellent location for exhibitions. All creative companies can use this location to display and promote their products. Moreover, supportive businesses like shops, cafes, and professional service providers can also work there, thus turning the place into a great platform for cooperation and development.

All interested people can participate in the upcoming discussion on the potential creation of a creative hub which will be organized by SMEDA to discover the real needs, engage motivated professionals, and consolidate resources. Just like previous round table meetings, this one may become a starting point for promising initiatives and new opportunities for small and medium enterprises in Armenia. ♦

GYUMRI BRANDING: The Guide

To assemble all the layers of Gyumri within one concept, Deem Communications* initiated and implemented the Gyumri Branding Project pro bono, with its funds as an investment in the development of Gyumri, and Armenia to some extent. The brand of Gyumri discovered its color, shape, and message that was presented to the public in Gyumri on December 9, 2017. The project's initiators are hopeful that Gyumri brand's strategy implementation will help advance the city's socio-cultural life, inner and outer tourism, and other key sectors.

TEXT : AREG DAVTYAN / PHOTO : DEEM COMMUNICATIONS





WHAT IS CITY BRANDING?

Place branding is a process of identifying the strongest assets of the place, building and telling a story consistently through marketing and communications to build, regain or maintain competitiveness. The goal of place branding is to build a reputation over time and contribute to the sustainable development of a place. Logos, slogans, and promotion campaigns are part of the process but aren't the primary focus. A logo is a visual symbol, designed to create an emotional association and bring recognition of the city among residents and visitors. Visual identity is only a part of the branding. Branding is about communicating the value through various tools and platforms: events, media, stories that will engage tourists and guests of the city.

Both logo and the slogan convey the core values of the city to reflect the common perception of the city, based on a comprehensive research. Place marketing is about ensuring that the brand message and the story of a place or community are strategically and methodically delivered to the right audiences through the appropriate channels. The visual identity including the slogan is created based on the analyses of the historical and cultural layers, as well as its tangible and intangible artifacts, stories and features of a place. It is important that the slogan is relevant so that locals can identify themselves with it, and visitors can experience it when they visit the city. >

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITY BRANDING

Today city branding has become increasingly important as a tool to make cities attractive and marketable. Cities with distinct brand identities have a better chance to stand out and achieve their economic, social and cultural objectives, win bids for major events and attract large flows of tourists. High attractiveness and a strong appeal ensure the future of towns and cities of all sizes; secure the next generation of skilled workers that are so critical to companies; attract investors and businesses; create popularity among tourists, and, ultimately, increase the number of local residents.

* Deem Communications is a full-service PR & marketing agency established in Yerevan, Armenia in 2006 by Canadian-Armenian founder, now Creative Director, Raffi Niziblian.



WHY GYUMRI

Gyumri is the second largest city of Armenia, famous for its cultural wealth and outstanding historical heritage, strategic location, incredibly witty people and a lot more. Gyumri is also about TALENT! The city and its surroundings have given birth to many of the greatest minds and champions of Armenia. Gyumri's identity is rich and multi-layered. Branding is the process of bringing all these layers together and creating one comprehensive identity that would capture an emotion and make a lasting impact on the public perceptions and the future development of the city. Gyumri has a unique story, one that merits the attention of the world. With much history under its belt, from Kumayri, to Aleksandrapol, to Gyumri, the city now boasts the oldest beer brewery in Armenia, the only gallery of women artists in Armenia, a historic 360° fortress, splendid architectural gems with distinct Aleksandrapol Belle Époque style made of black tufa as well as a recently evolving tech industry with emerging startups. Despite the grave repercussions of the 1988 earthquake felt even today, Gyumri is now a city full of promise.



G stands for Architecture;
 Y stands for Champions;
 U is about the Beer;
 M is where IT & Technology happens;
 R is for arts and crafts;
 I is for the spirit that encompasses the people, their humor, dialect and other features.



THE PROCESS

To deliver Gyumri's unique story, at the beginning of 2017 Deem Communications initiated the Gyumri City Branding project as part of its CSR policy with the intention to make a contribution to the city and community development.

The agency advanced the Gyumri brand stage by stage in cooperation and consultation with the Gyumri Municipality, State Tourism Department, Kumayri Cultural Museum-Preserve and other NGOs and businesses in Gyumri. To create an inclusive process for the development of the branding of Gyumri, a Working Group comprised of eight community leaders and experts within their respective fields in Gyumri was set up to provide consulting and expert opinion during the progress of the branding procedure.

Primary and secondary research on the city's historical and cultural heritage, economic and business environment, and other strategic documents make up the base of the brand development. More than 2000 people from Armenia and abroad were involved in the research process by answering online and face-to-face surveys, seminars, and discussions. Initially, trends were identified based on the outcome. After some testing with focus groups, the key components of Gyumri's identity were defined. There was an overwhelming engagement about the brand development on a dedicated Facebook page that provided insights and allowed us to understand perceptions about Gyumri and set the trends of the new brand.

Many cities and regions used a multi-brand strategy at the time, i.e., there would be one sub-brand for tourists, one for businesses and/or talent, one for academia, sports, culture, and so forth. But the One-City – One-Brand concept is new, like in the case of Gyumri with an external communication focus. The brand's concept connects with each



letter of Gyumri's name. The brand is defined with a simple concept that is delivered as – IN THE TRUE MEANING OF THE WORD. The word, well, is GYUMRI!

The logo demonstrates the many layers that have influenced the intricately woven city. The logo demonstrates two layers that can be replicated into three, four and more. Each of the directions can expand to a wide array of storytelling. The blocks also reflect building and construction, symbolizing the architecture and also the future. In doing so, we show that the city is constantly evolving. The G shape of the circular rotating image represents the G for Gyumri, but also a compass that shows the direction of the city on the map – North-West. Finally, the colors bear the following symbolism. Black symbolizes solidity and strength. As it rotates, the color opens to red, conveying the message about the witty and bold people of Gyumri while the orange reflects the energy and optimism of a sunny city aiming for bright future that the brand suggests. The slogan reflects the talents and the potential of the city. "Shining with talent" became Gyumri's slogan because all characteristics attributed to or perceived about Gyumri have to do with its people, their talent, strength, perseverance, energy, straightforwardness, spirit, creativity, and most importantly unique humor.

EXPECTATIONS

The agency has developed a proposal for the brand's implementation strategy for 2018-2019 to help advance the city's socio-cultural life, inner and outer tourism, and other key fields. The strategy considers methodology applied to shrinking cities, zoning and redefining of public spaces, revitalization models for abandoned or semi-abandoned districts to include concepts of smart cities as well as community economic development formulas. For the strategy to work, the involvement of all stakeholders will be required.

As a first step, a city branding expert Hjörtur Smárason was invited in the framework of the SMEDA project to provide training on "City Branding as a Development Tool" for specialists of different fields (SME, media, public, civil, educational, and cultural institutions). The training sessions were organized in cooperation with Gyumri Technological Center with the support of "Support to SME Development in Armenia" (SMEDA) project co-funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and implemented by GIZ. These two years will be the testing and learning period for all the stakeholders – to monitor and to evaluate the impact the city branding can have. Gyumri, commonly perceived as conservative, can be the first city in Armenia to have and advance its own branding. There is time for everything. This is the time for Gyumri. ♦

HJÖRTUR SMÁRASON:

“Reputation of the city is essential”

Hjörtur Smáráson, place branding expert, storytelling and communications strategist from Iceland based in Denmark, was invited to Armenia, to discover and offer insights for Gyumri specifically, within Branding Gyumri project initiated and implemented by Deem Communications, which is a contribution to the city's development. Mr. Smáráson offered 3-day workshops in Gyumri to CSO's, tourist agencies, media, businesses and students. The meetings were aimed to show how local businesses and organisations can use city branding as a tool for development. The training sessions were organized in cooperation with Gyumri Technological Center with the support of “Support to SME Development in Armenia” (SMEDA) project co-funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and implemented by GIZ.

INTERVIEW : KARINE GHAZARYAN / PHOTO : DEEM COMMUNICATIONS



Place branding is gaining more and more popularity worldwide. Why do you think cities need to be branded?

— It is quite simple: if you want to attract investments and new people, the reputation of the city is essential. For most of the history cities did not manage their reputation, it just happened by itself. With the tools that city branding provides it is possible to deliberately build and direct a reputation. Once a city figures out how it wants to grow, it should communicate this vision in a way that attracts the right target groups, to inspire people by the idea. Therefore, people will be interested to invest in the city and to help it grow and develop.

The work to build a recognizable image of Gyumri has just begun. How do you think an ordinary local business person can utilize the brand, understand what benefits she or he can have or contribute?

— I think very often the word “branding” confuses people. The term is relevant in advertising and marketing, but it’s important to understand that when it comes to place branding it’s not as much about external communication as it is about internal communication. People share a vision, they share an identity of who they are as a city or as a community, and where they’re heading to. It’s really not that complicated for a small business owner to think about how he wants his community to grow, and he is most certainly ready to support in one way or the other.

What do you think of Gyumri branding project?

— You usually need a strong logo and slogan to serve as icons for the communications. In this project, I’m very happy with the outcome. I see it’s quite well done. Still personally I don’t think logo is the most important component of place branding. Building a reputation is much more about communications, about PR campaign, which requires joint efforts of both marketing agencies and local governments. You need to



make sure that the reputation and the expectations you build up match the experience of the city, and then promote and strengthen this image.

On what basis should this image be created?

— There are no limitations here. Cities very often create their brand using a sign, like Paris with Eiffel Tower, or iconic architecture like Bilbao with Guggenheim Museum. Sometimes the brand is a concept, like in Amsterdam or Copenhagen. The latter promote themselves as environmentally friendly communities, and do that by using bicycles! Everyone these days knows that Amsterdam is a city of bikes. At the same time in Copenhagen, where I live, they took it to extreme: there are tilted trash cans across the city, so one can throw trash while passing by on a bike, without stopping. When you see such details, you understand that the goal is taken seriously, that they really mean it by saying “we are a bicycle city.” And place branding can actually be done through small nuances like that.

So it’s kind of an ongoing process?

— Absolutely. And unfortunately most place branding projects all over the world fail in the first years of existence, because advertising agencies create a brand without participation of the citizens. When foreigners come, their experience differs from what was promised in the ads. So I believe,

advertising is not the best way to promote a brand, as no one owns or controls these brands. Places are communities; every part of a community is independent, and can do what they like – use the brand, or do not use the brand. That’s what makes place branding so much more complex. Therefore I think it’s obvious that a shared vision, a shared identity are crucial for the success of a city brand.

I know it’s your first time in Armenia. When you decided to come, what were your expectations?

— I don’t really know Gyumri as a city, but interestingly I have been curious about Armenia for a very long time. It started when I was about 6 years old. I used to listen to strange German music, to a singer Nina Hagen. My favorite song “Born in Xixax” started with words “This is Radio Yerevan...” I wondered what is this Yerevan City like? I wanted to see the Armenian capital as well as the fascinating ancient culture. You have the world’s oldest church here, and that’s hugely interesting! I think this rich culture and the Diaspora are your strongest assets. A lot of people in different countries have touchpoints with the Armenian culture through the minorities. I’m not an exception: I once saw gravestones in a cemetery in Paris with strange alien signs engraved on them. They interested me, and I actually found out what it was: turned out to be Armenian alphabet. ♦

UNITED WE CAN WIN

Recently fashion industry became one of the SMEDA's spheres of interest. In 2017 SMEDA supported a group of young Armenian designers for participating in Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev. Then The Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia was initiated. Regional Post asked two members of the Chamber, designers Sona Hakobyan and Aram Nikolyan, about their impressions from the Kiev fashion event and expectations from this organization.

TEXT : LENA GEVORGYAN
PHOTO : MAXIM GETMAN, KAMO TOVMASYAN





SONA HAKOBYAN

We needed the Chamber long ago, it just happened that no one in the industry had much time to think it through. So, it's good that 12 of us went to the event in Kiev and there we had time to discuss it together and finally come up with the idea of the association. It's very important to work together. The problem is that Armenia itself as a country is not widely known abroad, and the term "Armenian designers" is known even less. So, united we must break that wall of ignorance, and find our niche in the world fashion, like it happened to Georgian and Lebanese designers. In the frames of the newly formed chamber we already have lots of interesting ideas and projects that need to be realized in the near future.

In Armenian fashion industry we have lots of talented and devoted professionals, but I think that we still have a lot of place to grow to present ourselves to the world. And again, being united in the chamber will help with that too.

I hope that the chamber will help to make the market more active. The market is extremely important for this industry. You need customers and finance flows to build a strong industry. The other very important element is networking with the rest of the world. Elementary thing, sometimes a designer cannot find the materials he would like to use in his design, just because he lacks networking with the world. We already have huge plans for 2018 with a number of invited professionals from abroad, master classes, etc. All of these will make really big difference. Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev was the first time we were there altogether. Everyone had his own pop-up store, were we could show up to 15 pieces. It was an interesting format, which allowed us to show a spectrum of Armenian fashion industry and it really gained attention of buyers, journalists and professionals.



Armenian designers at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev





< Nelly Serobyán,
 Sončess, Z.G.EST

v Black oversize bomber: RUZANĚ
 Silky dark red skirt: Nelly Serobyán
 Jinger leather top: RUZANĚ
 Glassy black skirt: Nelly Serobyán
 Black rain-coat: Z.G.EST



^ Shabeeg, LOOM
 Weaving, Biayni

v Dress: Sončess
 Blouse: Naghash





ARAM NIKOLYAN

Any industry needs to be systemized. You can have lots of talented and gifted professionals, but without an organized system and a vision it won't have significant results. It's not an Armenian invention, such organizations are common in the world and all we do is following the global experience. The Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia is still very fresh, I can't talk about the results now, but I'm sure it may change a lot in the industry.

All of us would like to have an event like Mercedes-Benz Fashion Days Kiev in Yerevan too. But it shouldn't be done just for the sake of doing. High quality fashion events have lots of criteria which are not reachable in Armenia now. One day we'll have our own international fashion show here, but what we have to do is to develop the sector in general. We have to create our national signature in the world fashion, become recognizable. And this is where cooperating with SMEDA helps us a lot. I was so pleased when after we applied for support in order to participate in the Kiev event, that organization stood with us. You can try to do many things personally and even reach some heights, but for the whole industry on the national scale it is extremely important to have such partner organizations. And most importantly, Kiev Fashion Week was just a start of a bigger cooperation and partnership of Armenian designers and SMEDA.

For me personally it was very important and symbolic the fact that I presented there my collection dedicated to Sergey Parajanov who lived and worked many years there. ♦



^
Z.G.EST, Petoor,
Sončess

ARMENIAN DESIGNERS PHOTOSHOOT IN KIEV

Photographer: Maxim Getman
Models: Anastasiia Panchenko (K Models), Katrin Stratford (MZM Models)
MUA: Olya Mirnaya

11 Designers looks are: Vahan Khachatrayn "Biayni", Aram Nikolyan, Inga Manukyan "LOOM Weaving", Sona Sahakyan "Sončess", Ruzanna Vardanyan "RUZANĒ", Nelly Serobyan, Seda Manukyan "Atex", Arusyak Poghosyan "Naghash", Ani Mkrtychyan "Petoor", "Z.G.EST" Alla Pavlova



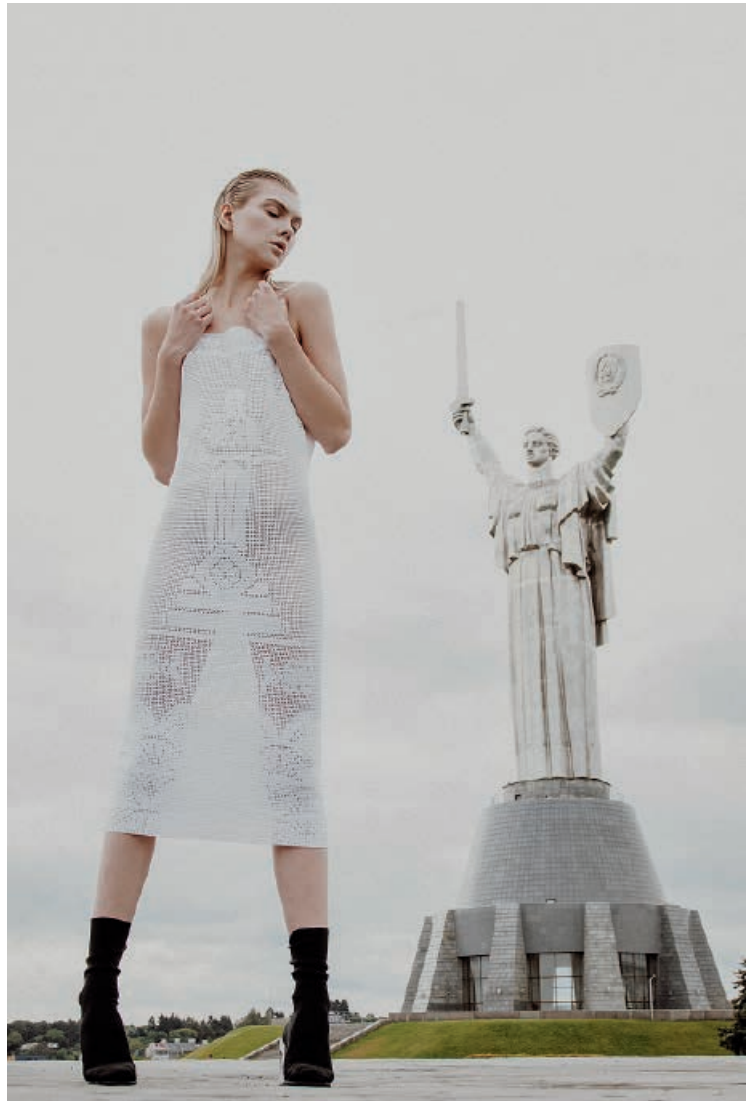
^ Naghash, Z.G.EST,
Sončess, Aram Nikolyan

^ RUZANĖ,
Petoor, Sončess



^ Petoor, Biayni,
Shabeg

^ LOOM
Weaving



FABRIKA

Creative hubs have an important role in developing a city's creative life. This article will focus on one bright example – Tbilisi's Fabrika, which is located in an abandoned Soviet plant and is now one of the hottest spots of the Georgian capital.



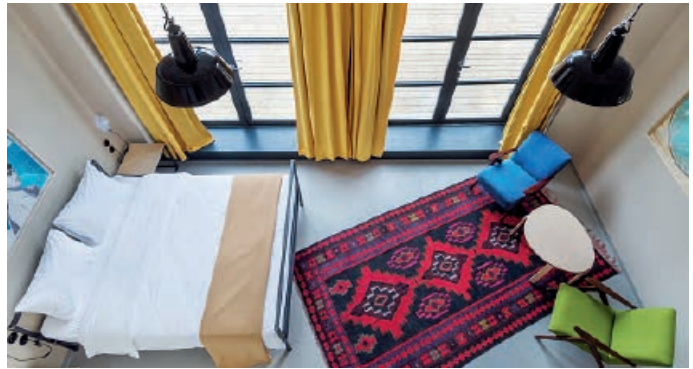
TEXT : LENA GEVORGYAN

The capital of Georgia has many times been compared to Berlin and London for a number of reasons, from the city's nightlife to the stylish local boutiques and street fashion. Once again, this comes to prove that Tbilisi has taken off the veil of post-Soviet influence.

