

The screenshot shows the Armenian Mirror-Spectator website. The main article is titled "The Debate about Culture and the Culture of Debate" by Archi Galentz, published on April 4, 2019. The article includes a sketch of three men in suits, with handwritten names and dates below them: S.E. Sushkoyan, S.E. Hakobyan, and S.E. Pashinyan, dated 1.07.2019, Arch. Galentz. The website header includes the logo "THE ARMENIAN Mirror-Spectator" and navigation menus for "ARMENIA & KARABAKH", "ARTS & CULTURE", "EDITORIAL", "COMMUNITY", "INTERNATIONAL", "GENOCIDE", "RECIPES", and "MORE".

<https://mirrorspectator.com/2019/04/04/the-debate-about-culture-and-the-culture-of-debate/?fbclid=IwAR1cSjsnnvEiGB78tjBzBIC7dnoyGFXCurNkXoW1Vu2I3qkzayjdKNUFUfk>

The Debate about Culture and the Culture of Debate

By Archi Galentz

BERLIN — The website of *Aravot* reported on February 21 on the visit of Anna Hakobyan, the wife of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, to Switzerland and the surprise that she brought with her. The surprise was her declaration that Armenia would once again amaze the whole world, this time with post-revolutionary achievements. Armenia is to become one of the most prosperous nations in the world, absolutely comparable to Switzerland

Hakobyan supporter Pashinyan during the revolution not only visibly and with extensive media coverage, but she is also now leading several charity organizations and is assuming serious representational duties.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan himself, during a meeting at the beginning of February with parliamentarians and the business community in the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin,

emphasized the fact that Armenia is not only a country with mining and agriculture, but a land of intellectuals, physicists, a flourishing IT sector and, as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, a country that may also pave the way to access to a market of 160 million people.

And when asked about the planned elimination of the Culture and Diaspora Ministries, which has generated concern, Pashinyan responded that every government mechanism has a tendency towards excessive control and this could have a negative impact on business.

Proponents of streamlining the government apparatus stress that reforms do not entail neglect of spheres of responsibility. Armenia's desire to introduce new standards of efficiency and its search for new models is also apparent in the cultural realm. In mid-May at the Venice Biennale 2019 we will be in a position to judge whether or not Armenia's pavilion, which according to the exhibition's curator Susanna Gjulamiryan this time is not to be organized on the premises of the Mekhitarists, will be convincing. Exhibition space at the Biennale is extremely expensive, but it is reportedly the explicit desire of the government-aligned commissar of the exhibit to invest considerably more than the usual \$5,000 in the "Olympic Games of Art." The Venice Biennale is the most important exhibition worldwide for contemporary art and architecture. It is particularly important to note that at this periodic event one cannot hide behind tradition and history, because its compulsory thematic focus concentrates on the "Now" – the current condition of the nation's art and its cultural policy. Armenia has been an active participant since 1995 and in 2015 received the highest award, the "Golden Lion," for its national pavilion. The 2017 presentation displayed very disturbing tendencies, and now what is being prepared is a huge installation of multiple interrelated components with a lot of videos which are supposed to provide a critical view of the "Velvet Revolution," how it unfolded and what expectations it raised.



The Biennale should not be considered only an important display that mobilizes national resources for the outside world, since it is actually culture and religion together which constitute the main pillars of the national identity. Such a project has an impact domestically as well. And at home it is still the government restructuring that is shaping discussion in the cultural realm. As mentioned earlier, the elimination of a ministry does not yet mean that

The associated tasks will not receive adequate consideration, but the fact that the Agency for the Protection of Historical Monuments, which has been successfully managed by the Culture Ministry since the 1970s, is now to be placed under the City Development Agency is cause for justified concern. A conflict of interest is effectively guaranteed in this arrangement, and monuments, for example, the last remaining nineteenth-century city villas in Yerevan, might fall victim to the powerful construction industry.

Another idea that is being hotly debated is the proposal to take paintings and other cultural artefacts out of museums and into schools where they can be exhibited. “Your Art” is supposed to be the name of the program, which is to implement what the current prime minister announced during his meeting in the Philharmonic Hall with people from Yerevan’s cultural scene in May 2018.

