

Armenia's Anti-Smoking Law: Puff or Progress?

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In this country, even the doctors and politicians who warn of the evils of nicotine are smokers themselves.

Armenia is the smoking capital of Europe.

The World Health Organisation, WHO, estimates that 63.7 per cent of Armenian men are smokers, which makes them the heaviest puffers in Europe. While there are no reliable statistics for the smaller number of women smokers, their number is growing every year.

In Yerevan, billboards every ten metres display cigarette advertisements for both Armenian and well-known international brands.

“It’s a national disgrace,” Grant Vardanian told IWPR. That’s a surprising comment, coming from a business tycoon with a monopoly on Armenia’s tobacco industry. “That’s what I say, even me, and those are my advertising billboards hanging there! Until now, our legislators have failed to pass a law prohibiting cigarette advertisements in public places.”

Nonetheless, it was Vardanian and a group of other businessmen directly involved in the production and distribution of cigarettes who earlier this year led opposition to an anti-smoking bill in parliament.

Another legislative attempt to fight Armenia’s smoking habit is currently being considered by the National Assembly, and could become law by the end of the year.

The problem is chronic. In the cafes and restaurants of Armenia you can hardly make out people’s faces in the dense tobacco smoke. “How can you drink a cup of coffee without a cigarette?” is the sort of remark that regulars in Yerevan’s countless cafes make to a curious journalist.

True, smoking has recently been banned in some large offices, but this has little effect on the general public.

“All my friends smoke, so am I any worse than they are?” asked Narine, a regular visitor to the Poplavok café in central Yerevan. “I know it’s bad for you, but so what? What difference does it make if you live five years more or less. I could give up if I wanted to. There is a saying, you know: someone who doesn’t smoke or drink is damaging his health.”

According to the WHO, 2,000 people between the ages of 35 and 70 die every year in Armenia from smoking-related diseases such as lung cancer and heart attacks.

“They are not dying from smoking,” said cardiologist Tigran Haianian, “but from stress. Smoking only aggravates and attacks the weak parts of the body. But they should give up, of course.”

Somewhat undercutting his fine words, Haianian admits he has been smoking since his student years and is not about to give up.

Alexander Bazarjian, co-ordinator of the public health ministry's anti-tobacco programme, argues that if Armenia were to sign up to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control it could save millions of lives, "The convention obliges everyone to fight against smoking, and if we do not subscribe to it, then we are pronouncing an ultimatum on our health."

But this message does not seem to be getting through. After all, health minister Norair Davidian is a smoker himself.

After doctors, it is of course journalists who smoke more than anyone else. "Well, how can you write without a cigarette? Your head just doesn't work," is a remark that typifies the attitude of three quarters of Armenian journalists, regardless of gender.

On the days a newspaper goes to press, the smoke in editorial offices is suffocating. "You may as well smoke yourself, at least fewer people will hassle you about it," said journalist Yelena Galoyan.

Legislation limiting the sale and consumption of tobacco products, proposed by the permanent parliamentary commission for science, education, culture and sport was adopted in a first hearing by parliament in mid-November.

The campaign is already having some effect. Rumour has it that the entire Armenian government gave up smoking simultaneously, but how long they can keep it up is another matter. President Robert Kocharian does not smoke, but the same cannot be said of his subordinates. True, in the new Yerevan mayor's office there is not a single ashtray and no area for smokers.

Artur Bagdasarian, speaker of the National Assembly, laid down something of a challenge when he declared triumphantly that he had given up, prompting journalists to begin stalking him and other deputies to see whether they could catch them out.

But there is another side to the coin. Cigarette production accounts for 3.3 per cent of Armenia's industrial output, and in 2001-03, profits from both imported cigarettes and the sale of locally manufactured product amounted to 42 million US dollars.

Last May, anti-smoking legislation failed in parliament because many deputies had vested interests in the cigarette business.

The watered-down version reviewed by parliament last month now protects the interests of cigarette manufacturers. As it stands now, smoking will still be permitted in cafes and restaurants, and taxes and excise duties on Armenian-made brands will remain low. Prices of cigarettes – currently between 50 cents and a dollar for a packet – are set to rise.

If it is passed, the new law will impose restrictions on advertising, the sale of cigarettes to minors, and smoking in public places.

Ordinary Armenians wonder how much difference it will make.

"Cigarette advertising is very attractive, with its courageous young men and elegant models inviting you

to take up smoking,” market trader Grigor Khachatryan told IWPR. “Our young people are attracted by beauty, they hardly think about the dangers. But banning it won’t work. Smokers will smoke. The advertisements don’t work on me, though - I’ve never smoked in my life.”

Economics expert Eduard Agajanov argues that “a ban on advertising local products leads to buyers preferring attractive foreign goods”.

“If this law becomes government policy, then of course I will obey it,” said parliamentary deputy Shavarsh Kocharian.

“And if we ban advertising, well so what? People will smoke all the same.”

Kocharian should know - he’s not planning to give up.

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Location: Armenia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenias-anti-smoking-law-puff-or-progress>