Once upon a time there used to be a sewing factory on Egnate Ninoshvili street, situated in the Chugureti block, where famous Georgian artist Nino Pirosmiani used to live and create, near the renovated prospect of Agmashenebeli. Nowadays, it is impossible to be in this part of the city and just pass by the factory without paying attention to the vintage building, which is entirely covered with creative samples of graffiti (like the remarkable "I spray for you") and street art.

The building was revived and re-named Fabrika, meaning "factory" in Russian. It has been transferred into a trendy urban hotspot, becoming a melting pot for different cultures and ideas. Fabrika is a perfect example of a creative hub with a firm cultural influence.





Fabrika is a complex with the biggest hostel in the region. But this hostel can only be compared to European design hotels. This four-story building offers 98 different rooms, including dorms and private rooms. But if one has already booked a hotel or a guest house in Tbilisi, Fabrika is still a must, which includes a number of cafes, bars, artistic studios, restaurants, boutiques where one can buy stylish and unique clothes and accessories by Georgian designers and shops with books, vintage posters, pieces by local artists, educational institutions and a large co-working space. Besides the above, the first ever graffiti shop was opened in Fabrika. “Weel” has become the best place for hosting the trendiest exhibitions and underground musicians. Fabrika is a real heaven for Instagram addicts, you can take thousands of beautiful snaps inside and out, using the light coming from huge old-school styled windows. Fabrika has a big open space courtyard, decorated with camp-cots. The old facade of the building has been preserved. Some details once part of a sewing factory

continue to decorate the interior of Fabrika, mixed with modern elements and colorful textures. The first line in the description of this spot on the official website reads that this place is for “rebellious minds to create and to share for both locals and travelers”. This place has become one of the symbols of Tbilisi, because here is where old meets new, architecture embraces design and vintage befriends modernity. As of May 2017, Fabrika is considered to be “one of the most interesting and trendy locations” in Tbilisi by a number of influential websites. This place has gone viral on Instagram and on Facebook. Fabrika is a typical example of a creative cluster exposing urban culture within its own walls. In the afternoon, this place is full of working people organizing seminars, business lunches and meetings. The courtyard is open for children to play and enjoy their time. In the evening, Fabrika turns into a stylish place, where one can be sure to find interesting and like-minded people, drink wine, visit the current exhibition, discuss modern art

and listen to electro mixes of guest international DJs. Fabrika has managed to fully integrate into the cultural life of the capital, thus becoming an example of a phenomenon in everyday life. Speaking about an analog of such a creative hub in Armenia, Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy director Tom Fleming stated: “For the creative industries to flourish in Armenia, creative hubs will provide a vital development function. They can help convene creative talent, giving it presence and providing opportunities for collaboration and scale. They can help re-purpose old industrial buildings to signal a new economic age. And they can play a role as enabler and catalyst for creative and knowledge-intensive activities to thrive through tailored business and network support. Moreover, they can help to forge a new identity and confidence for the Armenian economy, with creative hubs operating as lighthouses for a landlocked nation: beacons of entrepreneurship, innovation and imagination which generate new energy, as well as new jobs and new relationships”. ♦

RAFFI NIZIBLIAN:

“Twelve years ago there
was more raw talent”

Raffi Niziblian repatriated to Armenia from Canada in early 2000's and soon became one of the pioneers of the local creative industries. In 2006 he founded Deem Communications, a full service agency that is now one of the leaders of the sector. Regional Post talked to Raffi about different aspects of the creative industries in Armenia, including marketing campaigning, films and visual arts.

INTERVIEW : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN /
PHOTO : DEEM COMMUNICATIONS



Mr. Niziblian, how did you start your career in Armenian creative industries?

— My background is in communications studies and my interest was always in art film production. Back in Canada I was doing short doc-fiction films mostly related to Armenian topics. When I came to Armenia I started working for Land and Culture Organisation and soon after VivaCell as the first Commercial Manager. It entailed sales, marketing, advertising, communications, public relations, customer service – all within my department. And it was very challenging. When I had to come up with advertising,

clips, ideas, I realised there was a lack of ad companies. There were a handful of decent start up agencies with very little experience. We also had an event management component – organising of meetings, conferences and concerts. It was real chaotic, because we couldn't outsource many of them. The same with web-design and customer service. I was in my position for over a year, after which I founded my own full service agency. We started with designing and publishing books, organising events and concerts, creating award winning CD designs, developing and implementing marketing campaigns, and eventually gained

momentum in the creative industries. It wasn't just commercial activities, but also cooperation with museums, tourism departments and government agencies. This is how it all began. It's been already 11 years. We position ourselves as a Western-oriented, transparent, happy and bright agency that focuses on positive messaging – nothing to do with the so called black PR. We are also part of several global networks, as the Armenian representing entity. Recently we've been championing international organizations that want to do campaigning, messaging, raising awareness in Armenia. European Union, GIZ, UNICEF are among them.



We also have a positive history of cooperating with different Armenian governmental institutions.

Is it easier to work with this kind of organizations than with a private sector?

— I'll be honest: there's not a lot of money in the commercial sector anymore. Although we have several key accounts, we've seen that the market has changed a lot. Bigger companies either have inhouse teams and they do marketing and communications themselves, or they have reduced budgets altogether. Digital communications has also gained momentum: one person

THE MARKET HAS CHANGED A LOT. BIGGER COMPANIES EITHER HAVE INHOUSE TEAMS AND THEY DO MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS THEMSELVES, OR THEY HAVE REDUCED BUDGETS ALTOGETHER

can manage Facebook and other digital marketing platforms, which seems to be enough for some. But entities like Habitat for Humanity, World Vision or GLZ need external support, and here we are.

How did the industry in Armenia changed over the years? Are you satisfied with what you see around you?

— There are some solid agencies, that have a solid foundation and a really international level quality. They do pretty good on branding and events. But in Armenia in general there's a lack of good marketing campaigning. It also partially comes from the clients, because they still want to dictate this part of business. One of the reasons for that is a lack of trust and knowledge. There's a big gap between what the expectation is, what the delivery is; what the delivery can be. Sometimes, after implementing a campaign we can't even get statistics from the client to understand if our event, advertising or campaign was successful. And if I don't know where I failed, I can't change my approach and do better next time, right?

On the other hand, the Armenian market is so small, we have maybe a million and a half potential buyers for mass production, and much less if it's specifically targeted, so I understand companies who don't want to spend huge amounts of money. This is also part of the challenge. But I can't understand, when customers fish ideas for free, and then say we don't have a budget. Ideally, they should inform the budget within the brief so you offer ideas within their range. Many think we creatives have a magic wand which brings us ideas in thirty seconds! Creative concept development is a lot of work and time consuming.

What other problems do you see in the industry today?

— We don't have a lot of experimental or a political art. We have artists that make beautiful paintings, but very little related to causes. Those who do, either



don't have a platform to present their works, or very often just get banned. I remember the case with an exhibition on Soviet repressions of 1930's at Hovhannes Tuamnyan's museum. Why was it banned and closed? What about freedom of expression? If this photo exhibit was banned, then would another artist who wanted to do similar work spend time and energy on that? They would probably turn to photographing cute cats and squirrels.

You said that in the very beginning you were more involved in the film industry. What can you say about that sector?

— I returned to film production in last three years, so I know the field from the inside. I was working on a few projects as producer and was able to travel extensively participating in big

and small festivals, workshops and forums. Cannes or Berlin, those huge film events, enables the understanding of the lack of infrastructure, capacity and support that Armenia is offering to its filmmakers. Let's bring it close to home and compare to our neighbours, Georgia. That country has really become a high quality world cinema producer. I don't compare it to Hollywood of course, but to art films. Georgia has put a lot of money and effort, created partnerships with international bodies that would provide further support, co-production, knowledge and money – a real industry. Armenia is just now talking about a new law, 26 years in its independence. We are already late. But this law has its own problems. At most, a film will get a hundred or two hundred thousand dollars over a year or 2. But if your film costs, say, seven hundred

thousands, you are already a minority producer, because the rest you must find from abroad. At the same time, for countries like Germany or France, they are not interested in co-producing anything cheaper than a million euro. So, this in itself is a challenge for the Armenian producer. But this is not only about producers, it is about creating incentives for foreign films being shot in Armenia, about creating platforms for Armenian films to be shown locally or internationally, it is all about creating a financially sound industry.

What is the reason for this situation?

— We don't have a smart set of laws that allow film to flourish. We have talented filmmakers, but not all of them can get through these obstacles. Well, we have commercial films in Armenia that can get sponsorship through product placement. But in three weeks you forget about these films. At the same time, our cultural elite throws around names like Parajanov or Peleshian, to show the glory of Armenian film culture, but don't want to support future Parajanovs and Peleshians to flourish. It's obvious, that cinema may become a brand for a country. Look at India. Bollywood is that country's shining symbol! And it is a huge industry with thousands of professionals and high turnover. While in Armenia, we maybe have two or three festival-worthy films a year, but who's going to sell them to festivals and international markets? It's a huge and difficult job, certainly not what directors should be doing. We need producers and sales agents.

Do you have any idea how it could change?

— I hope we can bring some changes with the newly created Independent Filmmakers' Club of Armenia (IFCA). We are pushing the envelope, we have met with the ministry and discussed the film law, we have raised issues related to infrastructure and organisation, we are trying to raise momentum about the topic. We are now planning



to organize workshops for producers with international organizations, particularly with the EU-funded SMEDA project, and hope that it will bring about some positive change in the industry. But then again, no real large-scale change can be done without state support and political will.

Many industries in Armenia are suffering because of the lack of the new generation of professionals. Do you feel it too in your work?

— Armenia is hurting. There's a large number of exodus. And it's not only about people who are seeking better economic situation, but also artists, creative people, engineers, who have good work in Armenia. They leave never to come back. Trying to hire a qualified employee in our industry has become a major challenge. Quality and qualified designers, editors, content writers – it's difficult to find them. When I started twelve years ago, there was more raw talent, more people who were hungry to learn and work.

But we have a professional creative education. Where are those young students who want to conquer the world with their creativity?

AS A YOUTH, I WAS INTERNING, VOLUNTEERING AND WORKING FOR ALL SORTS OF SHORT AND LONG TERM PROJECTS TO LEARN, TO PRACTICE MY SKILLS AND TO GAIN EXPERIENCE. THIS IS LACKING TODAY

— Where are the people who are teaching them? Or I should say, who are they? Either they are Soviet leftovers who have no idea about, say, digital marketing, or young people who just graduated few years ago. What can a 25 year old professor teach kids? He doesn't have the necessary field experience! And overall students in Armenia are extremely passive, they don't demand. As a youth, I was interning, volunteering and working for all sorts of short and long term projects to learn, to practice my skills and to gain experience. This is lacking today. University graduates call themselves experts and want to be paid the same as their senior.

What about the future of the industry? Are you still positive about it?

— There's a lot of potential. You can see that there's a willingness by a certain segment of people to try hard and make it right. We have great fashion designers who just came together, did their best and now produce lots of cool items and even export them. Look at the IT sector – tech oriented people are doing much better... I know several marketing companies (like us) who export their ideas to Russia and the West, which means they provide high quality services. Though local market is too small for any serious growth to happen, there are people who want to stay here and grow while developing their sectors. For me, living in Armenia means living the good life. Yerevan is small, I can do more in my day, I feel safe, I am more or less free to express my opinions without being repressed. And a lot of creative people around me who work, create and succeed feel the same. I just wish more creatives would see things like I do and stay by our side. We have potential and talent, we just have to sell it better to the rest of the world. ♦

HAYFILM:

Glorious past and unknown future of the national studio



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Hamo Beknazaryan's memorial in Hayfilm

Films helped to spread a patriotic and political agenda under Marxist-Leninist ideology. Thus, the Soviet Union authorities concentrated and raised funds to create a centralized filmmaking structure and set up film studios and administrative structures even in the most remote regions of the USSR. In the 1930s, most of the capitals of the Soviet Republic, including Yerevan, had their own film studios. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, left most Soviet-era filmmaking studios, including Armenian “Armenfilm” (“Hayfilm”) in crisis. After 25 years the fate of the studio is still unknown.

TEXT : RUZANNA BALDRYAN / PHOTO : SATIK STEPANYAN



THE SOVIET ERA

The history of the Hayfilm studio goes back to the 1920s. After nationalization of all the privately owned film theatres in 1923, the Armenian Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) announced the establishment of the State Cinema organization (Goskino) as part of the Commissariat of Political Education. The stockholding company State Photo and Film studio (Gosfotokino) was established in Yerevan, which was later renamed to Haykino (Armenkino). Some of the pearls of Armenian cinematography were produced during the first years of its existence. The first silent films, including “Honor” (“Namus”, 1926), “Zare” (1927), “Shor and Shorshor” (1928), as well as the first sound film “Pepo” (1935) were produced at this film studio. Haykino was renamed several times and was eventually named Hayfilm studio after Hamo Beknazaryan in 1966. Much of the history of the Armenian cinema was written during the Soviet period and is related to this film studio. Throughout its history, Hayfilm



^
Studio's
main building

THE FATE OF 400 EMPLOYEES OF THE FILM STUDIO WAS UNKNOWN, FILMMAKING OPPORTUNITIES WERE UNCLEAR AND THERE WAS A RISK OF THE NEW OWNERS BECOMING BANKRUPT

created around 400 short and feature films, as well as animated films. These films were presented at numerous international film festivals and were awarded prizes. Hayfilm attracted many famous actors, film directors, producers, and screenwriters.

THE INDEPENDENCE AND PRIVATIZATION OF HAYFILM

The collapse of the USSR hit the Armenian filmmaking industry hard. Brutal waves of privatization turned cinemas and film clubs into assets that were transformed into shopping centers, or worse, were looted and left inactive. Making films was an extremely risky investment. Although some films were created at Hayfilm in the 1990s and early 2000s (“Aghet” (1993) and the 2001 film “Land of Sacred Rituals”) there were not many platforms to show films in Armenia and the film market was shattered. One of the most circulated ideas during this period was the privatization of Hayfilm. For some, film was equal to a business tool. The Hayfilm director at that time, Gevorg Gevorg-

yan, thought that privatization could contribute to the development of tourism, hotels and transportation. However, filmmaker Karen Gevorgyan was sure that “they take Hayfilm since they need its archive and territory”, and cinematographer Davit Muradyan was urged against treating Hayfilm the way ArmenTel was treated. These concerns were based on the sad fate of other post-Soviet film studios that were privatized. It is important to note that at the time, the fate of 400 employees of the film studio was unknown, filmmaking opportunities were unclear and there was a risk of the new owners becoming bankrupt.

The film studio was planned to be turned into a Hollywood style film studio. In 2005 Hayfilm was sold to the CS Media City holding, a company co-owned at the time by US-Armenian philanthropist Gerard Gafesjian and his business partner Bagrat Sargsyan – against protests from many of the country’s filmmakers. The new owners of Hayfilm pledged to renovate the

infrastructure, equip the studio, and recover films and fund the production of four feature films per year.

A DECADE OF IDLENESS

Except for the digitization of around one hundred films, none of the commitments were honored. Moreover, as uncovered by the Specialist Committee of the National Film Centre, there were serious violations of standards in the digitized films, and worst of all, the wrong coloring was used. Color conveys mood and atmosphere of a film, if done wrong it can turn drama into comedy and distort cultural heritage. To illustrate this point, one can refer to the case of Ted Turner. When the broadcaster announced his plans to color 100 black-and-white films from Hollywood’s golden era in the 1980s, it resulted in social outcry.

The reckless attitude of CS Media towards the preservation of films, as well as failing to fulfill its commitments, resulted in the urgency to re-nationalize Hayfilm studio. In 2015 the Armenian government retook control of the Armenfilm



Hayfilm's abandoned film archive





studio. Currently, 100% of Hayfilm's shares belong to the state and are under the control of the Department of State Property Management by the Government of the Republic of Armenia. The film studio survives on state support and the rental of two pavilions.

WHAT NOW?

In May 2017, the RA Government confirmed its plans to privatize Hayfilm again. According to them, this will attract investments and make the studio financially sustainable.

Many filmmakers, including film programmer and producer Melik Karapetyan, think that there is no need to revive Hayfilm. Saving the moribund building, which is old, makes no sense. It has no functioning studios or halls and has no quality props that are attractive to rent. It is not appealing for business, and moreover, it is a burden on the state budget: the government cannot provide funds for its maintenance and renovation. According to Melik Karapetyan "If by "salvation of Hayfilm" we perceive its rich cultural heritage - films, it should be managed differently." Although the previous owners distorted films during the renovation process, these

TIS NOT APPEALING FOR BUSINESS, AND MOREOVER, IT IS A BURDEN ON THE STATE BUDGET: THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT PROVIDE FUNDS FOR ITS MAINTENANCE AND RENOVATION

were copies; the original reels are kept in Moscow. He suggests to "Create a state-backed body similar to the National Film Preservation Board in the United States, which will annually select films for restoration, preservation and commercial exploitation of digitized versions." Newly elected president of the Union of Cinematographers Harutyun Khachatryan, who was an ardent opponent of Hayfilm privatization from the beginning, in his latest talk, stated that it is difficult to restore Hayfilm. Due to the careless attitude of the former owners, its furniture, recording equipment, facilities and props have been gone now for years. The best way to save Hayfilm is to privatize it. As a president, he plans to focus on film archive issues of Hayfilm instead. On the contrary, Satik Stepanyan, editing and sound director and cin-

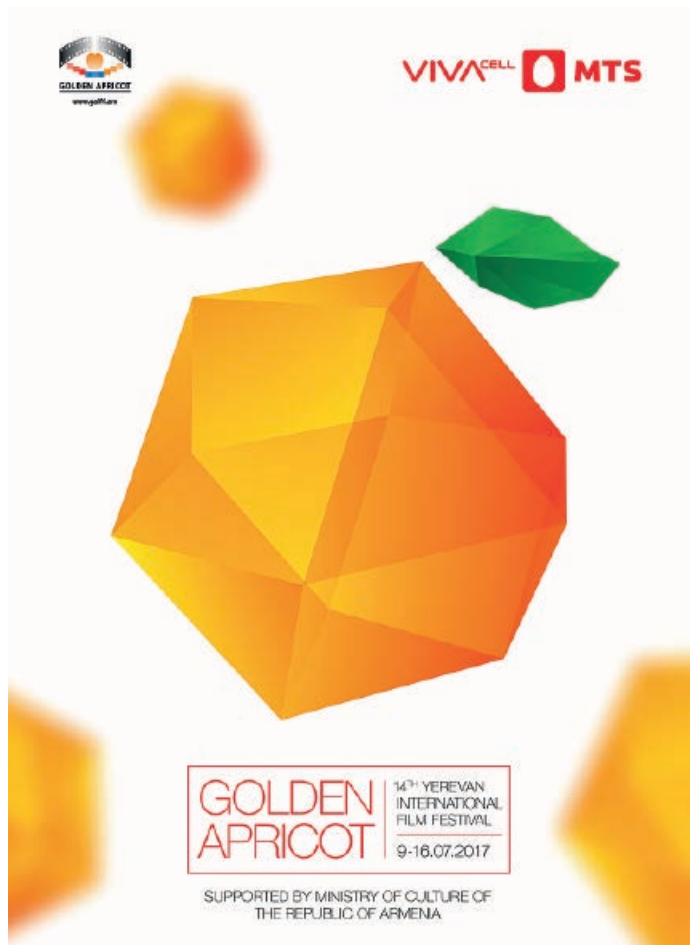
ematographer, thinks that the film studio has the potential to develop based on a business plan. The building used to have one of the best sound recording studios, pavilions, black and white film development lab and other supporting facilities for filmmaking. Although the studio was looted and most of its infrastructure is damaged, Satik thinks that investments and new technical equipment can revitalize the studio. Film is an amazing form of art. It also helps to educate, develop tourism, business and create employment. Maybe Hayfilm indeed has the potential to revive the best of Armenian filmmaking traditions and develop the industry. However, unless the Law on Cinematography is finalized, there is no state policy and holistic approach towards the industry, which could regulate the field and protect filmmakers and studios in the future. ♦

GOLDEN APRICOT 2017:

In search of a future within regional cinema

Yerevan's Golden Apricot international film festival always pays great attention to the regional cinema. This summer Regional Post watched all the films of the region – Turkey, Iran, Armenia, Georgia – shown in frames of the festival and tried to see what do they all have in common.

