



# Library development in Armenia: Problems and progress since the dissolution of the USSR



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**Abstract** The paper provides a situation report on the state of libraries and information services, publishing and bookselling in Armenia. It briefly describes their development, outlines the international development assistance that they have received during the last twenty years, describes their current situation, and indicates some of their future needs.

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was catastrophic for the library and information services of the newly independent countries, for whom there was little legacy from the formerly highly-centralised system. A study of the assistance that the post-Soviet Republics have received suggests that, for lack of adequate preliminary research into the background, much of the assistance has hitherto been uncoordinated, sometimes inappropriate, and frequently unsustainable (Johnson, 2013). This paper was prepared as a background study for a TEMPUS Joint European Project, NMPLIS (New Master's Programmes in Librarianship and Information Science),<sup>1</sup> which was supported by the European Commission to facilitate the modernisation of professional education and the underpinning library services in Armenia, Georgia and Uzbekistan between 2009 and 2012. It is based on a review of the published literature, and data gathered during the implementation of the project. The literature is

fragmented, and not fully captured in the major indexes to the literature of the field. Following a thorough search, this synthesis outlines the factors that have influenced the national development of library and information services in Armenia, outlines international development assistance that they are reported to have received, describes their current situation, and indicates their future needs, including the human resource requirements to sustain development. In providing a comprehensive overview of the situation in Armenia, it is expected to be of value to future projects intended to assist the development of that country's libraries and information services.

## Armenia: history, population, governance, and economy

The Republic of Armenia is a landlocked, mountainous country in the Caucasus, with a population of about 3.2 million. There is evidence of settlement in Armenia as early as the third millennium B.C. It developed into a significant empire, extending to the shores of the Mediterranean, but eventually came under Roman and then Byzantine control.

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<sup>1</sup> NMPLIS website URL – <http://www.flib.sci.am/eng/Tempus/>

Through most of its recent history, Armenia has been subject to its neighbours for longer periods than it has enjoyed independence. In the sixteenth century Greater Armenia was divided between the Ottoman Turks and the Persians; the latter, eastern part being seized and annexed by Russia in 1828. This marked the end of all political autonomy until almost the end of the twentieth century.

The country was the scene of conflict between Russia and Turkey before, during, and after World War I. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, it became the independent Democratic Republic of Armenia in 1918. However, it was eventually seized by the Bolsheviks and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922 (Matossian, 1973) as part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, which also included present day Azerbaijan and Georgia. That federation was dissolved in 1936, and its constituent parts became three separate Soviet Socialist Republics.

In 1991, Armenia seceded from the USSR and declared its independence. The establishment of parliamentary democracy enabled Armenia to become a member of the Council of Europe, and it has been predicted that it will make an official bid for membership of the European Union in a few years. However, this aspiration is complicated by the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave surrounded entirely by Azerbaijan but with a majority of its population of Armenian origin. The region had been a source of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for centuries. In the immediate post-Soviet period, a military conflict commenced between the newly independent Republics but, although a ceasefire was negotiated in 1994 and Nagorno-Karabakh has declared its (unrecognised) independence of both Republics, no permanent diplomatic solution has since been achieved.

Armenia had developed a major industrial economy during the Soviet period, based on mineral extraction, chemical production, manufacturing machinery and electronics, as well as maintaining its reputation for fruit-growing and wine-making (Matossian, 1973). The Republic's industrial sector supplied manufactured goods to neighbouring countries in exchange for raw materials and energy.

Despite disruption caused by a major earthquake in 1988 when, for example, 80 per cent of the city of Gyumri was destroyed, steady economic progress has earned Armenia increasing support from international institutions since independence. Nonetheless, although the economy has shown strong and sustained growth, half of the people remain impoverished. Armenia's land area is comparable in size to Belgium or Maryland. However, the estimated GDP per capita in 2010 was \$5,178, compared with \$36,274 in Belgium and \$47,123 in the USA. The substantial difference between the GDP data for these countries seems unlikely to be explained by any differences that may have occurred in the way in which it is calculated for each country.

## Education and research

In the communist era, Armenian education followed the standard Soviet model of complete state control (from Moscow) of curricula and teaching methods, and close integration of education activities with other aspects of

society. In its first years of independence, while health and welfare services attempted to maintain the basic state-planned structure of the Soviet era, the country's education systems changed rapidly.

A literacy rate of 100 percent was reported as early as 1960. As in the Soviet period, primary and secondary education in Armenia remains free, and completion of secondary school is compulsory. There are some 1500 general education schools, including some 300 middle and higher secondary schools (Education, 2010).

In 1989 some 14 per cent of the population had had a higher education. Since then, Armenia has made substantial changes to the centralized and regimented Soviet system. Because at least 98 per cent of students in higher education are Armenian, curricula began to emphasize Armenian history and culture. Armenian became the dominant language of instruction. Russian was still widely taught, but as a second language.

Armenia's largest institution of higher learning, Yerevan State University, was founded in 1919, and currently has 20 academic departments and around 11,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students. There are nine other state-funded post-secondary education institutions, with some 58,000 students in total. In addition, the private American University of Armenia was founded in 1991 by the combined efforts of the Government of Armenia, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAid), and the University of California.

In the Soviet system, the national Academies of Science coordinated the top-level research and educational institutions, and were the leading institutions in all types of research. The Armenian Academy of Sciences had been established in 1835, and became independent of the USSR Academy in Moscow in 1943 (Matossian, 1973).

## Language issues, publishing, bookselling, and bibliographical control

At least 93 per cent of the population are of Armenian ethnicity, speaking Armenian and reading and writing in the unique Armenian alphabet, which was devised in the fifth century A.D. In 1970, only about 23 per cent of the population claimed to be fluent in Russian (Matossian, 1973). One third of Armenian-speakers in the USSR lived in other Soviet Republics, but their use of the language was said to be in decline. In the early 1970s, it was estimated that there were also around 1.7 million people in the Armenian diaspora, the largest proportion residing in the U.S.A.

In 1970, 96 newspapers were being published in the country, 81 of them in Armenian. In addition, there were 87 magazines and periodicals (Matossian, 1973). By 1977, there were about six publishing houses in Armenia, producing about 1100 books each year, 91 periodicals and 81 newspapers (Nemirovsky, 1981).

One of the first decrees of the new People's Commissariat of Armenia in 1922 was to set up a Book Chamber, on the model initiated by the Russian Soviet in 1917, to coordinate bibliographical affairs (Aslyanyan, 1986). The National Book Chamber of Armenia is the country's centre for national bibliography, bibliographic information and statistics, centralized cataloguing, archival collections of

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