Pashinyan expressed his gratitude to the intellectuals for having mobilized the population to take to the streets, and then promised to bring the population to the same level as the intellectuals. In point of fact, the idea for “Your Art” is said to originate from Pashinyan. But the intellectuals responded only with concern, and even the offer to make more vehicles available to transport the paintings and to entrust the most valuable items to the security services did little to reassure them.

Armenia, though the smallest of the 15 republics of the USSR, possessed the third largest collection of art treasures in the picture galleries and even today there are astounding collections found in provincial cities like Dilijan or Vanadzor.

“Stupidity” – that is the name for this popularizing campaign suggested by Zaven Sargisyan, director of the Paradjanov Museum, one of the most successful museums in Yerevan, which not only earns its own money, but also supports a lively international program with exhibits recently in Berlin and Istanbul.

“Absurd! We have museums precisely for this reason: so that people go to the paintings and look at them, and not the other way around! Meaningless and unprofessional,” complained an angry Hayk Hovhannisyan on his site in the social networks. In Germany, he is the director of a highly respected restoration studio and has actively supported Armenian institutions for years. Anthropologist Gayane Shagoyan also hopes that Pashinyan, who has often proven

willing to change his mind, will do so again, and cancel the “museum delivery service” program.

The Culture Ministry is to be subordinate to the Education Ministry and “Your Art,” regardless of the form it is to take, is clearly a project for education. It will not guarantee the continuing expansion of museum collections, it will not serve the aims of research into art objects and it will expose museum pieces to ever greater dangers, since for example any abrupt change in temperature and humidity, usually accompanying transportation, is simply catastrophic for paintings.

What is still more disturbing is the fact that there exists no museum law in the Republic of Armenia. And the museums, with few exceptions, are state run and therefore are regulated by orders from above. Even during the time of the previous government, for an exhibition abroad the director of Armenia’s National Library had to take the first edition of the *Urbatagirq*, the first book printed in Armenian (in 1512), and which exists in very few copies, and wrap it up in a piece of cloth and tuck it into his inside jacket pocket to transport it. There were written instructions from President Sargsyan, but no funds for transportation or insurance had been authorized. In the exhibition titled “The Art of Calligraphy and the Charm of Pictures,” which was presented in Halle an der Saale on the 500th anniversary of book printing, this priceless item was exhibited like a relic, under protective glass in accordance with museum practice, only to be tucked again into the inside pocket of the director (who did his best not to perspire) for the journey home.

It is well known that hope is the last to die. The website of the Moscow-based Armenian Museum of Moscow and National Culture reported on February 25 on two museums in Yerevan that have been begging to be renovated for almost 40 years. It is not a question of cosmetic appearance but of mold that has attacked the foundation masonry, the wooden floor and a number of exhibits.

The reference is to a house in Yerevan’s city center, with two important institutions, one on top of the other. One is the atelier of Ara Sargsyan, a sculptor originally from Istanbul who studied in Vienna and was close to the Nemesis Group; and the second is the museum of the painter and graphic artist Hakob Kodjoyan, who studied in Munich and was among the founders of the national painting style. The report is alarming, but it does contain some hope in that it mentions a law project that is still in the advisory stage. In the project, museums are

to be allowed to run cafés to earn income to finance the renovation of the exhibition rooms. Apparently it is believed that restaurants in museums might expect adequate turnover. In fact, those few museums in Armenia that offer visitors postcards and other memorabilia, like the Aslamazyan Sisters Museum in Gyumri or the Paradjanov Museum in Yerevan mentioned above, do manage to generate some income. It is clearly not enough to finance renovation work and the sales are the director's own responsibility. The legal situation is not settled and individual initiative entails significant risks.

The absence of legally clear regulations does not make life any easier for the limited number of private museums either. And the elimination of the Culture Ministry will mean yet more chaos. It is not only the fact that a legal dispute may lead to long drawn-out court proceedings, but also that there is nothing concrete regulating cultural assets on the law books. Take, for example, the Tamanyan Museum, which was founded in 2001 and represented successful cooperation between the state and private individuals. The state provided rooms and workplaces and the architect's heirs made the exhibits of the museum available in the form of drawings, photographs and models. Last year, however, the family took back the exhibits and the museum was closed, or rather, forcibly fused with the National Museum Institute of Architecture.