TEXT : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN



The 14th Golden Apricot Yerevan International Film Festival paid great attention to the popularization of regional film production. Even the opening film was regional oriented. Although the film is not new, the Soviet Armenian silent drama “Khaspush” was screened, shot in 1928 by director Hamo Beknazaryan, a pioneer of Armenian cinema. The dynamic film with quite impressive solutions not typical for that period, depicts the Perisan revolutionary movement and poverty-stricken peasants (who were called khash-pushes), which is actually considered to be a masterpiece of Armenian silent film. It is based on the stories written by

◀
“Khibula”



◀
"City of the Sun"

outstanding Armenian writers Raffi and Vrtanes Papazian. With the brilliant work by Russian cameraman Nikolai Anoshchenko, Beknazarian managed to show the cruel and dark reality of the East for the first time in his "Khash-push" in contrast to the bright, unreal and exotic picture that was dominant in films about the East. The film does not end with the khash-pushes' victory, they promise to come back and win the battle and to build a fairer future (Beknazarian believed the newly established Soviet Union and Armenia, which was a part of the Soviet Union had similar ideology).

It was an amazing coincidence that "A Man of Integrity" by Mohammad Rasoulof was screened on the next day of the festival within the framework of the feature competition. It turned out that nothing significant has changed in Iran since the khash-pushes rebellion 130 years ago. Regular employees are still struggling for their right to have an ordinary life. A man of integrity is stubborn and refuses to give in to both police officers and criminal illegality. But if the unity of oppressed people is highlighted in Khashpush, Rasoulof targets the struggle of an individual. Though the individual is not lonely, a strong and a confident woman portrayed by Soudabeh Beizaeis is his real supporter. Rasoulof fights against the

▶
"Alter Ego"



situation himself. A few years ago, he was imprisoned for criticizing the authorities. Although he hasn't served his sentence, the screenings of his films are prohibited in cinemas of his native country. He shoots new films secretly, falsifying the certification of the scripts. Thus, he repeats his character's path, trying to find alternative ways and showing amazing flexibility to achieve the goal. Because of Iranian censorship and restrictions, Rasoulof just like his famous colleagues, such as Asghar Farhadi who received two Academy Awards (in 2011 "Nader and Simin" by Farhadi received a Grand Prix – Golden Apricot for Best Feature Film), skillfully uses special semi-signs, space, sound and music that remains out of frame to show different nuances. Thus, he uses those restrictions to develop the language of cinema.

"Ember", shot by Turkish director Zeki Demirkubuz focuses on a female character. Unlike a Man of Integrity, the poor main character in Ember finds herself in the middle of a love triangle. She is dependent on two men, one of which is her husband who has disappeared and the other one is a rich employer who is in love with her. Despite the cinematic rhythm and impressive acting, Ember loses its power during the second half of the film. The woman fails to decide what the right decision for herself and for everyone is and the director loses his way through the film.

If Iran and Turkey (despite the censorship) have once again managed to prove that they have leading positions in regional film production, Georgia and Armenia (both presented their films at the festival) are still searching. ▶



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"Ember"

At first sight, *Khibula* by Georgian director George Ovashvili, participating in the feature competition, is a brave attempt to look at the beginning of the 1990s, the period when Georgia faced a difficult situation, experiencing political chaos and civil war after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A soviet dissident and the first president of independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia is the main character of the film. But the fact is that his name is never uttered during the film, other characters respectfully call him "Mr. President". So, pathos is the main issue of the film.

The old and grey-haired "Mr. President" has an eminent look, he is proud, but he does not understand the way he should act. The continuous repetition of the same scheme is another issue of the film. The President wanders around forests and canyons looking for shelter. People respectfully welcome him, show their support and sing (a common cliché in Georgian films, they sing on many occasions). But the President suddenly leaves because of serious danger. And this situation continues until he reaches *Khibula* village. As a result, the film fails to show the development of the story and to expose the nature of the main character. The director builds the same primitive pyramids and fails to develop the narrative.

Two Armenian films out of three for their part did their best to seem complicated, but they mainly failed. For instance, "Alter-Ego" ("Archbishop's Silence"

originally in Armenian) by Vigen Chaldranyan, the only Armenian film in the feature competition, managed to have a short theatrical release in 2016. It was positioned as a film about Archbishop Komitas, one of the most important figures in Armenian culture, who is also considered to be one of the main symbols of the Armenian Genocide. While being exiled from the country along with other Armenian intellectuals on the 24th April 1915, Komitas survived but experienced a mental breakdown and spent the last years of his life in a psychiatric hospital in Paris.

The scene of the exile in "Alter-Ego" seems to be one of the most important elements, but an Armenian writer, writing a book in 21st century about Komitas, is the main character of the film. His visions about Komitas and the conversations with the director Vigen Chaldranyan are mixed in the film. Alter-Ego seems to be complicated and each character expresses the author's thoughts about art, history and humanity. But they use such archaic and simple language that one is amazed knowing that this film was released just last year.

"Bravo, Virtuoso!" by Levon Minasian, presented at the Armenian Panorama, is the director's debut (the film is produced by Robert Guédiguian, a prestigious representative of French film production). The film is about a musician, who became a killer against his will. "Bravo, Virtuoso!" could have

been a farce, an interesting sample of a comic dramatic genre, but as a result it became an unbalanced and confusing film and the director failed to define its genre. Young and talented actor Samvel Tadevosyan can definitely be considered the discovery of the film. Samvel also stars in two other films presented at the Armenian Panorama. "The Line" with Samvel Tadevosyan produced in 2016, is about young men heading to the front lines of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1991. The film by Mher Mkrtchyan unlike the other two Armenian films, does not tend to seem unique and sophisticated. This is a simple war drama with all the necessary elements typical for such a film. "The Line" is about love, self-sacrifice, loss and betrayal.

Both Armenian and Georgian directors have recently started to touch on the first years of independence more often in their films. In 2016, "Good Morning" by Arevshatyan, is about a child growing up during the period of the siege (blockade), which won the Armenian Panorama. It is obvious that topics about the Nagorno-Karabakh war and the cold and dark years of Armenia will still be adapted by the language of cinema, especially given the fact that the generation of filmmakers that were growing up during that period is all grown up now.

The reflection on the post-Soviet era continues in the regional documentaries presented at the festival. Unlike

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"Man of Integrity"



∨
"Bravo, Virtuoso!"



∧
Mohammad Rassoulof

"Those from the Shore" by Tamara Stepanyan, about Armenian refugees in Marseilles, "The City of the Sun" by Rati Onlei shows the residents of an abandoned and forgotten Georgian industrial town after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The beauty and the abandoned buildings of huge factories buried in the mountains and forests and the life of people struggling to find a piece of bread is shown for almost two hours. One of the residents breaks the steel bars of a former factory to make some money, another one performs at one of the state establishments during a not so crowded

event (another Georgian film where the characters sing and make toasts). The directors do not talk to the characters; he takes the role of an observer documenting their everyday life. Even at the end of the film the director shows no hope for the future, when a demon-like bulldozer demolishes one of the factories. This uncertainty about both the present and the future is the main idea in regional films. The characters of "Those from the Shore" are asylum seekers, who go to France in search of a better future, but begin to live in-between space. It seems they live between the past and

the present, and by the shore they float in limbo. The memories about snowy Armenia are bright and colorful as compared to their black and white present. It should be noted that while receiving the award for the best documentary, the director urged her friends to come and build a new Armenia instead of emigrating. If the future is uncertain in terms of politics and the economy, one can certainly see this future reflected in film production. Maybe we will manage to see new results, or the next step at the Golden Apricot 15th Yerevan International Film Festival next year. ♦

ARSEN BAGDASARYAN:

“Film is a free world”

Regional Post discussed the future of the Armenian film industry with the head of the country’s film commission Arsen Bagdasaryan. Next year Armenia’s first ever film law will come into effect and, Bagdasaryan believes, will make the Armenian film industry great again.

INTERVIEW : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN

Mr. Bagdasaryan, for years you’ve been working in the United States as a film producer. What made you leave that path, come to Armenia and try to change its film landscape?

— This all started in 2014. I came here as a producer with business partner and famous comedian Ken Davitian. We had a fully financed studio model we wanted to implement, and we had a romantic comedy project with an eight million-dollar budget that we wanted to shoot here. But here we discovered that there’s no film law and no rebate program. It made our investors turn down the idea. It was such a disappointment, to have the money but have no opportunity to spend it in Armenia. I did some research, talked to different people and understood that there’s a will to change things, but no idea how to do it. Soon Mr. Armen Amirian was appointed minister of culture and earlier this year my colleagues and I had a meeting with him. He said “come with me and make this happen”. I’ve never been a film commissioner, but I had a will to change the situation and a big network to do it. So, I decided to put my businesses aside and dedicated myself to implement the changes in the country I was born in. That’s how I started to work on the film law, the law that will bring all the other changes to the industry.

What were the main challenges you faced while developing the law?



— For months we discussed all the details with different groups of professionals. I'm not a lawyer, but I have years of experience in film production and had a great legal team behind me while developing the law. The biggest challenge was to make it applicable to the current laws of Armenia. I think we managed to find the balance.

As I can see, there are certain filmmakers here, who are active in the industry and have a good understanding of what the law should be. Complications can occur when we see that some of the current international film laws don't quite fit with the current Armenian laws. That means we have to balance this. So far, we managed to do so, discussing it line by line with all the interested parties. If everything goes well, we'll have the law by the beginning of next year.

Did you face criticism from professionals?

— Many people criticize the monetary model, claiming that it will just become another commercially viable project. Well, any project that has exposure needs some sort of monetary compensation. If you distribute your film properly, it means more people see it and the more money it will bring to you as a filmmaker. At the end of the day, what's the purpose of making a film? It's to find your audience, right? It's not about the money, it's about how many people see your art, and how it helps you to do your next project as an artist. I'm not asking everyone to produce slapstick comedies instead of art. But you have to prove that you can do something better, and find your market. One of the biggest problems we have now is the lack of distribution. What can you do with four to five film theatres? We plan to increase this number to at least 20, although it's still not enough. But my ultimate goal is to present Armenian films to the international market.

Many countries in our region or in Eastern Europe are very attractive for big productions because of their tax rebate programs. Do you plan to have it in Armenia?



ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS WE HAVE NOW IS THE LACK OF DISTRIBUTION. WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH FOUR TO FIVE FILM THEATRES? WE PLAN TO INCREASE THIS NUMBER TO AT LEAST 20

— Of course we do, and it's a unique concept that you cannot find anywhere else in the world. We discovered that we are restricted by the international banking sector, which basically says, you can't do this because the country is already in debt. We found another model, which will create a very competitive advantage for Armenia. Traditionally each country that has a program, has a minimum that filmmakers should spend there, usually 500,000 dollars. And once the accounting is done, the government presents them with a voucher which allows filmmakers to claim back some of their taxes, usually around 20-25 per cent. The biggest challenge is that it takes

almost a year to receive the rebate, while time itself costs money. So, in Armenia we found a solution. First of all, our minimum budget is 200,000 dollars. We then provide a list of highly qualified industry organizations, who can provide a range of production services, from stunts to camera rental and lighting. Our goal is to provide all of the secondary crew for filming. As they come to the shooting, we provide them with an instant 20 per cent discount on all of these services. Hypothetically speaking, let's say a foreign crew shoots a film here and rents a camera for 100 dollars. But at the end they only pay 80 dollars, and after that the government pays the 20 dollars to the company that provided the camera. It means less paperwork and less of a headache. It's the first instant rebate program of its kind. I think it's going to be one of the key components that brings greater interest to Armenia. And more filming in Armenia means more awareness of Armenia around the world, more tourism, more economic growth etc.

So, do you think the film industry has a crucial importance for countries like Armenia? >

— In my opinion, film is the main tool that any culture, nation, and country can have to promote itself. If you are able to promote your message through film and television, it's a real success. Film presents the story and the country's landscape at the same time.

Do you think Armenia has stories that may be interesting to the world?

— There are so many hidden ones that still have to be told! Just look at our traditions and myths. Just one example – dragon-stones, “Vishapakars”, about ancient serpents that were once believed to inhabit lake Sevan. And now, three separate organizations, none of them Armenian, offered us projects related to this topic! The closest to production right now is the one presented by a Russian producer and director. They showed me such a solid story, that I wanted to see it immediately. The other one is a 1.4 million-dollar project from the USA. There are also other stories, you can imagine.

So, the next time Terry George decides to shoot the “Promise”, he won't have to do it Spain?

— Exactly. We have to gain projects like that, ones that need to be shot in Armenia and don't go anywhere else. Of course, I can't blame them for doing that in the “Promise”, because from the perspective of production they needed a place with the infrastructure and the necessary experience. But the next big project about Armenia will be done in Armenia, I promise. By the way, I would like us to stop focusing on the issue of the Armenian Genocide. We can't tell that story over and over. We need to find lighter and fresher topics to show our heritage to the world.

We talked about international productions related to Armenia. What about local filmmakers?

— Any international production that comes here will need local co-producers. And in time these investments will enhance the local film community. Be-

FILM IS THE MAIN TOOL THAT ANY CULTURE, NATION, AND COUNTRY CAN HAVE TO PROMOTE ITSELF. IF YOU ARE ABLE TO PROMOTE YOUR MESSAGE THROUGH FILM AND TELEVISION, IT'S A REAL SUCCESS

sides, in the law we have a part about funding for local filmmakers. A year's subsidy budget is about 600,000 dollars. We need this model to keep cooperating with a number of European programs.

So, the other part, the film commission model, where we want to make others come and spend their money here, will help us to balance these two structures. In future we will be able to take the profits generated from it and invest in the subsidy model. We will even be



able to grow the fund for local filmmakers. Overall our annual industry budget is only one million dollars. It's astonishingly small, but we're a small country. But we have to start from something.

This year Armenia applied to the Academy Award with Iranian-Armenian film "Yeva", which seems an interesting precedent, considering how strong Iran's film industry is. Do you plan to deepen cooperation with regional neighbors in the future?

— Iran has a very active industry, though they have lots of topics they cannot touch on in their films. And that makes them go to Georgia or Armenia to produce what they can't in Iran. Partnerships with local neighbors, and not only, is a very important part of our program. We proposed active packages to India, Iran, Russia and Georgia. We want to create an ideal situation for all of our neighbors. This includes Turkey, unless it's a political film. Film is a free world. You can make a film about anything, anywhere, anytime. It doesn't matter how tense the relationship between Iran and the US is, you can still see Iranian films shown in America and winning awards there.

Georgia had four films featured in different competitions of the Berlin film festival this year, and a film shortlisted for an Oscar a few years ago. What can we learn from them?

— Georgia has many advantages that we don't have right now. They have a tax program, studios and infrastructure. The latter is probably the most important component. Honestly speaking, even if ten American productions come to Armenia right now, we won't be able to provide them with everything. But that's just for now. In the near future we can even go one step further than Georgia. It's very important to open borders in terms of filmmaking. Look at Hollywood, the world leader of the film industry. They constantly look for new markets and new countries for co-productions, to make low or middle budget projects that will see a profit. And we have to be there.

Where will Armenian cinema be in five years?

— If all goes well within the next five years, we'll have our studio system in place. By the way, HayFilm, the national film studio, will be revised and become a very important element of the system. We already have financial contributors that are interested in investing in infrastructure. This will help significantly in transforming our educational system. Let's look at Tumo, it's an astonishing and great project. There is an issue there, however. What happens to the amazing students that graduate from Tumo? They are now receiving basic, maybe even more than basic knowledge, but have nowhere to go after that. My plan is to invite one of the leading US universities to open a branch here in Armenia. Also, we can't forget about IT, and I'm not only talking about the visual effects industry, but also gaming. These are the components of today's film industry. So, Tumo students will have the opportunity to continue their education in a high-quality institution, and will also have practical production experience in the studio system. At the end of this process we'll have positions and lots of work to do for both experienced professionals and for the newcomers. In five years' time we'll have about three thousand permanent jobs. As this happens other partnerships will come along.

This sounds optimistic.

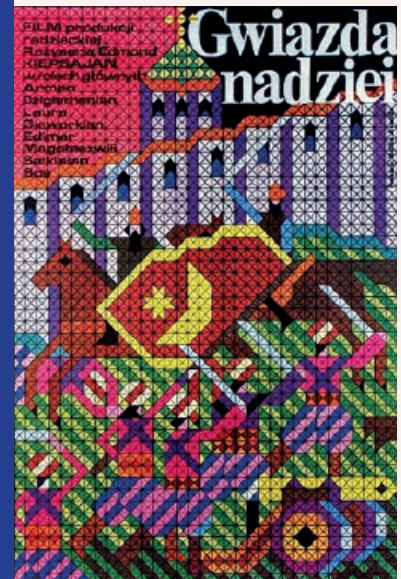
— In 2014, during an interview on this topic, I was asked whether I thought these changes were possible or if they were just a dream. I said: "Everything starts with a dream". I had a dream. And seeing progress within the last three years, it's astonishing how far we have come. We are now close to something really big. This isn't only about the growth of our country, it can't be. It's a mutually beneficial relationship we build with the local industry, local government and foreign businesses. And it will work. ♦

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JIVAN AVETISYAN: “Make films instead of the noise”

Armenian film director Jivan Avetisyan's second feature film, “The Last Inhabitant” recently won the feature competition prize at Pomegranate film festival in Canada and will soon appear in HBO East Europe's catalogue. Meanwhile the filmmaker is already working on his third picture. Regional Post talked to Avetisyan about the nuances of film production in Armenia and his vision on the future of the industry.

