

## **Armenia: Fury at Foreign Language School Move**

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Campaigners say national identity under threat despite government concessions.

A government plan to allow Armenian schools to teach in foreign languages has outraged writers, opposition groups and nationalists, who say it risks relegating Armenian to an inferior status.

The idea stemmed from an initiative by the ethnic Armenian billionaire banker Ruben Vardanyan, who wants to build a financial centre in the town of Dilijan, complete with an international school with teaching in English.

That is currently illegal under Armenian law, which specifies that the language of instruction must be Armenian, and activists fear the government will end up undermining the country's heritage.

"This presents a great danger to the independence of Armenia. Armenian will become a domestic language, and our independence will exist only on paper," said Vahan Ishkhanyan, an influential blogger and former editor of *Ankax Newspaper*, ([www.tert.am](http://www.tert.am)).

He was one of the founders of an online campaign against a change in the proposed law.

The campaign group, which unites thousands of people from a wide section of public opinion, wrote an open letter to the directors of the Dilijan School, asking them to reconsider their desire to have instruction in English.

"A slow but irreversible process will start, where parents looking for the best education for their children will prefer instruction in a foreign language. These pupils, receiving a more successful education, will get into the best universities, take the leading positions in the private and public sectors, and form a foreign-language elite, which will at best only know conversational Armenian," the letter, which is being translated into English for the non-Armenian directors, said.

Education Minister Armen Ashotyan has promised that a planned change in the law will include conditions to make sure only a handful of non-Armenian language schools can be opened.

Answering a question from IWPR in parliament on May 19, he said deputies would amend the draft law to reflect the public's concerns.

"All the restrictions that the government has suggested will be introduced into the law as a legal guarantee in answer to the many constructive concerns and suggestions which have been raised these last few days," he said.

He said the law would limit the number of non-Armenian schools to 15, with specific restrictions on the number in each language; Armenian would be a compulsory subject for all pupils; and only children aged ten or over would be admitted. He also stressed that the schools would not be funded by taxpayers.

"The logic of the law is to give the possibility to investors, organisations or individuals who want to open such schools," he said.

But his logic has not proved convincing to society at large. Among other groups, the initiative has been condemned by the President's Public Council and the Union of Writers of Armenia as well as by the opposition parties Heritage and the Armenian National Congress.

Marine Petrosyan, a writer whose work has appeared in *Inknagir* literary magazine among other publications, said opening foreign-language schools would serve to reduce the quality of general education.

"If the Armenian education minister thinks that we need to open foreign-language schools to improve the quality of education, then it follows that he thinks Armenian is a second-rate language, in which it is impossible to receive a full, modern education. How can such a person be the education minister?" she said.

Such opinions are widespread, but not universal. Armen Harutyunyan, the country's human rights ombudsman, thinks foreign language-schools could prove beneficial. He thought they would help counter the increasingly mono-lingual tendency that the country has shown since the end of the Soviet Union, and

the related decline in Russian language teaching.

“Pupils from foreign-language educational establishments can better defend the national interests. We need to steadily move away from being provincial. This educational system gives us the possibility of making our culture more open and strong,” he said.

But Petrosyan was not persuaded by such arguments and called on the government to recall the draft law from parliament.

“I think the government is clever enough to remove this proposal. It is clear that opposition in society is very strong. And the most interesting and pleasing thing is that newer and newer elements of society who were passive until recently have become active too. The question of the national language is so complex that the government could end up paying dearly if it goes against the will of the public,” she said.

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