The fate of the Kalentz Museum in Yerevan is even more dramatic. It opened in 2010 as a purely private house-museum and was initially dedicated to the work and life of my grandfather, the painter Harutyun Kalentz. The bitter inheritance battle following the death of the museum founder, my father Saro Galentz, in October 2017 laid bare the fundamental weaknesses of the legal system in Armenia. It starts with the fact that one cannot register artworks or manuscripts or other intellectual wealth as property. The museum, which had four jobs paid by the Culture Ministry for six years, was never registered anywhere, and there was never a list of the museum's exhibits. The notary who handled the inheritance initially refused to draw up a list of the artworks actually on hand, on grounds that there existed no precedent in Armenia. And when she was then ready to conduct this pioneering task, evenings, after office hours, she was simply not permitted to enter the house. It took three instances in court before the Supreme Court ruled, in January of this year, that the notary would be allowed to conduct her task unhindered. By way of comparison: elsewhere the police would simply decide on the basis of an application by the person entitled to the inheritance and would secure the entrance to the house with a seal.

In this case, however, the decision on the part of the Supreme Court did not lead to any final settlement, since the authorities register only real estate and automobiles as property that may change hands, but not libraries or art collections, not to mention copyrights to pictures and similar intellectual property.

Legal rights concerning gifts are not regulated either, and this is an invitation to criminal acts. In Armenia only automobiles and real estate have to be notarized as gifts. Anything else can, metaphorically speaking, be listed on a paper napkin and checked off. Whether or not such a gift — regardless of value — is received after the death of the giver can no longer be determined. In the concrete case of the Kalentz Museum, four months after the death of my father, who left no testament, several pages of a document appeared with a list of gifts, and was used in the court proceedings to argue against the notary's drawing up an inventory of the works held in the house-museum. This bundle of pages was neither notarized nor supplied with the name of a witness; it did not even have a handwritten line from the "gift giver," who a full year prior to his death was supposedly giving literally all his art works to his older brother who resided abroad. And the several pages were presented in photocopied form. Perhaps it reads like a soap opera, but it was only after police investigated this case of document forgery that months later the original document was made available. The experts however were not allowed to take enough samples, to examine the aging of the paper and ink, and to establish the date of the "donation," since the suspect, as owner of the document, did not give his permission for them to extract samples from the A4 format pages. Allegedly this was done to avoid endangering the cultural-historical value of the "document." The graphological examination of the "checkmarks" or "tics" as a supposed signature was determined unattainable on grounds of simplicity. In the end, after six months and the removal of three leading commissars the case was considered closed, without any conclusion. What legal recourse remains is the possibility to take the State Attorney to court and to go through three instances to demand he fulfill his duty to investigate the suspicion of a serious crime of document forgery.

Even the special hearing that was supposed to declare the "gift" as null and void, remained without result, since Armenian law does not provide for any strict form for a gift. The grounds for such a declaration would have been found in numerous formal errors, like the nebulous formulation "whole archive," or the lack of signatures on each page of the list, or the lack of the actual transfer and acceptance of the gift objects; and, the authenticity of the signature was

not a subject of the hearing. It is that simple. One can however appeal the decision. Armenia is a state of law.

Pashinyan himself even added during his meeting in the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin that the new government “would not like to interfere in the work of the courts.” The courts, however, seem to expect instructions to come “from above.” And if we do not interfere, that does not mean that others will not do so.” Apparently we are not dealing here only with the measurable degree of independence of jurisdiction, but with the belief that the juridical system is a service, one that settles problems and if necessary even legalizes matters of fact. And that is what’s called the culture of debate, something that varies greatly from one nation to the next.

With the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution on the horizon, one might place the main emphasis on an increase in prosperity and economic activity and consider cultural aspects as peripheral phenomena. But how is one supposed to attract investors to the country in droves and reach Swiss living standards in record time if bonds, shares and other capital assets do not enjoy the same value status as an automobile? How can one guarantee legal security if fundamental mechanisms of treating property are apparently stuck in the Soviet era, when real estate enjoyed the highest protection status?

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