INTERVIEW :AREG DAVTYAN

We heard the news that “The Last Inhabitant” is bought by the HBO East Europe channel...

— We are still in the process, but yes, the deal is happening right now. The channel will have a one year exclusive license to show the film, and then half a year more without exclusive rights. At this point our team in Lithuania is preparing a video file with HBO's guidelines.

You mentioned Lithuania. You cooperated with co-producers from that country on both your films. How important it is to have partners in different countries?

— Of course, you can shoot the film with your own money just staying in Armenia. And it happens very often I have to say. But as I see it, Armenian film industry's development is largely connected to the co-production mechanism. If one wants to be involved in the world market, and that's what any filmmaker wants, one must have big actors, good stories and production companies, known in the market. One may have a film from a country not widely known worldwide, but if there is a production company or a co-producer from France, or Germany, or Netherlands, it's way more trustful for the buyers and distributors. Without that, one may have a great picture but never



^ Premiere of “The Last Inhabitant” in Los Angeles

< With “The Last Inhabitant” executive producer Adrineh Mirzayan



^ With composer Serj Tankian and producer Kestutis Drazdauskas

v Jivan Avetisyan's upcoming project



< Avetisyan's first feature film, "Tevanik"



find a market. I understood the importance of that five years ago, when I first went to the Cannes Film Market and saw how the global industry works. Film industry is such a global, international thing. Look, if twenty years ago Abbas Kiarostami's "A taste of cherry" wasn't selected for the Cannes Film Festival (it later won the Palme D'or prize), I probably would not see it. Then I wouldn't know the great actor Homayoun Ershadi and wouldn't try to get him to act in my film. But that's what happened and Ershadi played one of the two leading roles in "The Last Inhabitant". And I love the idea that our great local actors have the opportunity

IF ONE WANTS TO BE INVOLVED IN THE WORLD MARKET, AND THAT'S WHAT ANY FILMMAKER WANTS, ONE MUST HAVE BIG ACTORS, GOOD STORIES AND PRODUCTION COMPANIES, KNOWN IN THE MARKET

to work with international cast. Armenia has to do everything for local filmmakers to have more opportunities to work in co-productions. That is the key.

Your first film, "Tevanik", was a co-production of two countries, five countries were involved in "The Last Inhabitant". Which one was easier to make? Does this experience help you on your third feature film, "Gate to Heaven"?

— Well, all of them had their own difficulties, because after each project my team and I had bigger challenges and bigger scales, though we had more experience than before. "Tevanik" was easier, but it was my first feature. "The Last Inhabitant" was way bigger, "Gate to Heaven" is made in even larger scale, with wider geography. >

And all of these three films are related to your native Nagorno-Karabakh...

— Yes, indeed. And the biggest problem here when talking to foreign companies and producers, is that many of them say they don't want to be involved in projects related to a conflict. That means that at home, in Armenia, these kind of projects must get even more support.

What is "Gate to Heaven" about? Is it a war film?

— I would say it's a love story, with a Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and a post-war Karabakh on the background, but not actually a war film. It's about human relations and the mistakes of the past.

Is it so much important for you to have Nagorno-Karabakh in all your films, at least so far?

— We live once. And now we live in a moment in history, where all our actions must have one aim: to finally gain peace and prosperity in all our land. Film is not the ultimate answer, art only raises questions that lead to answers. And that's what I can do.

When will "Gate to Heaven" be ready?

— We plan to do shootings next years and be ready for 2019's festivals. By the way, as far as I know, this is the first film on Karabakh, which is mainly –



^ With famous Italian writer Antonia Arslan



^ Scandinavian Film Festival



^ On the set of "The Last Inhabitant"



^ Crew of "The Last Inhabitant" on the set

^ Jivan Avetisyan (right) in Cannes



◀ "The Last Inhabitant"

^ Jivan Avetisyan's meeting with Cristiano Corazzari – Regional Minister for Territory, Culture, Safety, Sport during the Venice Biennale

about 80 per cent – in English. Because in the story we have international characters, so they communicate in English. At the same time it will make easier to gain international distribution.

What countries are involved in the production?

— Armenia, Lithuania, Finland and France. We are now expecting final agreements from different companies and funds. Each part has its crew, cast and location shootings. All of these make "Gate to Heaven" really challenging and special for me.

What do you think about the film law and the changes it may bring to the industry?

— Film law is a very important thing, but it must be perfect. As I can see, the weakest part of the draft law is that it pays more attention to the foreign productions that can use Armenia as a location, than to the local filmmakers. But not a single foreign production will come here, unless you have experienced and qualified crew here in Armenia. To have that crew you must sup-

WE DON'T HAVE ACTUAL FILM INDUSTRY, INSTEAD WE HAVE A LOT OF NOISE. ONE SHOULD JUST SIT, GATHER A TEAM AND MAKE HIS FILM. AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT I TRY TO DO

port their local projects. That's how my partners in Lithuania work: his production company has more than a hundred professionals who do dozens of local films and at least two big scale American productions during a year. Local cinema must be on the first place.

What skills must a filmmaker in Armenia have to be able to shoot films he wants?

— We don't have actual film industry, instead we have a lot of noise. One should just sit, gather a team and make his film. At least, that's what I try to do, not waste my time on making noise about problems of the industry, but actually trying to do something. First we wrote a script with Artavazd Yeghiazaryan and Mko Malkhasyan, then started fundraising and preparations for the production.

How is the fundraising taking place? Is it difficult?

— We are using all the mechanisms, that are common in the industry. It means that not only we apply to the international film funds, but also try to get the product placement – of course without harming the story. The other important part of this is charity: we already have support from Tufenkian, Hamazgain and Pyunik foundations, and negotiate with others. And also organize crowdfunding. At the same time, we use all the money that comes from my previous two films screenings and sails. But most importantly, we hope to get support from Armenian Cinema Center to shoot the film we want the world to see. I'm sure, the result will be satisfying for all the parties. ♦

THEN WE TAKE BERLIN

Film critic Diana Martirosyan, who has covered five film festivals (Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Tehran, Yerevan) this year, explains the importance of representation at international film festivals and exposes the unique approaches of each festival and the differences of the various atmospheres.

TEXT : DIANA MARTIROSYAN



CHAIN REACTION

Probably all filmmakers strive to feature at the world's leading film festivals, such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin, or Sanders, Locarno and Karlovy Vary. But it is not so easy. First of all, the film should comply with the policy, the conceptual components



and the principles of the festival, that have been formed over the years. And of course, it should be a quality film. The major festivals and the market in general are in the constant radar of distributors, producers and sponsors.

So here is the perfect opportunity to show the work to everyone who can make the film successful and it will become easier for the author to start shooting the next project. At the same time, it will be an honorable moment for the representative country.

One successful Armenian film can pave the way for other Armenian filmmakers. Thus, the success of Abbas Kiarostami at Cannes film festival years ago attracted the attention of the world to Iranian cinematography, which still manages to preserve its reputation. Armenia, meanwhile, remains a mainly unidentified area at international film festivals.

THE POWER OF MEDIA

It is easier for our regional films to appear at Berlinale. The philosophy of the festival where films compete for golden and silver Bears are sociopolitical topics. Very often the festival highlights urgent political and social issues of "second world" countries.

Four Georgian films were submitted into the different programs of Berlinale at the same time. "Hostages" by Rezo Gigineishvili, "My Happy Family" by Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross, a joint production between Germany and France, and "City of the Sun" by Rati Oneli, a documentary co-production between the USA, Netherlands and Qatar. The Georgian animation "Li.le" by Natia Nikolashvili was represented at the Generation competition program.

Of course, a few Georgian or Iranian films can be represented at competition programs of the Moscow Film Festival, Iranian Fajr International

Film Festival or at the Golden Apricot Yerevan International Film Festival. But those will not have the same effect as Berlinale. First of all, about four thousand film critics will not watch these films, the leading magazines and websites in New York, or Hollywood will not publish reviews about them.

The presence of celebrities, screenings of the greatest movies of the year and the media representatives from all over the world are among the advantages of the leading festivals.

THE ADVANTAGES OF QUEUES

There are always queues for screenings at Cannes and Venice. That's the way it is. There is no such kind of policy in Berlin, because the German system has developed a special rule, allowing tickets to be obtained for free. One needs to collect them beforehand and should not be late for the screening.

But the tiresome queues in front of the entrances may be useful. Some are stuck on their phones, reading the reviews of previous films, or writing their own comments, while others do not mind talking, forgetting about their working lives. You can just discuss the films you have watched, or exchange contacts, ask them about the film industry of their own country, or about festivals, you can also represent the situation of cinematography of your native country, everything depends on your rhetorical skills and the situation.

From a journalistic point of view, such kinds of accidental meetings can be very useful for the future, because it is impossible to see around four or five thousand journalists standing next to each other in Armenia, right?

Queues in Venice are not as "savagely" as they are in Cannes. There is no special area to drink a free cup of coffee or to smoke a cigarette in Venice, in contrast to Cannes. But the atmosphere in general is not intense and the agenda is lighter in Venice, so both of the festivals sup-



pose networking. Unlike these two festivals, Berlinale, which takes place in February, is not centralized in one special area.

THE RECOGNIZABILITY OF A COUNTRY

The trend of Georgian films this year, and the number of journalists and film critics who watched those films, the PR companies and the number of posters and articles in different magazines and websites prove the recognizability of the country.

When some coincidental acquaintances ask Georgian journalists, whilst drinking coffee and talking in lounge areas, about the current situation of filmmaking in Georgia, they can easily tell them about these films, which seem to become real visit cards thus showing the engagement of their country with the world.

Of course, the international media is much more interested in Hugh Jackman and "Logan", which was also one of the premiere films at Berlinale, as compared to Rezo Gigineishvili and his "Hostages". But the films produced in our region do not even try to compete with famous European or American filmmakers. These kind of festivals are huge fields, where your film has a great chance to be viewed, for instance, by Robert Pattinson, who could just come up to you after the premiere and congratulate you. Exactly what happened to a young Russian director Kantemir Balagov.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE MONEY

So here is a question for you, if there are no international events, where else can one achieve these kinds of results? This is why almost all filmmakers dream to be present on such platforms, participate at forums and film markets, exchange contacts, and meet with producers and actors. "Armenian films are nothing else but interesting", the person responsible for film selection from our region Joel Chapron stated, explaining that he has not seen a real piece of art for 15 years. Chapron noted as well that it is not about the money, because there is money in Kazakhstan, but the country does not produce quality films.

Of course, Georgia is not one of the richest filmmaking countries among our neighbors, but it is definitely one of the most active along with Iran. Both Iran and Georgia have managed to understand what is interesting on the international market of festivals, they know what to expose, taking into account their own inner sociopolitical or traditional peculiarities and issues.

Generally, one should feel the vibe and walk along to the harmony of its rhythm. The Armenian film industry has not yet felt this vibe. The moment our filmmakers forget about apostolic functions and start watching not only commercial projects, but all the best films produced throughout the year, they will find out which path they should choose. And maybe one fine day we will discuss Armenian films, while drinking coffee with journalists at Berlinale. ♦

FILMING THE PAST, SHAPING THE FUTURE

From the Soviet Union to the present day

How cinema was used as a tool of propaganda and ideology in three neighboring South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN



> "Davit Bek", 1943

When talking about the relationship between ideology and cinema the first things that come to mind are Nazi and Soviet propaganda machines with their two admittedly talented representatives, who ironically happen to both be ethnically German, Leni Riefenstahl and Sergey Eisenstein. Meanwhile, a second look at the propaganda machines of both totalitarian systems reveals that Soviet cinema, unlike its Nazi counterpart, had various stages of development due to its comparatively long life-span of some seven decades and that the ideological control was not always tight, and even their messages could somewhat change due to the certain unfolding political environment.

Cinema often conveyed ideological messages through historical films and Soviet ideology could not miss such an opportunity to promote its own agenda through the general public interest in their own national history. Thus, cinema became an important playground where nationalism was put to the service of Soviet ideology coupled with veneration towards the Big Brother, Russia, which according to the Soviet historical grand narrative, “saved” the smaller nations from powerful empires.

CINEMA OFTEN CONVEYED IDEOLOGICAL MESSAGES THROUGH HISTORICAL FILMS AND SOVIET IDEOLOGY COULD NOT MISS SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY

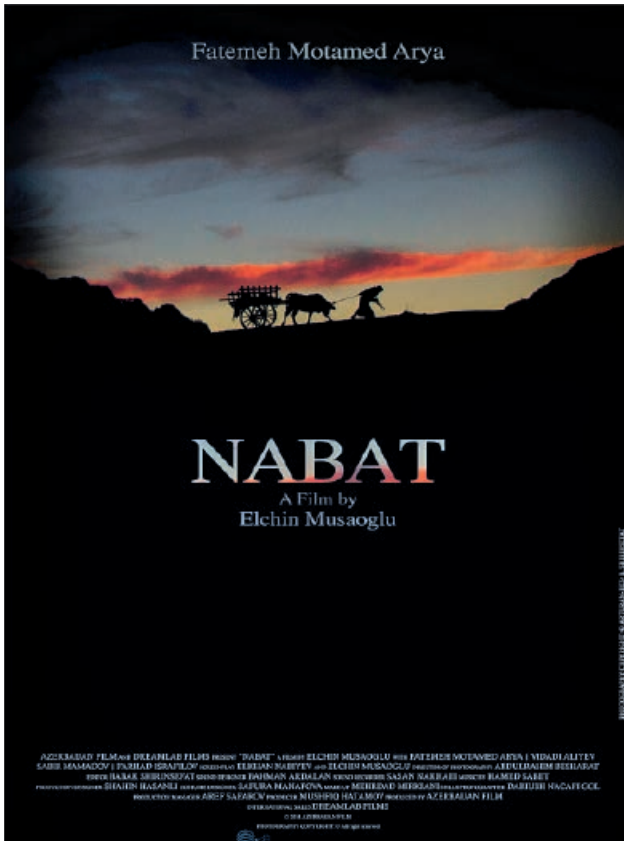


“Pepo”, 1935

“Garegin Nzhdeh”, 2012



“Nabat”, 2014



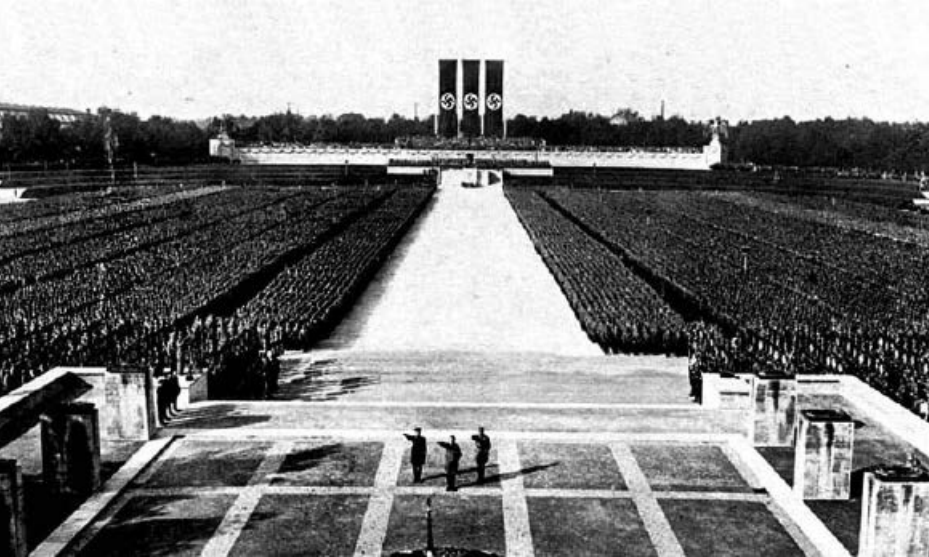
This article will focus on consequential historical films in the Soviet and post-Soviet era cinematography of the South Caucasus.

ARMENIA'S PAST IN THE LANGUAGE OF CINEMA

Armenian Soviet cinema in the 1920's at the height of korenizatsia¹ was almost silent about Armenian national issues. Hamo Bek-Nazaryan's “House on top of the Volcano” (1928, shot in Azerbaijan in cooperation with AzDovletKino) was a rare attempt to touch on the relations between different nationalities, namely in the oil capital of the Russian

¹ Literally translated as “nativization”; a term used to describe support for national self-consciousness of the representatives of various ethnicities, which were to be “national in form and socialist in essence”. This policy was stopped at the beginning of the 1930's and revived to some extent during World War II

▼
"Triumph of Will", 1935



►
"Babek", 1979



empire Baku, however, as it is expected the film glorifies the solidarity between the workers of different nationalities as opposed to the oppressing bourgeoisie, personified by an Armenian in the film.

In a rare instance, Russian imperial chauvinism and cultural racism were also episodically displayed in the pre-war Armenian cinematography such as in the first Armenian sound film "Pepo" (1935, Bek-Nazaryan) where a member of the Russian administration in Tiflis (Tbilisi) mockingly referring to an Armenian wealthy merchant Zimzimov dancing "Asiatic dances". However, it is generally true that Armenian cinema largely lacked criticism of Russian tsarist policies and we see such a trend throughout the existence of Armenian film history and even in the present day.

A new fashion for historical films came with Eisentein's "Alexander Nevsky", a historical drama (1938) assessed by some as sending a warning message to Nazi Germany. In the wake of these films and particularly during World War II (part of which was dubbed the "Great Patriotic War" in the USSR) several historical dramas were shot, aimed at encouraging respective nationalities while in the meantime keeping and intensifying pro-Russian sentiment. It was under such conditions that the first Armenian historical drama "Davit Bek" was shot (released in 1944, directed by Hamo Beknazaryan), featuring the story of an uprising, headed by Armenian nobility in the south-east of Armenia against larger



² Meanwhile it is known that Nzhdeh did not believe that coexistence between Armenians and Caucasian Muslims was impossible and even contemplated the idea of a possible alliance against the invading Red Army.



>
"Alexander
Nevsky", 1938

A RMENIAN CINEMA LARGELY LACKED CRITICISM OF RUSSIAN TSARIST POLICIES AND WE SEE SUCH A TREND EVEN TODAY

Muslim lords during the period of decomposition of Iran's Savafid Empire in the 1720's.

The film also included historically misplaced, completely unattested and highly questionable characters and episodes (like Tsar Peter the Great practically backing the uprising and even naming Davit Bek as its leader, sending Russian gunners as support etc.) with an apparent purpose of showing Russia's presumed "eternal support" to the Armenians and probably calling Armenians to "pay off" Russia with the same in the war, or maybe hinting that without Russians, Armenians could not make a stand against their powerful neighbors, Turkey first of all.

This topic was touched on yet another time by one of the biggest Soviet blockbuster makers, Edmon Keosayan (he is mostly known for the iconic "Imperceptible Avengers" trilogy) in a historical two-episode drama "The Star of Hope" (1978), continuing the story where it concluded in the previous film. This time the victorious rebels, who after Davit Bek's death chose a new leader Mkhitar Sparapet, had to deal with an even stronger adversary, the advancing Ottoman army. Quite in the fashion of the previous film, in an apparent historical distortion, after the Turks seem to have vanquished the Armenian defenders, Russian troops appear at the very end of the film and are greeted joyfully, despite the widely known fact that the Russians actually arrived some one hundred years after the described events.



Such historical misrepresentations, which not only were not "corrected" after decades, but on the contrary, were even more developed, could hardly be a coincidence. Unfortunately, historical distortions, albeit to a lesser extent, or rather misplacements, are present in post-Soviet Armenian historical dramas, most representative of this is the film "Garegin Nzhdeh" (2013, directed by Hrach Keshishyaa). It touches on the events in the same southern region of Armenia, Syunik, during Armenia's independence in 1918-1920 through the main character, Garegin Nzhdeh, the military leader of the region in 1919-1921 and the years following up to his death in Soviet prison in 1955. The film, with many clichés and sometimes primitive nationalist imagery, according to some critics simplifies or even avoids some "hot issues", including his complex relations with the Soviet authorities, portraying him as a stark nationalist with an almost racial hatred towards the "Turks" (a term used by Nzhdeh's character to also refer to Azerbaijanis)². In the

“October”, 1927



“Repentance”, 1986



meantime, ethnic Armenian Soviet KGB agents, who under Stalin are expected to be the worst of their kind, are depicted as quite polite and reserved towards their renowned inmate, the reasons for which remain unclear to the viewer, creating confusion rather than clarification. The film does not provide an adequate picture of the Stalinist regime's attitude towards Armenian nationalism, despite the fact that it is shot years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Overall it can be said that Armenian cinema along with historiography are still partially under the influence of Soviet narratives and the current political stance does not permit any state-sponsored large budget film to deviate from that narrative in the foreseeable future.

AZERBAIJAN: CONSTRUCTING ITS HISTORY AND CINEMA

Azerbaijan as a nation is a classic example of the Soviet kornizatsia and nation-building, although its project started before the collapse of the Russian Empire. Cinema was to play an important role in creating such an image and it was used extensively by many directors, some of whom happened to be of different ethnic backgrounds. Initially Azerbaijani cinema avoided touching on historical topics, because of the nation's young age and exercises in nation-building exercises did not go beyond the glorification of Azerbaijan of that period and touching on the recent past. However, the authorities and Soviet ideology gave Azerbaijani historians and publicists more room for constructing history and creating an Azerbaijani or a “proto-Azerbaijani” nation where it could not have existed, such as, for instance in the pre-Turkic past.

AZERBAIJANI CINEMA AVOIDED TOUCHING ON HISTORICAL TOPICS, BECAUSE OF THE NATION'S YOUNG AGE

The first attempts of Azerbaijani historical cinematography referred to the 19th century, around the time of the birth of Azerbaijan as a national project awaiting implementation. The film “Deli Kür” (Mad Kura/Untamed Kura, 1969) represents Azerbaijani nationalism in rather “modest” tones, in which Russian and Georgian “revolutionary-minded” intellectuals played an important role. While welcoming democratic, westernizing and modernizing influences under the Russian administration the films also criticized the “tsarist” regime. The situation soon changed with growing Azerbaijani nationalism and historical appropriation with the aim of artificially making it more ancient to which Moscow either turned a blind eye or even encouraged. A classic example of “ancientization” was the case of the Zoroastrian Babak Khorramdin's anti-Arab and anti-Muslim uprising of the late 8th century in northern Iran which even entered the general Soviet history school textbook under the name of an “anti-feudal movement of the Azerbaijani people”, while it is general knowledge that by that time Azerbaijan/Artopatené denoted a territory south-east of Armenia and was inhabited by people of Iranian origin. In 1979, a film entitled “Babek” was released as a product of cooperation between “Azerbaijancinéma” and “Mosfilm”.

The controversial historian, Ziya Buniatov, was selected as the historical adviser to the film, which probably contributed to its “nationalization”. The film is generally historically misplaced, repeating the above-mentioned statements, lacking any concrete evidence.

Following independence and the Karabakh war in 1992-1994 Azerbaijan produced some outright propagandistic films, one of which was released in 2009 with the title “Qarabagdir Azerbaycan” (“Karabkh is Azerbaijan”). It was shot as a short docudrama, based on the narratives of some of the soldiers killed in the war, afterwards honored as “heroes” as well as including some patriotic poetry recited against background footage of battle scenes between Azerbaijani and Armenian soldiers and atrocities committed by the latter.

The shooting of the film was supported by Azerbaijani ministries such as the ministry of defense, foreign affairs and other state structures, the caption at the end of the film reads. It is hard to imagine that given the present circumstances and the current state of historical narratives in Azerbaijan that any new films challenging the current setting and ideology can be expected. Quite the contrary, more is yet to come, unfortunately.

GEORGIAN CINEMA BETWEEN THE PAST AND PRESENT

Georgian cinema itself was quite distinct in its artistic ways and was well known not only within the Soviet Union but also to some extent, beyond its borders.

From the very beginning it started discussing national issues, albeit speaking the language of anti-colonialism and class struggle. The first soviet Georgian silent film shot in 1921, “The Murder of General Gryaznov”, was devoted to the recent past of the country, namely the 1905 peasant uprising in western Georgia.

Georgian cinema also produced panoramic historical films along the lines of other Soviet constituent republics, like the “Giorgi Saakadze”. It was based on the real story of a Georgian nobleman of the 16th-17th century, allying himself from time to time with Iran and the Ottoman empire who were fighting against each other. Although his figure could otherwise be assessed as “controversial” from the viewpoint of Georgian nationalism, he was established by Stalinist propaganda as a main hero of the nation and was hence glorified. The film was released in 1942 during World War II and showed the success of the Georgian nation’s fight against the Ottoman incursions and their own Iranian rulers. However, the struggle ends in a fratricidal fight, which caused the resistance to collapse.

Meanwhile Georgian film production also produced some large narrative films, which were quite in line with Soviet ideology. The 1983 film “A Written Oath” is an example of this, which as the film suggests in the very first annotation, is dedicated to the bicentennial of the Georgievsk treaty of 1783, under which Georgia became a Russian protectorate. While the current Georgian historiography claims that the



treaty was unilaterally abrogated and violated by the Russian Empire, which simply annexed Georgia, the film’s authors in the very concise introduction announced it as the “first manifesto of friendship and brotherhood” between the two nations. The film depicts Georgia’s suffering from Persian and Turkish invasions and devastating warfare, to which Russian intervention was called for to put an end to. The film also promoted the idea of the communality of the fate of the Caucasian nations, namely Armenians and Georgians (featured through an Armenian merchant figure, who in 1578 was delivering a letter from the Georgian king to the Russian tsar). Meanwhile, only a year after that, Georgian cinema made an extraordinary attempt in its time to touch on the topic of Stalinism. Tengiz Abuladze’s acclaimed film “Repentance”, shot in 1984 but released only in 1987 under Gorbachev’s glasnost, touched on the vestiges of Stalinism in modern society and the need to arrange matters with the past. “Repentance” goes well beyond specific Georgian and even Soviet frames and is a unique and successful film that depicts not only history.

There is little hope that the current situation of historical narratives and film making will change. Independent filmmakers, even if they are ideally independent in terms of finance, can hardly succeed in shooting controversial films (which is certainly the case with Azerbaijan, then Armenia and to a lesser extent, Georgia). There is some hope in Georgia. Meanwhile, speaking of the regional dimension of the issue, Turkish cinema and the state are now engaged in propaganda to deter attempts at spreading knowledge of the Armenian genocide and other problematic issues of Turkey’s recent history and this trend goes hand in hand with the crackdown on civil society and free speech in the country. The hope is that in the current world, borders do not have too much of an impact on the flow of information and there could be films made, albeit not on a large-scale, outside of the region that addresses its issues. ♦

EFFICIENCY, TRANSPARENCY, DEMOCRACY

TEXT : KARINE GHAZARYAN / PHOTO : SDC

In January 2014, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, along with other partners and in cooperation with the government of Armenia, started the project of improvement of the local self-governance system in Armenia. The goals of the project are precise: efficiency, transparency, democracy.

In 2014, the government of Armenia announced the start of territorial administration reform in the country. Driven by the need of optimization of resources, Armenian officials initiated the process of municipality enlargement. In the first phase 142 municipalities were transformed into 18 clusters with population of 165,000. It is expected to have another wave of amalgamation with additional 34 clusters transformed from 325 municipalities. The clusters are formed in a special way: economic, geographical and demographic factors all play their role in the transformation process. Other countries' experience have also been studied and taken into consideration. Before the amalgamation, Armenia had 915 municipalities, 49 of which were urban and 866 rural. The municipalities are extremely unequal by the size of population: whereas Yerevan has about a million inhabitants, half of the settlements have less than 1,000, and many count no more than 50 people. As a result, numerous small communities have difficulties with providing basic public services to citizens. A detailed analysis demonstrates that financially weak authorities are simply unable to cope with problems they face and to exercise their powers. As a member of Council of Europe, Armenia has assumed also a set of commitments and obligations towards this organization, including in the area of local self-government. In particular,



during the development of the new RA law on local self-government the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which Armenia signed, were taken into account. Since 2014, Switzerland as a member of a multi-donor consortium, committed to support the reform contributing to more democratic processes and accountability as well as to improved quality of public services. The successful implementation of the reform will pave the way for further decentralization of powers and functions to the

local level. "People and local authorities on site where local specificities can be taken into account know the needs of their municipalities better, and if we encourage their participation in decision making and equip with necessary skills, they will be able to lead their communities more effectively and decisions affecting the local level will be democratically legitimate." – says Sergey Hovhannisyan, National Program Officer at Swiss Cooperation Office South Caucasus who coordinates the program.



◀
Urtsadzor
settlement,
Armenia

▼
Participants of
Women in politics
program

“All the supporting partner organizations: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation with its German (BMZ) and American (USAID) partners providing financial resources for the program, with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Council of Europe (CoE), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Armenian Territorial Development Fund (ATDF) as implementers use programmatic approach, which means that we all see one goal, join our efforts and work on its fulfillment,” – Sergey Hovhannisyanyan notes. He adds that this kind of international and multilevel consolidation of resources is quite rare. In enlarged municipalities the program provides technical assistance in the form of capacity building and expertise. The program also encourages women to engage in local politics. During previous municipal election, 750 women candidates were nominated, and 99 were elected. 72 successful candidates, or 73%, had participated in trainings within the framework of the program. To strengthen the voices and participation of local governments in the policy/reform dialogue through their main legitimate representation body, the program builds up organizational capacities of the Communities Association of Armenia. The program also makes available funding for community-driven public infrastructure projects to ensure better



access to municipal services, trigger economic development, as well as improving capacities in municipal assets management. The municipalities are trained in 5-years local economic development plan elaboration, as well as in development of result oriented budgeting and annual working plans. Citizen Offices based on “one stop shop” principle equipped with the Municipal Management Information Systems enabling automatic management of information flow are ensuring easier communication between citizens and municipal administration. Seven already existing Citizen Offices prove to be highly effective and appreciated by citizens: the survey showed 97% of

citizens’ satisfaction with accessibility and quality of the services received. While decentralized local self-governance has proven its efficiency in many countries, the transformation process is not at all easy. “The program conducts trainings, provides tools and information, promotes women and citizens active participation with the main aim to strengthen the capacities of the municipalities for establishment of an effective self-governance system in the country, – says Sergey Hovhannisyanyan. – However, it should be noted that the visible results of the reform might be expected in 4-5 years after it has been launched.” ♦

RED, DRY, POTENTIALLY INEBRIATING SUCCESS

Nune Manukyan, the head of “Areni Festival” Foundation and organizer of Yerevan Wine Days told us about her way to ensure consistent economic growth by becoming a dedicated wine lover.

INTERVIEW : KARINE GHAZARYAN

Areni Festival is one of the largest tourist events in Armenia. How long has it been going?

— The idea of the festival emerged nine years ago: we wanted to establish a project which would contribute both to the empowerment of communities and to the development of tourism. With the start being a success, we established the “Areni Festival” Foundation in 2010. And in 2017 we had more than 20,000 visitors, of which 45% were foreigners.

Why did you choose Areni village and not, let’s say, Vernashen?

— The village itself was very willing. They had already held such an event once, and the results were promising. Moreover, at that time they had already made very valuable discoveries related to winemaking in the caves near the village. And in the launch year of the festival the famous 5,500 years old shoe was found. All of this generated discussion about Areni, and the



region became recognizable not only in Armenia, but also abroad. Today, we can already discuss the achievements of the Areni community: domestic winemaking and viticulture has developed, as well as the opening of multiple guesthouses – there was nowhere to spend a night there 10 years ago. But most importantly, serious investments have been made in the area. For instance, before there used to be two wineries in the village of Areni. Now there are three, plus a winery was built in the village of Rind, one more in Yeghegnadzor, and enterprises are also going to be opened in the villages of Chiva and Khachik.

How many winemakers participate in the festival?

— In 2016, we had 17 brands, this year the number increased to 23. There could be more, but not every company has the necessary volume of production. Participation in such festivals means that you are going to spend some resources connected to advertising, free testing, etc., and not all producers have these resources. But the market is growing significantly. Just in the upcoming month two new brands are going to be presented. In recent years, three to four new Armenian wine brands enter the market annually. And I can say for sure

that local wine is an absolute best-seller. This is the aim of Areni Festival: to create new ways for the economy to grow, for people to engage and make a living.

How in particular do you think this is achievable through festivals?

— Festivals in general were underrated before. When Chef Sedrak Mamulyan started his khorovats and tolma festivals, no one really knew the potential of the Akhtala region. People would say he was just kidding around while the country was suffering from poverty. But time has shown that these festivals have had a huge positive impact on the region and on Armenian tourism as a whole. Festivals promote certain sectors of the economy, and at the same time they serve as platforms to summarize and present a year's worth of work. That's why I believe Areni Festival was able to popularize wine production and consumption in Armenia. And that's why another project of ours, Yerevan Wine Days, was so successful. For the first time this May we organized it, primarily targeting Russian tourists as they vacation at this time of year. But the event was attended by thousands of locals too – Yerevantsis have definitely fallen in love with wine!

What other fields does the foundation work in?

— For four years we have been organizing a gata festival in the Khachik village and the mulberry festival in Syunik region. The latter is related to the Silk Road Armenia project. In the first year, the festival took place in Syunik's Goris and Amaras in Artsakh where marvelous mulberry trees grow. In 2017, the event took place in the village of Karahunj which is famous for its mulberry vodka. It's not a coincidence that the festival engages different communities: we try to find a recognized production tradition of the area and promote it to become a strong brand.



Is there such a brand for Yerevan?

— This city can be a great tourist destination if its history is properly preserved and presented. Authentic places are the most precious “findings” for the tourist. I have been advocating for the protection of Yerevan's historical architecture for several years now, and the biggest achievement in this field I believe was the defense of the fire service building on Sakharov Square and a part of Pushkin Street where Nerses Tairyan's home was located. The man who lives there showed us the old granaries which belonged to the founder of the Yerevan Brandy Company. And I was shocked how one could even dare to think about demolishing this place! We claim to have the oldest winemaking traditions and an ancient city, yet we fail to keep even a century of its history. Not only do we lose huge amounts of money that old venues can bring, but we also lose our appeal to tourists – cheap skyscrapers are everywhere, and they do not interest anyone.

You volunteer in a number of charity initiatives. What do you aim to achieve through these projects?

— The largest of these is maybe the Gyumri project which involves purchasing houses for those who still live in cabins. The so called “domikner” are going to be there for a long time if we do not



take drastic action. This project was initiated by my friend, Tereza Mkhitarian, who organized a series of fundraising initiatives for Gyumri and other regions in Armenia. After a while, the owner of Dolmama restaurant Zhirayr Avanyan joined us, and we began to serve charity dinners and hold other fundraising events in Armenia and in Switzerland. For now, 23 houses were bought for families in Gyumri. It's mandatory for us: whenever we buy a house, we demolish the cabin, so that there can be no way back to poverty and distress. I strongly believe that if every one of us will be consistent in what we do – be it charity, promoting tourism, winemaking, or literally any other positive initiative – we could very much succeed in capitalizing on Armenia's huge potential and ensure continuous development. ♦

CURE-ALL TECHNOLOGY

On October 27, Armenian startup Factumsoft signed a contract with Norvex Systems, a major Canadian consulting company, to provide enterprise resource planning (ERP) software for some of their clients. Factumsoft is expected to grow further in external markets and set new standards for ERP systems.

TEXT : KARINE GHAZARYAN

Factumsoft provides ERP solutions which enable companies to automate business processes (including HR, accounting, CRM, reporting, etc.) based on a single platform. The platform is implemented iteratively, and it can coexist with the clients' legacy software in the transition phase. In other words, Factumsoft deploys its solutions one module at a time, enabling the clients to start reaping the benefits of their new system without delay. Factumsoft CEO, Arman Margaryan, is convinced that faster implementation cycles and quick reaction are what most companies need today. "For more than a decade I managed Margasoft, a custom software providing company. During that time, I had a chance to look deeper at how the platforms and technologies emerge and examine the market needs. And what I understood was that there existed a big gap in what companies needed and what vendors provided." It takes a long time to launch traditional ERP systems. The financial stakes are also very high. By the time the system is implemented, the needs of the company may have most likely been changed "It's a game

of catching up, and you never actually do," – Margaryan says.

It was the need to break this cycle that Norvex Systems was driven by when they decided to replace some of their legacy applications. They have been delivering custom ERPs in the construction sector for many years. And, as Norvex Systems Chief Information Officer Michael Saydam states, they decided to nip the problem in the bud. "We're not reactive to our clients' needs, we're actually proactive, and that's why we partner with companies like Factumsoft. Being too busy with their direct occupation, the clients may not feel the pain immediately when it's there. But it is there, and our job is to provide a solution in advance, before it becomes disrupting". Saydam says that big companies often fail to cover the particular needs of various industries. They provide solutions in HR or finance in general, but they do not do anything well specifically for construction or manufacturing companies. In the meantime, Factumsoft allows companies to adjust the software in accordance to their needs. "Our client businesses are usually large-scale – billion

dollars or above in revenues, – Saydam adds. "And the solutions are needed in weeks rather than in months. A quick response is crucial for their systems. This is particularly important factor in choosing Factumsoft: the platform meets our key requirements – flexibility, scalability and rapid deployment." Arman Margaryan points out that Factumsoft has one more competitive advantage – Armenia. The country has great developers and business analysts and the costs of operations here are less than in many Western countries, which allows Factumsoft to uphold quality standards for a significantly lower price.

Factumsoft does not target any one particular industry. Instead, it partners with industry experts and consultants, who have years of experience and in-depth knowledge of their respective industries. This way their efforts are focused on delivering tools for industry specialists, who do not want to delve too deep into the process of software development. It was this strategic approach that allowed the Factumsoft team to create a unique ERP system that is as universal as it is specific. ♦





Once this small restaurant Armenian cuisine was one of the favorite places for residents and visitors. Who has ever visited the restaurant Noyan Restaurant, nostalgically remembers the local cuisine, especially hearty khash, or a live performance of folk, pop all your favorite songs, accompanied the evening in the restaurant. Some visitors came specifically just listen to a concert. And so the years passed, tastes changed, Noyan Restaurant restaurant opened again with the same philosophy, but on a large scale, which today we would certainly be pleased as yesterday and the new visitors.

The entire interior as well as each item individually, deserves special attention. First, the enlarged space in the main hall, thereby the number of tables is added. In addition, next to the restaurant, outside cafe is opened with the modern concept in the format of lounge with large, comfortable , leather sofas, where you can spend some quiet time to relax from everyday hassle. Secondly, there is a bar with a cocktail menu. A variety of flavors and alcoholic combinations, the most colorful color and dry just favorite drinks can be found in the bar of the restaurant map Noyan Restaurant. And if you're a fan of house wines and vodka from the heart of Karabakh, you are here for a real treatq

THE BEAR CRISIS IN ARMENIA:

Rescuing animals from the private zoos

The bear crisis suddenly became an urgent issue in Armenia. Almost every TV channel began to report on the topic, and a number of websites published articles about bears that are illegally kept in a number of private areas in Armenia. Regional Post found the source of the issue and has followed the process of rescuing the animals.

TEXT : VAHAGN TEVOSYAN



The international community made a lot of noise about the treatment of bears in Armenia. First of all, the British welfare group International Animal Rescue released the following statement calling for fundraising: “We are desperate to expose and end this barbaric torture as quickly as possible.” A scandalous article published by the UK-based Daily Mail followed: “The former Soviet country has long had a tradition of capturing and keeping bears, and despite progress in many other areas, animal rights are behind the times in Armenia”. Alan Knight, CEO of International Animal Rescue stated in this article: “I have seen the conditions these bears are living in for myself and they are nothing short of appalling”.

These publications hurt some Armenians and a number of angry statements appeared on different social platforms and in the media, stating that Armenians would solve their problems without any external pressures and that there is no need “to take the garbage out of home”.

Meanwhile, the issue of cruelty towards bears in Armenia isn't new but there has never been a crisis. Many owners say that there are a few bears that have been kept in cages for 15-30 years. The Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC) has been monitoring the

bears that are kept illegally. The FPWC is always vocal about this issue. But the public are usually indifferent as there are supposed to be more important issues in Armenia, compared to rescuing bears.

Rouben Khachatryan, the founder of the FPWC and the head of Yerevan Zoo states: "The attitude towards wildlife exposes much about the reputation and the rating of any country. This is a rule that has been approved in a civilized world and we have no right to ignore it. I think it is not normal when a person imprisons an animal living in a wildlife for an entertainment.

These kind of cases reflects the state of the society as well. It is pity, but there are a number of similar examples. The monitoring implemented by FPWC showed that there are about 80 bears in Armenia that are kept in private areas and in awful conditions. This number is variable".

There are three reasons why the bear crisis has been a real issue in Armenia for many years. The first reason is public indifference, the fact that parents take their children to a restaurant with an imprisoned bear sitting in a cage instead of alerting the authorities. The second reason is the legal deficiency, which does not set severe penalties for such barbaric treatment.

The amendments to animal rights are currently being publicly discussed, supposing tighter restrictions on keeping wild animals. A number of different environmental organizations have been working on this project along with state authorities, although they are not content with the proposed amendments. The FPWC coordinator Arevick Mkrtychyan says that accord-

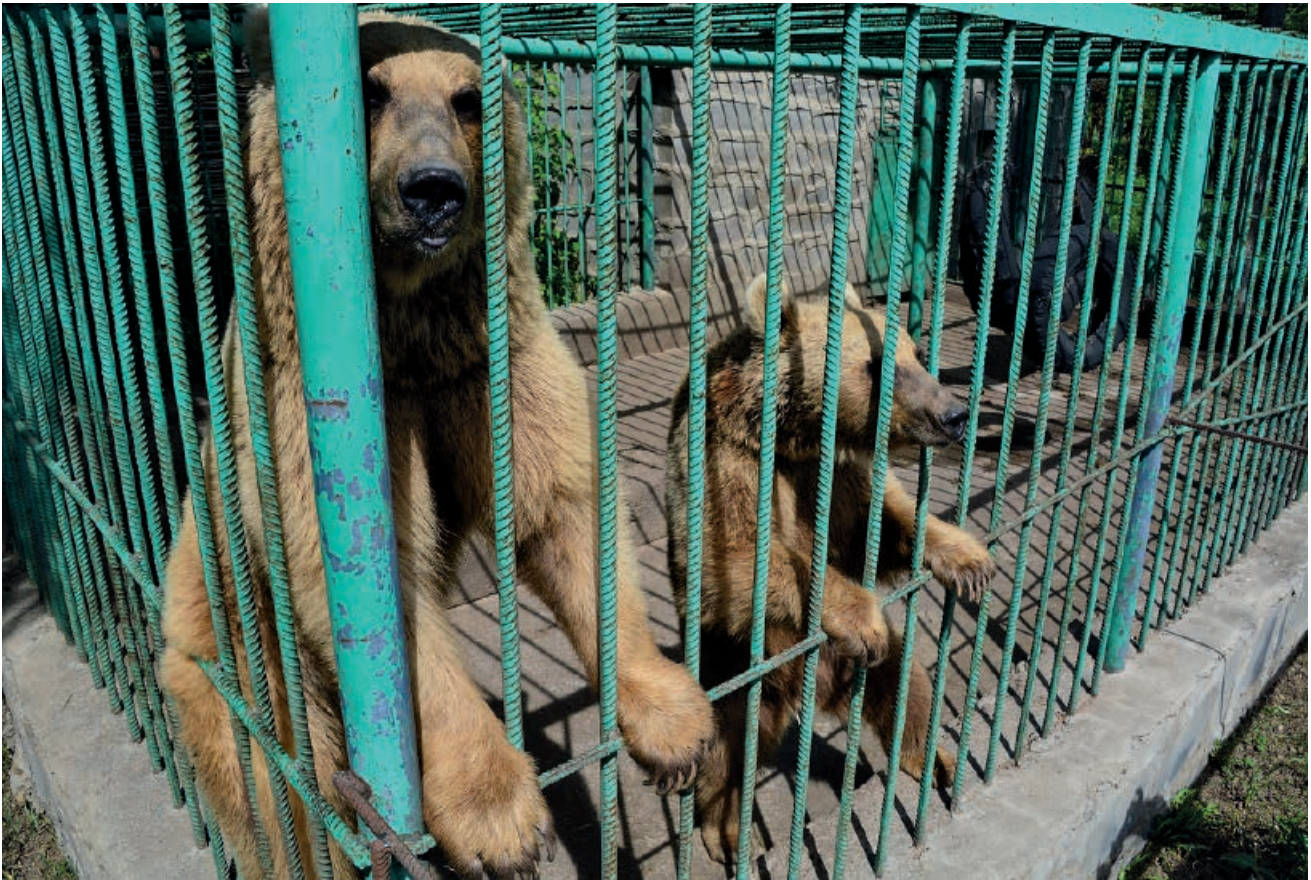


THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS WILDLIFE EXPOSES MUCH ABOUT THE REPUTATION OF ANY COUNTRY. THIS IS A RULE THAT HAS BEEN APPROVED IN A CIVILIZED WORLD AND WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO IGNORE IT

ing to animal rights it should be forbidden to keep wild animals in private areas. "This should work for both IUCN Red List of Threatened Species such as brown bears and wild animals in general", she says.

The third reason is the lack of allocated areas where the illegally imprisoned bears are moved to after being rescued by the government. Environmental organizations discovered these bears, fined their owners, but couldn't take further action, according to the law. Because of this, bears have continued to be imprisoned and tortured.

Cooperating with International animal rescue group, Natura Artis Magistra zoo in Amsterdam, VivaCell MTS and FPWC have built sanctuaries for animals. They are located



in the Caucasus Wildlife Rescue Center (CWR), a specially protected area constructed by the foundation. It occupies almost one thousand hectares.

It possesses a quarantine station and the area is monitored by cameras. The status and behavior of bears is monitored by animal rescuers and shelter rangers at the CWR. The bears from “Arjanots” (a place full of bears) restaurant complex were moved there.

Photos of the restaurant “Arjanots” were published in the Daily Mail, proving the barbaric treatment. The owners of the restaurant turned these wild animals into pets that are out on display in the restaurant. Although acknowledging the issue, they willingly agreed to cooperate and gave the bears to the rescuers. Thus, on the 31st of October the first group of bears were successfully rescued. Various state authorities took part in the rescue process along with the FPWC.

The founder of FPWC Ruben Khachatryan states that the project of rescuing bears would have been impossible to implement without the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Nature Protection and the state authorities from the environmental protection and natural resources organization. Yerevan Municipality has also made a great contribution to

DURING THIS YEAR, THE FPWC WILL TRY TO RESCUE 30 BEARS. THE CURRENT RESOURCES SUGGEST THAT THIS WILL BE TOO MUCH FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PHASE OF THE PROJECT

this large-scale project. Wider cages have been constructed for bears at Yerevan Zoo as well.

During this year, the FPWC will try to rescue 30 bears. The current resources suggest that this will be too much for the implementation of this phase of the project. But these are long-term projects and they have support from state authorities. Some of the bears that are not deemed fit for release into the wild (as they are mentally and physically damaged), will be given a permanent home at a sanctuary. Attempts will be made to release others into the wild.

Rouben Khachatryan states that one of the goals of this project is to give bears a better life. But the project is also aimed at changing the public’s attitude, “People should understand that it is wrong to keep wild animals in cages, they should quit the habit of watching them in cages as well. So, this project has educational purposes as well”. ♦

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BURN FOREST BURN

2017's summer was severe for Armenian and Georgian forests. Weeks of fire, that took place in Khosrov Forest State Reserve, in the juniper forests of Vayots Dzor and in the Bqurakan oak forest in Armenia, and in Georgian Borjomi revealed the huge problems that local authorities have. And the solutions are not obvious.

TEXT : VARDAN MELIKYAN / PHOTO : PHOTOLURE





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Khosrov Forest State
Reserve on fire

This summer was extremely hot in Armenia, especially in rare forested areas. Fires were burning for more than a week in Khosrov Forest State Reserve, in the juniper forests of Vayots Dzor and in the Byurakan oak forest. Thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Nature Protection, civil society and, of course, an airplane from Russia, the fires were extinguished, though some think it took too long. Whether it was too long or not, and how well organized the firefighting operation was, is something yet to be determined, but the unprecedented damage has been done. In 2017, more forest surface was damaged by fires than in the previous 10 years combined, which is a serious issue for a country like Armenia, which only has 11% of territory covered by forests.

Fire is an important part of a forest and some other ecosystems' lifecycle, with many plant species depending on it for reproduction and growth. For instance, the cones of some pines will open only after being treated by fire, while some other species benefit from fires burning their competitors, allowing better growth. The problem is that not all species benefit from fire, and for some, any fire is a catastrophe. In any case, all over the world fires have naturally occurred throughout history, with a different frequency and with different effects.

The reasons behind fires can be both natural and anthropogenic, and this is an important part of the story. In many countries forest agencies let natural fires burn, unless these pose a direct threat to humans. Such an approach has two main justifications. First, if fire is a common element of a given ecosystem and has natural causes, it should be allowed, particularly in forests, where no active management is undertaken. The other is based on the long-term experience of fire control in many countries, namely, the United States.

Throughout the 20th century, the US Forest Service invested enormous financial and human resources into controlling fires, and as a result, huge volumes of fuel in the form of dry deadwood was accumulated in its forests. In addition, the absence of fires has made the active growth of young trees possible under the canopy of older ones. Some may say that forests have become more beautiful as a result, but there are certain issues here as well. Since an absence of fires has been a consequence of human intervention, the ecosystems have lost their natural state, while the

accumulation of fuel in forests has led to a situation, where controlling fires has simply become impossible or too expensive to be feasible. Plus, while in the past, as a result of regular fires, the undergrowth has been less abundant, where fires have mainly occurred at the surface of forests, burning dry leaves, lower parts of tree bark, and small shrubs, as a result of the development of undergrowth, the characteristics of fires changed to canopy, where whole trees are burned. To address these problems, starting from the 1990s, the US Forest Service has shifted from the policy of zero tolerance of wildfire to a higher degree of freedom in decision-making on wildfires. The situation is quite different in Armenia, where fires are not a common element of ecosystems. Most of the forest fires are caused by humans, either accidentally or purposefully. The first obviously includes failure to put out the fire after barbecuing, the disposal of cigarettes, and the disposal of water-filled bottles which act as lenses, etc. Purposeful fires include burning of pastures and arable lands and the failure to manage fires,

IN 2017, MORE FOREST SURFACE WAS DAMAGED BY FIRES THAN IN THE PREVIOUS 10 YEARS COMBINED, WHICH IS A SERIOUS ISSUE FOR A COUNTRY LIKE ARMENIA

as well as reported cases of igniting fires to cover up evidence of illegal logging in forests. It is also worth mentioning that the damage caused by the 2017 fires mostly lowered the forest density, where the ground is exposed to sun and vegetation is more abundant. Still, up until 2017 all of these reasons together have only caused local small-scale fires. So, what has changed?

If you take a closer look at the situation with the forest fires, it is clear that Armenia is not the only country that has been hit hard by the problem in 2017. Georgia has struggled for even longer, with Borjomi forests burning for a few weeks. Issues like the burning of pastures, and the disposal of cigarettes have always been there, but have not caused serious problems up

until this year. What has changed and is further changing is the climate. The mean air temperature in Armenia has already increased by more than one degree Celsius and if no efforts are undertaken by the global community, by the end of 2100 it may increase by up to six degrees Celsius, making Armenia a quite uncomfortable place to live. On the other hand, the annual precipitations have dropped by 10% already, and what's more, these decrease even more dramatically during July and August, in parallel with intensive evaporation caused by high temperatures. Increasing temperatures and extended dry periods are exactly what is needed for fires, meaning those will potentially become increasingly common and severe, causing even more damage.

Now, what can be done to mitigate the risks related to wildfires? Well, first of all, we need to realize that these changes are not temporary, and the problem will only become more serious, as climate change is irreversible, together with the effects it brings. Information is an important tool, and being informed about the future trends is one of the most important elements for mitigating the risks. Decision-makers at all levels need to understand that all actions taken today have to be assessed against climate change trends, and the longer the project, the greater the risks. Forests are an extremely long-term "project", and thus decisions related to it have to be very well substantiated. Illegal logging, development of small hydropower plants, poaching, pasture management and

ARMENIA IS NOT THE ONLY COUNTRY THAT HAS BEEN HIT HARD BY THE PROBLEM IN 2017. GEORGIA HAS STRUGGLED FOR EVEN LONGER, WITH **BORJOMI FORESTS BURNING FOR A FEW WEEKS**



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Forest fires
in Georgia

underfunding are some of the issues that need to be addressed in order to mitigate forest fire related risks. Another important action is the development of a robust environmental education system aimed at children. This is a long-term process with an



The problem of forest fires has been discussed at the highest possible levels

even longer-term impact, but can be extremely effective in solving environmental issues. One of the advantages of the tool is that it not only allows educating children in how to minimize the negative impact of human activities on nature, but also indirectly educates adults, as children tend to teach their parents too. Armenians are known for dedicating their lives to children and also trying to please them as much as possible. Whether

this is a good habit or not is difficult to tell, but at least in the case of environmental education it can be used for making positive changes. Obviously, in parallel with long-term solutions there is a need for immediate action as well, since climate change is an urgent issue and forests need to be protected today. First and foremost, the illegal logging issue needs to be solved to avoid further degradation of relatively dense forests in the Lori, Syunik and Tavush regions, where forest ecosystems are more or less healthy and better protected from fires. The issue of illegal logging is a complex one itself, but there are certain steps that can lead to the improvement of the situation. In particular, there is a need for legislative changes to make investments in fuelwood plantations more attractive and better protected. Another important element can be the promotion of wood crafts at the local level, thus helping to generate income, which in parallel with stricter control over forests, can help in shifting from burning wood to natural gas. Stricter control itself will not be possible without better incentives for rangers, who are cur-

rently among the least paid and worst equipped employees in Armenia. There are many other steps that need to be taken and the list of potential solutions is almost endless. The problem of forest fires has been discussed at the highest possible levels this year, orders and instructions have been given, and hopefully actual steps will also follow. Hopefully, these will be different from the traditional Soviet-style actions focused on what the public administration system can do, and will rather initiate wider scale public discussions with respective specialists, including international ones, businesses, and most importantly, the population of forested areas. Interests of all stakeholders need to be taken into consideration to come up with a feasible and effective plan to address the issue of forest fires and forest management in general. Finally, the financing of improved management is not only the task of government, business has an important role to play as well. Hydropower plants and mineral water companies are directly benefiting from the high quality of water flowing in the streams of Armenia, and it is in their interest to maintain and improve it. ♦



REVISITING CERAMIC TRADITIONS FROM KÜTAHYA TO GYUMRI

Interview with Dr. Yolande Crowe – Independent scholar, art historian and archeologist, currently working on the origins of Kütahya designs.

INTERVIEW : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN



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Dr. Yolande Crowe



Mrs. Crowe, when and how did start your interest (towards) in the Armenian involvement with Kütahya ceramics?

— When I wrote my thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London on mosque of Divriği in Turkey dated 1228. The architecture there was so varied that it forced me to look into neighboring types of architecture. There was a signature of the architect, who was from Ahlat. And I wondered where different influences came from. There were three types of influences in my mosque: old Christian Syrian tradition which we see in Konya besides traditions from Armenia and Georgia. My first visit to Armenia in 1975 was a follow-up to my thesis on architecture. The other day I was in the monastery of Goshavank and there I saw columns similar to those in my mosque, so that was a confirmation of my theory. In other words I started with architecture. Then I went to Afghanistan in 1975 and discovered excavations there with the British Institute of Afghan Studies, still at the time

of the King. The archaeological team of the British Institute had found pieces of blue and white ceramics and they did not know how to interpret them, so I decided to study them. I had never seen such pieces. So I drew them and described them. When back in England and at the Victoria and Albert museum in London I discovered similar pieces of blue and white. I published a catalogue of the blue-and-white Persian ceramics of the Safavid dynasty of mainly 17th and early 18th centuries. This was a bombshell among the specialist because they never had looked at this collection. But in this selection – over 500 pieces – there were three pieces with three composite Armenian letters. I got the dating wrong in my catalogue as it was not Nazar of 16th-17th centuries but Nazar of the early 18th century, from the same family; so I decided to correct this mistake. So from Armenian architecture to ceramics I kept up my interest in Armenia but initially I had not looked at Kütahya with great interest. I got to realize that in the first half of the 18th century the European approach to the

arts could be like a series of fireworks. For Kütahya ceramics the influence of Chinese exported blue-and-white porcelain, probably the influence of Armenian potters fleeing the imposition of the Savafid government and the invasion of the Afghans at the beginning of the 18th century transformed the style of production. At that stage Kütahya was still making tiles and you can still see those tiles in the Kütahya mosque installed in the middle of the 18th century. In general the potters were known as “cup makers”. Kütahya was subcontracted by Iznik in the 16th century. Later it developed its own style. Patterns which came from Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain. But the small size of Kütahya ceramics of the 18th century begged a question. The reason for this was the recent fashion of drinking tea, coffee and chocolate in Europe. Besides the discovery of European porcelain, expensive in its beginning after 1710, everybody wanted European porcelain. But at the time when the European porcelain was still expensive there was the supply of Kütahya which was of good quality



with new designs and imitations of European shapes echoing delicate life of drinking coffee, chocolate and tea.

Was it meant to be sold chiefly in Europe?

— Well not mostly. It was bought largely in Ottoman Turkey and when Europeans traders came to Istanbul or Izmir, for instance they could buy cups, saucers even rose-water sprinklers. But if you look at Meissen shapes and the shapes of Kütahya there is a similarity in the size and shape but not in the decoration. Some of those Kütahya pieces were found as far as Williamsburg in Virginia (USA), and of course there are many traces of Kütahya ceramics in Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem and on a sunken ship off Kartal opposite Istanbul and in Crimea besides other parts of the Ottoman empire.

Could you elaborate on the motives of the ceramics? Did they have religious motives?

— There is a series of tiles in the Saint James' monastery in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. Those tiles were ordered for the Holy Sepulchre. They

could not be placed in the Holy Sepulchre so they were placed in the monastery. That was a specific order and obviously the writing and the decoration must have been made by Armenians because the decoration roughly reproduces images from Old and New Testaments, manuscripts of the period. As they are signed one knows they were made by Armenians for a religious place. Besides there are also dishes such as one with the depiction of Saint Sergius and another one painted with St John the Baptist being beheaded, both dated 1718.

Could you describe the role of the Armenian merchant networks in the distribution of the Kütahya ceramics in Europe? What was their share in the trade?

— Shah Abbas transplanted the Julfa population (1604) and its twenty rich Armenian merchant families to what was to be New Julfa near Isfahan as he realized these were good and efficient traders capable of looking after his commerce of silk. So they were really the silk merchants of the shah. Successive shahs were not so satisfied with

this arrangement and the situation of the Armenians became very difficult towards the end of the Safavid dynasty at the beginning of the 18th century. The merchants dealt in silk and also in precious stones, and painted cotton fabrics from Madras and the Coromandel coast. The ceramic trade was a Eurasian trade, between Europe and Asia and it was more or less in the hands of the Dutch East India Company.

From what time can we say that we have a peculiarly Kütahya style in ceramics?

— It is in the first half of the 18th century, when some Persian Armenians might have moved to Kütahya although there are no written proofs for this. At one sale of Islamic ceramics there was a small dish which was described as Kütahya but when I looked at the back of it it was not the usual back of a Kütahya dish, but that of a Persian one. The beginning of the persecution of Armenians at the end of the Safavid dynasty, the knowledge of a potters' community in Kütahya and the knowledge of less strict Ottoman laws vis-à-vis Christians, explain in part the renewal of



the ceramic craft in Kützhya. Several merchant families were already settled in India and St Petersburg, although earlier in Moscow with privileges over European traders. Merchants were the vehicle for carrying ideas. They transported textiles, jewelry, diamonds. As far as I am concerned in my study of ceramics they transported foreign patterns with the painted cotton textiles ... and fashions from Europe.

Can you tell us how this story ends and why?

— In the history of world ceramics new developments are at their best when they start happening. You see it with Meissen (Germany), Delft (Netherlands), with Nevers, Rouen, Strasbourg (France) ceramics at their beginning, then the routine sets in. Perhaps the sponsors – they can be royalties, rich people etc. – are no more there. In our case Iznik did produce an enormous amount of tiles and other ceramics in the 16th century, when there was great prosperity in the Ottoman empire. This was not the case in the 17th and early 18th centuries when the Iznik production was no longer at its best.

Why then did Kütahya ceramics blossom in the first half of the 18th century?

— This is because they had sponsors, be it the state, rich Armenians or the Armenian Church. There was a complete reorganization of the economic structure of the Armenian Church in Istanbul at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century. Both reorganization and sponsorship revived the community of potters in Kütahya including the Armenian one with opportunities for new creations. Evliya Çelebi called Kütahya potters “cup makers” because tea, chocolate and coffee had created a new fashion and there was room for the cup makers to produce new shapes in European style.. But production started going downhill in the middle of the 18th century two generations later after the the discovery of Porcelain in Saxony and the invention of transfer printing on ceramics in Europe; all the fresh spirit of the early 18th century vanished with competition from European porcelain. The production of Kütahya then became less original, aimed at tourist export, lacking the quality and the originality of the begin-

ning of the century. The current Armenian tradition in Jerusalem, for instance, is not even copying the Kütahya patterns of the first half of the 18th century.

What is the aim of this Gyumri project? Is it to reproduce and revive the 18th century tradition?

— Machines can reproduce any pattern, but that is not art. For ceramics to be of interest. The idea for Gyumri is to recreate a ceramic tradition in the 21st century, unlike that of Jerusalem's Armenian ceramics, where the patterns of the 19th century still rule over the decorative vocabulary. The purpose of resurrecting the ceramic craft in Gyumri is to bring forward the skills of the 18th century potter into the 21st century – which means re-thinking both patterns and shapes. So this should be creativity and not mere imitation. If you look on the Internet at the modern ceramic production of Kütahya you will see reproductions of the Iznik patterns of the 16th and 17th centuries. There is little creativity in such work. So the purpose of the Gyumri project is to be able to say in the next twenty years: “Ah, this is the new style of Armenian ceramics”. ♦

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT: Lessons from the Referendums in Catalonia and Kurdistan

Two referendums on the issue of independence took place this autumn, within a week from each other: in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25 and in Catalonia on October 1. Obviously, there are as many differences between the two cases as there are differences between the current political situation in the Middle East and in Western Europe. And yet, it is hard to ignore some striking similarities between the two cases.

TEXT : MIKAYEL ZOLYAN

You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes you might find
You get what you need
Rolling Stones, "You can't always get what you want"

CATALUNYA AND KURDISTAN: SO DIFFERENT, YET SO SIMILAR

In both cases the referendums revolved around the issue of transforming an autonomy into fully-fledged independence, an issue which has been on the table for years, and yet the governments and politicians had been wary of taking decisive steps. Both regions are on the average better-off than the rest of the country (though in very different ways) and in both regions support for independence movements is based on a long history of discrimination and pro-independence movements. Obviously, there are immense differences between cases of Kurdistan and Catalonia, as well as between Iraq and Spain. Spain is (or at least was until recently) not just a paradise for holiday goers and expats but also one of the most politically stable countries in Europe, a textbook example of a successful transition from dictatorship to democracy. The last time Catalans suffered from large scale violence was during the Civil War in Spain in the 1930s, when they were punished for





siding with the republicans precisely because the republican side had promised autonomy to Catalonia. Under Franco Catalans faced linguistic and cultural oppression, but it largely became a thing of the past after the democratic transition. On the contrary, the Kurds in Iraq not only faced bans on the language and culture but became subjected to a genocidal campaign by Saddam Hussein's government as recently as the 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of a no-flight zone by the Western countries saved the Kurds from annihilation and gave them de facto autonomy, but they were still left surrounded by enemies amid an unstable region. The American invasion of Iraq, as we know, did not result in an establishment of a stable democratic Iraq. On the contrary, Iraq, torn between different factions, became a dysfunctional state plagued by chaos and civil war. So, obviously the challenges and dangers facing people in Erbil and Barcelona are very different from each other. And yet, analyzing the similarities between the two cases may lead to interesting conclusions.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

One striking similarity is how both referendums were given a cold shoulder by the international community. The only country that openly supported the Kurdish referendum was Israel, a mixed blessing for Kurdistan, sandwiched between Syrian and Iraqi Arabs, Iran and Turkey. All the neighbors of Iraqi Kurdistan had an extremely negative position on the referendum, and made it clear that they would not stop at any steps aimed at preventing Kurdistan from achieving full independence. The prospect of emergence of an independent Kurdish state has



^
 Alaya Rengin ("The Colorful Flag") is used by Kurds as a symbol of independence

for years been a nightmare for the rulers of not just Iraq, but Turkey, Iran and Syria, with their own sizable Kurdish minorities. As if numerous statements had not been enough, Ankara and Tehran even went so far as to hold joint talks of the heads of general staff in the run-up to the referendum. Similarly, the idea of Catalonian independence was met with condemnation in virtually all European capitals. The only country that was "suspected" of sympathy for Catalan secession was Russia, and in this case the "accusations" were not based on any official statements but rather on the recently common trend to see Russian "hackers" and "trolls" behind any significant development in the West. In fact, Russia with its ethnoreligious diversity, federal structure and history of separatism would be an unlikely supporter of Catalan independence. There was also a common pattern in how Madrid and Baghdad reacted to the actions of Barcelona and Erbil: essentially in both cases the central government refused to compromise and responded by force. Of course, the level of violence was very different in each case: Baghdad initiated a full-scale military offensive and the violence in Catalonia did not go further than arrests of Catalan government members and some cases of police brutality on the day of referendum, which, as Madrid supporters claim, were in fact amplified by the media

reports. However, even this level of use of force came as a shock to many Europeans, used to a non-confrontational style of politics, at least in so-called “Old Europe”. Moreover, in both cases a potential arbiter, who could have interfered in the conflict, either remained silent or supported the central government’s position. In case of Kurdistan, the ally, whose support the Kurds expected, was the United States. US, however, not only formally spoke out against the referendum, something that could have been expected, but also, what was probably more shocking for the Kurds, refused to interfere, when another American ally, Baghdad’s central government, resorted to brute force to solve the issue. Washington stood aside, even though its supposed arch-enemy Iran was helping Baghdad to stage a sweeping offensive against the Kurdish autonomy’s forces. In case of Catalonia and Madrid, it was Brussels that could have pushed Madrid in the direction of being more accommodating but chose not to do so. Hence, EU was seen by many observers as extensively supportive of Madrid’s position, especially when it failed to condemn the violence used by Madrid to prevent the referendum, while similar police actions are often condemned, when they happen in Eastern Europe or post-Soviet countries. Madrid government’s persecution of Catalan leaders for their political actions, rather than any criminal activity (though it was indeed based on existing Spanish laws), also caused little formal reaction from EU and Western European capitals.

Finally, there is one more similarity between the two referendums: ultimately, both referendums not only failed to bring the desired result but also, arguably, left the cause of independence further from achieving its goal. In case of Kurdistan, the final outcome of the processes, triggered by the referendum was the loss of de facto control over so-called “disputed” territories, which include the city of Kirkuk and oilfields around it, which were considered instrumental for the economic well-being of the future Kurdish state. As for Catalonia, not only the referendum was proclaimed illegal by the Spanish court, but it also became a catalyst for mobilization for those in Catalonia who are opposed to independence. The Catalan government took some steps that raised eyebrows and left journalists confused, such as proclaiming independence, then immediately “freezing” it, and then eventually “unfreezing” it. All this provided pretext for the Madrid government to enact the laws that stipulate for temporary direct rule in Catalonia, declaring new elections as well as arresting the members of the Catalan government.

WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

So, why did the referendums in both cases eventually fail to lead to independence? It is possible to attribute this result to two groups of factors, internal and external. The external factor is the more obvious one. Landlocked Iraqi Kurdistan is extremely vulnerable to the prospect of a blockade imposed by its neighbors, let alone the prospect of military interven-



IT WAS BRUSSELS THAT COULD HAVE PUSHED MADRID IN THE DIRECTION OF BEING MORE ACCOMMODATING BUT CHOSE NOT TO DO SO

tion. In case of Catalonia things are obviously not as rough, but the prospect of being left out of the European Union after leaving Spain played a similar role. Catalonia, which would be left out of EU, would have a completely different economic outlook. In fact, even before the referendum an exodus of Spanish and international companies from Catalonia began, which gave a glimpse of the economic risks associated with independence. So, in both cases it became obvious that, were they to become independent, both Kurdistan and Catalonia would face economic collapse.

This attitude is a part of larger consensus which unites most world governments, authoritarian and democratic. “Separatists” are subject to virtually unanimous condemnation, probably second only to “terrorists”. In the dominant discourse of today, shared by many ardent authoritarians and some proponents of the “liberal consensus”, once someone is declared a “terrorist”, almost all forms of violence against them become acceptable. Not to the same extent as “terrorists”, but the label of “separatist” in fact carries a similar negative connotation, which allows central governments to turn to violent means when dealing with “separatism” with little fear of inviting international condemnation. Of course, when “countering separatism” leads to mass extermination or ethnic cleansing, the position of the international community may change, but as long as the central government stays within certain limits, it can usually count on the backing of the international community. Of course, there are exceptions, and there are always double standards, but the general rule seems that existing nation-states support each other in preventing new nation-states from emerging.

WHY CATALONIA AND KURDISTAN ARE NOT SCOTLAND OR QUEBEC?

Obviously, there are differences in how governments deal with the issue of separatism, or to use a more neutral term “secessionism”. Czechoslovakia was divided into Czech Republic and

Slovakia in 1993 peacefully and without any major confrontation, just as war raged in former Yugoslavia. Some Western countries, such as Canada and UK, have allowed referendums on independence in Quebec and Scotland respectively, while actively campaigning for a “No” response, and in both cases this tactic has helped not just to avoid conflict but also to preserve the unity of their countries (at least for the time being). In both cases the referendums were only a part of the political process that included negotiations and compromise between the center and the secessionist regions.

From the point of view of various types of political culture, the Madrid government’s reaction was arguably closer to that of Baghdad vis-a-vis Erbil than, say, London’s reaction to the independence movement in Scotland. Some observers have put the blame for this inflexibility on the ruling Popular Party, and more specifically on Francoist heritage within it. There is a fear in Madrid that allowing a referendum in Catalonia, even if it brings a result desirable for Madrid, would be a time-bomb under the unity of the Spanish state. What if it becomes a precedent for similar demands in the Basque country, where the separatist violence of ETA has only come to an end recently, or emergence of similar demands in other regions, with their own distinct cultural and linguistic identities, such as Galicia, to bring one example. Similar fears obviously play an even bigger role in case of Iraq too. It is only recently, with the defeat of the IS that Baghdad Shia dominated government has managed to secure its control over the larger part of the territory of Iraq. It might be ready to tolerate de facto autonomy of Erbil authorities, but a de jure independence of Iraqi Kurdistan would effectively mean an end to Iraqi state in its current form. Thus, the leaderships of both Catalonia and Kurdistan were faced with central governments determined to win what they believed was an existential struggle for the existence of their countries. They were also faced with international community’s unanimous opposition to their independence. However, external factors might have proved less decisive, had their actions been based on an equally unanimous support inside the regions. However, for different reasons and in different ways, in both cases there were some issues regarding domestic support.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF GETTING EVERYONE ON BOARD

Of course, in terms of popular support for independence there is a significant difference between Catalonia and Kurdistan. Though it may be somewhat incorrect to compare the referendum results, since the one in Catalonia faced obstacles from the central government, still the numbers tell their part of the story. In case of Kurdistan, turnout was 72 %, and 92.7 % of those who voted said “Yes” to independence. In Catalonia, 92 % of those who came out to vote said “Yes”, but only 43 % took part in the voting.

These numbers reflect the reality that in Catalonia, the population is divided over the issue of independence. In Catalonia ethnic boundaries are blurred: many people identify as both



2,044,038 people voted "Yes" for independence in Catalonia



IN TERMS OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CATALONIA AND KURDISTAN

“Catalan” and “Spanish” (though not “Castilian”), while many immigrants or children of immigrants often identify with the Catalan independence cause. The Catalan and Spanish (Castilian) languages are related, and most inhabitants of Catalonia are bilingual. In everyday communication it is a common practice to use both languages as each person speaks the language that he/she knows best (a practice common in some other cases, as for example in Ukraine, between Russian and Ukrainian speakers). The absence of clear-cut ethno-cultural borders in Catalonia has encouraged Catalan politicians to present Catalan nationalism as inclusive and civic which seeks to represent all inhabitants of Catalonia, regardless of their ancestry or cultural heritage. Yet, as recent events in Catalonia have shown, pro-independence politicians have so far failed to convince the absolute majority of Catalans. In case of Kurdistan there is an overwhelming support for independence among the Kurdish population of the region, a support forged by years of oppression and uprisings, followed by years of de facto independence. While it is true that there is an immense diversity of dialects and traditions between various Kurdish groups, there seems to be a consensus among the majority of Kurdistan’s population, at



least in Iraq, on independence as the ultimate goal. However, there is no consensus as to when and how it should be achieved. The decision to hold the referendum in September was seen by many in Kurdistan as premature. Government's critics claimed that the referendum was supposed to boost the popularity of autonomy's leader Masoud Barzani. The rivalry between two main Kurdish parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by competing families Barzani and Talabani, influenced recent developments. When the Iraqi force occupied Kirkuk almost without any resistance, some PDK supporters even accused PUK of treason. A third party, Gorran movement, which considers itself in opposition to both PUK and PDK, was suggesting to postpone the referendum. Finally, the Kurdish leadership has failed to attract to its side some of the ethnic and religious minorities residing in the area. While it was difficult to expect support from Arabs and Turkomans living in these areas, even those minorities, such as Yezidis or Assyrians, who potentially could have become supporters of the Kurdish state, to a large extent remain sceptic about the Kurdish national project.

**EPILOGUE: BUT IF YOU TRY, SOMETIMES,
YOU JUST MIGHT FIND, YOU GET WHAT YOU NEED**

So, in both cases the referendums have failed to bring independence supporters what they wanted, and in fact have thrown the independence agenda several years back. But is the dream of independence shattered once and for all? Historical experience tells us that it is hardly so. Once a certain national project emerges and achieves support of the majority among the people that it seeks to represent, it is extremely difficult to destroy or contain it. The idea of independence may survive numerous failures and defeats, and as time passes they often become a part of the mythology that only strengthens the pro-independence sentiment: the failed "Easter Rising" in Ireland in 1916, which ultimately led to Ireland's independence, is a great example of that. In Kurdistan, it seems that the red line was crossed a long time ago. The majority of Kurds in Iraq see themselves as a separate nation, and sooner or later this view will find its reflection in the political setup of the region. It may take time, geopolitical shocks, and sacrifices on behalf of the Kurdish



population, but the final outcome of this process is evident. In the long term perspective, few things short of large scale ethnic cleansing are capable to prevent the perspective of Kurdish independence. The emergence of Kurdistan on the map of the Middle East is a question of "how" and "when", not a question of "if".

With all the similarities, the case of Catalonia is different in this respect. Here things hang in the balance. It is precisely now that the main question of Catalan identity is decided: is being Catalan compatible with being Spanish or not? Depending on how the current crisis is handled, the political preferences of Catalans will be shaped for years and maybe even decades to come. Madrid's no-nonsense tactic, based on unyielding adherence to the letter of the law and willingness to use force to uphold it, may have been efficient in the short term, but in the long term it may push more Catalans to the camp of independence supporters. In the 1990s one of Catalan politicians ran under the slogan "for a Spain that understands Catalonia". Maybe it is time for the Spanish government to show some "understanding", otherwise it may win the legal and political battle but lose the battle for the hearts and minds of Catalans once and for all. ♦

GOOD BOLSHEVIKS AND BAD BOLSHEVIKS:

Is the Soviet Past still a Matter of Controversy in Armenia?

When Armenia was still part of the Soviet Union, November was a month of celebrations. On November 7 “the Great October Socialist Revolution” was celebrated (October 25 in the old “Julian” calendar) and November 29 was the day when “Sovietization” of Armenia was celebrated. Today these dates mean little to most Armenians. And yet, it turns out, there is still room for a heated debate on how to deal with the Soviet heritage

TEXT : MIKAYEL ZOLYAN



When in the municipal council of Yerevan an opposition political block “Yelq” raised the issue of renaming those Yerevan streets that still have “Soviet” names, some observers thought the initiative would go unnoticed, since inhabitants of Yerevan have more pressing concerns, such as the state of public transport or the quality of air. However, the initiative sparked heated debates that extended far beyond the city council and resonated outside of Armenia. Renaming streets and removing statues has been one of the spheres of symbolic “wars of memory” between Moscow and post-Soviet countries for years, and these “wars of memory” have recently intensified. So, the “Yelq” deputies’ initiative was noticed by many outside Armenia: the issue of renaming certain Yerevan streets reached Russian media. A prominent member of Russian parliament Leonid Kalashnikov, head of the committee responsible for “Eurasian integration”, called this initiative “a hostile act”, compared what was happening in Armenia to developments in the Baltics and Ukraine, and said that Russia would need to respond “if these discussions did not stop”. Apparently “Yelq” deputies had touched a nerve, and not just in Yerevan.

HUNDRED YEARS LATER: HOW POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES REMEMBER THE SOVIET YEARS

Post-Soviet countries have varying approaches to dealing with the Soviet past. In Russia the condemnation of the Soviet system, which was the dominant paradigm in the early 1990s, gave way to widespread nostalgia. Against the dramatic background of the 1990s the Soviet years came to be seen by many as a time of stability and comfort, a view

RENAMING STREETS AND REMOVING STATUES HAS BEEN ONE OF THE SPHERES OF SYMBOLIC “WARS OF MEMORY” BETWEEN MOSCOW AND POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES FOR YEARS



Traditional October Revolution parade in Yerevan, 1984

adopted also by a part of Russia's political elite. Perceptions of the Soviet past remain mixed today: some episodes, such as the October revolution itself, are largely seen in a negative light, while others are celebrated. Thus, the celebration of victory in World War II (the Great Patriotic War) became a major unifying force for the Russian society. In addition, while in the late 1980s many Russians, of both liberal and nationalist views, made a distinction between USSR and Russia, today USSR is increasingly seen as simply another incarnation of Russian statehood. Paradoxically, this attitude allows to combine an idealized view of the Russian Empire with an equally idealized view of the Soviet Union. It also means that when a post-Soviet country makes a move that challenges heritage associated with either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, this is often perceived as a hostile act in Russia. Thus, through recent years Russian media reacted negatively to such diverse developments as the demolition of Lenin statues in Ukraine, the introduction of a public holiday in remembrance of a 1916 uprising against Russian Empire in Kyrgyzstan, and the decision to introduce a Latin-based alphabet in Kazakhstan.

As for other post-Soviet countries, their approaches to the Soviet past vary from celebration to complete rejection.

On one end of the spectrum is Belarus, which, at least until recently, was arguably even more loyal to the Soviet heritage than Russia. Minsk still surprises some of its foreign visitors with an impressive Lenin statue on the city's main square, which has been renamed "Independence Square", even though the metro station is still called "Lenin Square" (yes, it is complicated, and yes, it is the statue mentioned in a classic episode of the American TV series "Friends"). Even in Moscow the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the infamous founder of Soviet secret police, was demolished in 1991 and never restored. Yet, a bust of Dzerzhinski can still be seen in one of Minsk's streets, aptly placed before the State Security Committee (the abbreviation still reads "KGB" in Russian). In the recent years, Belarusian government has engaged in a campaign of "soft Belarusization", which among other things, means paying more attention to pre-Soviet Belarusian history and encouraging cultural traits that distinguish Belarusians from their neighbors. However, at least so far, this campaign has not meant significant changes when it comes to the attitude to the Soviet past.

On the other end of the spectrum are countries like the Baltic states and Georgia, which treat the Soviet period as "occupation". It seems that Ukraine, where the two approaches to the Soviet past had competed for years, has now firmly moved to the "anti-Soviet" camp. In other post-Soviet countries the political and intellectual elites took the middle road. They needed to build a national narrative distinct from the Soviet heritage,



MINSK STILL SURPRISES SOME OF ITS FOREIGN VISITORS WITH AN IMPRESSIVE LENIN STATUE ON THE CITY'S MAIN SQUARE, WHICH HAS BEEN RENAMED "INDEPENDENCE SQUARE"

while not breaking with the Soviet past completely, especially in those cases when the rulers themselves came from the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Even in case of Belarus things were not black and white. Going back to the case of Dzerzhinski, locals usually explain that the main reason why Dzerzhinski's name is still on the city map, is that Dzerzhinski, though of Polish ancestry, was a local of Belarus. So, paradoxically, a controversial Soviet figure can also be perceived in the context

of a distinct Belarusian identity. In other words, when it comes to dealing with the Soviet heritage, things are complicated.

REMEMBERING THE SOVIETS IN THE ARMENIAN WAY

Until recently, it seemed that Post-Soviet Armenia had found a perfect solution to the issue, combining seemingly incompatible approaches. Armenia was one of the first Soviet republics to experience a mass national-democratic movement that directly challenged central authorities. Accordingly, Armenian society went through a reappraisal of the Soviet past as early as the end of the 1980s. Dark pages of Soviet past, such as Stalinist repressions or the previously unknown details of Armenia's forced "Sovietization" were discovered. Lenin's statue on Yerevan's central square was removed in April 1990, when the Soviet Union still seemed alive and strong. Yet, already then, Armenian society's attitude to the Soviet past was more complicated and nuanced than the "occupation" model, which dominated in the Baltics. While forced "Sovietization" in 1920 came to be seen as an act of aggression, it was still considered to be "the lesser evil" compared to the possible perspective of occupation by Kemalist Turkey. Those territories of Armenia that fell to Kemalists were practically cleansed of their Armenian population, while Soviet Armenia became a center of revival of Armenian life. Obviously, Soviet Armenia was not an independent state, but it was seen as a "quasi-state" with some characteristics of a sovereign political unit. For the first



< Lenin's statue
overthrown
in Kiev



> Lenin's statue
overthrown in
Bucharest



> Lenin's statue
overthrown in
Ethiopia

time in centuries (with the obvious exception of the short-lived independence in 1918-1920) Armenians received a chance to build something that resembled a nation-state. Hence, Soviet Armenia, while not a sovereign state, is seen as “the second republic”, a bridge between the independent Armenia of 1918-1920, i.e. “the 1st republic”, and post-Soviet Armenia, i.e. “the 3rd republic”.

The attitude to Soviet historical figures reflected this attitude. Historians and politicians distinguished between two kinds of Armenian Bolsheviks: “nationally conscious” Bolsheviks, who combined Communist views with loyalty to Armenia’s interests, and “anti-national” ones, who were ready to sacrifice Armenian interests on the altar of “world revolution”. Based on this distinction, some Armenian Bolsheviks were “punished” by erasing their names from the map, while others were “spared”. Thus, in Yerevan there are still statues and streets devoted to prominent “nationally conscious” Bolsheviks, such

as Stepan Shahumyan and Alexander Myasnikyan. Yet, the statue of Ghukas Ghukasyan, a participant of Bolshevik uprising in May 1920, which stood in one of Yerevan parks, is gone (so is the park, but that is a topic for a different article). And probably very few of the pub-goers, who fill Yerevan’s Parpetsy street on weekends, know that this street was called Ghukasyan street before 1991.

This nuanced approach was applied not just to the period of “Sovietization”, but to other periods of Soviet history as well. Soviet leadership, especially Stalin’s, was condemned for totalitarian policies, and the victims of political repressions were remembered. At the same time Armenia’s achievements during the Soviet years, whether in development of economy, in science or in arts were celebrated. Armenians’ participation in World War II is seen by most Armenians as a heroic episode, and Armenian soldiers and generals of World War II continued to be celebrated as national heroes

after the Soviet Union was long gone. It was in the post-Soviet years that the statue of Soviet Marshal Hovhannes (Ivan) Baghramyan on horseback was erected on one of Yerevan's central avenues that bears his name.

BETWEEN MIKOYAN AND NZHDEH: RE-EMERGING DEBATES ON SOVIET PAST

This consensus on how to deal with the Soviet past that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped Armenia to avoid some of the conflicts that tore apart other post-Soviet societies in the 1990s. With the exception of some radicals on both sides of the political spectrum, neither political nor intellectual elites in Armenia questioned the consensus that emerged regarding the Soviet past. True, the hardships of the 1990s brought about nostalgia for Soviet times, but it did not become a factor of political life. Armenia never experienced a political comeback of Communism: Communists' votes diminished from one election to the other. Even when the former head of Soviet Armenia Karen Demirchyan returned to politics in 1998 as a presidential candidate, he did not do so in the capacity of a Communist. In fact, he carefully avoided ideological rhetoric, stressing his managerial qualities instead. However, recent events showed that the consensus on the perception of the Soviet past, which existed in post-Soviet Armenia, may no longer exist. The "Yelq" initiative was not the only sign of erosion of the consensus on the Soviet past. Several developments showed that the question of how to relate to the Soviet heritage is once again a matter of debate. One of the first signs of this change was the case of a planned monument to Anastas Mikoyan in 2014. The initiative to place



^ "Soviet Armenia",
 touristic advertisement

< Demolition of
 Lenin's statue,
 Yerevan, 1991



◀ Alexander Myaskin statue, Yerevan

▼ Garegin Nzhdeh statue, Yerevan

a bust to Mikoyan in Yerevan came from his Russia-based descendants. Mikoyan was well-known as the most powerful Armenian in the Soviet hierarchy, having been a member of Stalin's inner circle and Khrushchev's closest associate. However, he was clearly not a "nationally oriented" Bolshevik: in 1920 Mikoyan took a hostile stance toward "Dashnaks" and "Imperialist Armenia". Yerevan municipality first gave its approval, but this brought about criticism from historians, descendants of victims

of Stalinist terror, as well as various political and NGO activists. Eventually, after heated debates, plans to erect a monument to Mikoyan were abandoned, but the very fact that initially authorities considered the monument acceptable was remarkable. Recently, in September 2017, the Soviet past once again became a matter of heated debates, this time in relation to the exhibition "Eclipse", devoted to victims of Soviet political repression. The exhibition was held in the Museum of Hovhannes Tumanyan, a major Armenian writer, whose sons perished in the repressions. It was shut down by an order from the Ministry of Culture; and the Deputy Minister, when explaining the closure, said that the exhibition was "somewhat politicized". This explanation raised even more questions from critics: how could an exhibition on political repressions not be "political"? Some, like historian Hayk Demoyan, argued that the decision is a sign of "freeping re-Stalinization", which has begun in Russia and is now influencing Armenia as well.

While it may be hard to believe that Armenia's Ministry of Culture is run by closet Stalinists, the decision to shut down the exhibition may reflect the fear of Armenia's authorities to do something that could be perceived as hostile by Moscow. Indeed, in the recent years Moscow has become increasingly sensitive to developments related to Soviet past in Post-Soviet countries. Thus, when in the center of Yerevan a statue to one of the most celebrated Armenian national figures of 20th century, Garegin Nzhdeh, was erected, it created a minor, but noticeable tension in Russian-Armenian relations. Nzhdeh is one of the most revered Armenian figures of the 20th century,

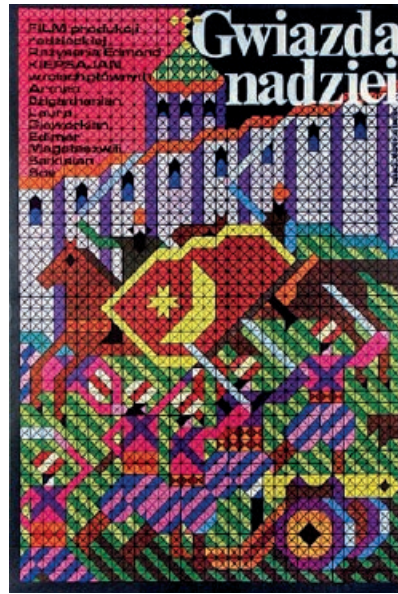
AFTER HEATED DEBATES, PLANS TO ERECT A MONUMENT TO MIKOYAN WERE ABANDONED, BUT THE VERY FACT THAT INITIALLY AUTHORITIES CONSIDERED THE MONUMENT ACCEPTABLE WAS REMARKABLE



and Armenia's ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) considers him to be its ideological forerunner. Controversy emerged, however, related to allegations of cooperation with the Nazi Germany during the World War II. Nzhdeh did participate in the creation of "Armenian legion", made up from ethnic Armenian POWs, which, however, never took part in the actual fighting. Most Armenians believe that Nzhdeh's actions were aimed at preventing mistreatment of Armenians by the Nazis, particularly saving Armenian POWs from perishing in concentration camps. When the Soviet forces advanced, Nzhdeh voluntarily surrendered to the Soviets and suggested cooperation (the offer was not taken and Nzhdeh died in a prison in Russia several years later). Whatever the complexities of history, the monument to Nzhdeh draw a negative reaction from Russia, voiced not only by the Russian media, but even by the MFA speaker, Maria Zakharova. Some observers noted that within the same week, another statue was erected in Yerevan, this time devoted to a Soviet hero of World War II, marshal Hamazasp Babajanyan. Probably this "statue diplomacy" worked, as no further discussion of the controversy around Nzhdeh followed. Instead, Babajanyan's statue created controversy at home. Some Armenians, mostly of liberal political convictions, claimed that Babajanyan, apart from being a war hero, had also a dark page in his biography: he took part in the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 by the Soviet military. Apparently, when it comes to deciding how to remember the Soviet Union, things are complicated, even today, a quarter of a century after its demise. ♦

ARMENIAN FILM POSTERS

Since its foundation in 1920's, Armenian cinema was often released abroad, though had mixed success. Often posters for these films were made in foreign countries by local artists.



^ "Hostages of a Leopard Canyon", 1956, Romania



^ "Star of Hope", 1978, Poland



< "Tango of our Childhood", 1984, Poland

^ "Personally Known", 1958, Poland

< "Men", 1972, France



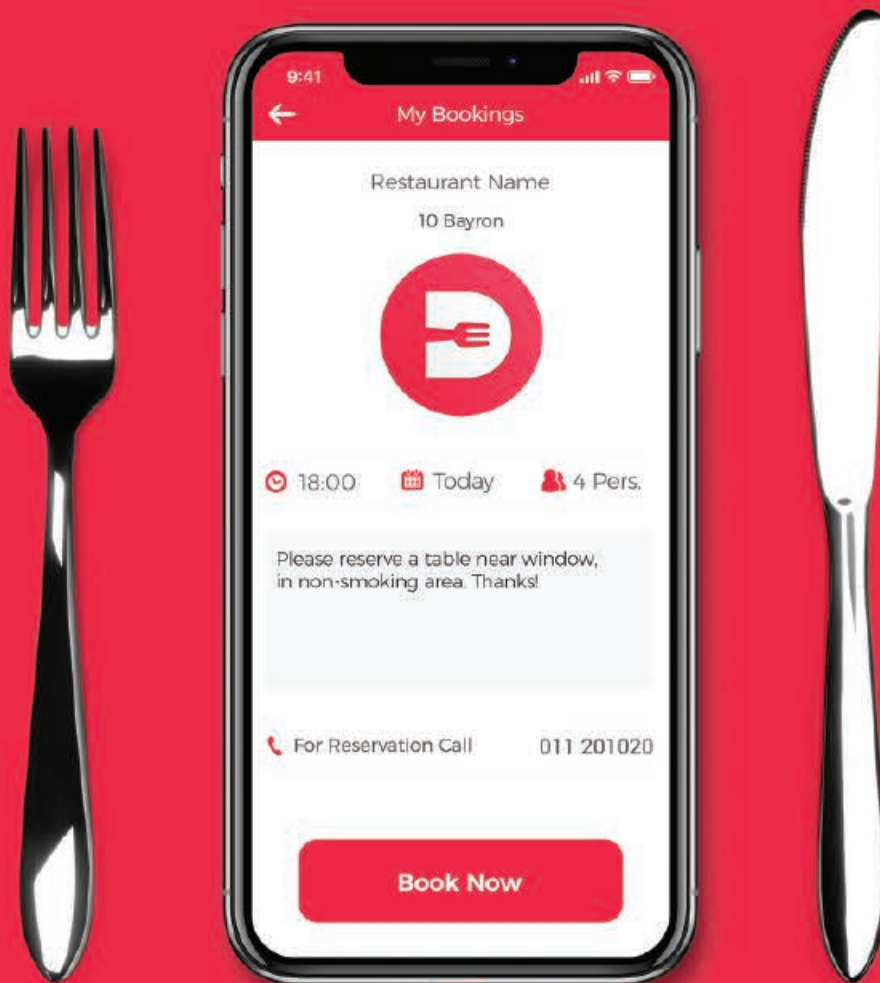
< "Special Mission", 1965, Poland

> "Pepo", 1935, Latvia



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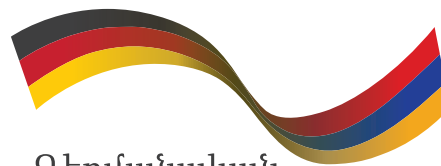
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