HER EXCELLENCY AMBASSADOR MARIE L. YOVANOVITCH: REPORT FROM ARMENIA

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Category: Opinions

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Is it?
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Click Here for Report From Armenia
00:01 Introduction - Levon Avdoyan
03:10 - DeAnna' Marcum
09:30 - Ambassador M. L. Yovanovitch
36:00 - Q&A

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In the month of June Ambassador Yovanovitch appeared in several communities in USA. Commentaries appearing in Armenian media were, by and large, unfavorable. Below are a couple of examples.

Pari (Ch)desank, Yovanovitch
By Lucine Kasbarian, New Jersey, USA, Keghart.com 29 June 2009

Like many Armenian Americans, I am unhappy that our organizations hosted the recent public tour by the U.S. Ambassador to Armenia, Marie Yovanovitch. Nevertheless, trying to make the most of the situation, I attended her presentation at the Armenian Cultural Foundation in Massachusetts.

As expected, Yovanovitch largely evaded the audience's pointed questions and comments.

From having spoken to Armenians who attended Yovanovitch's public presentations elsewhere, such as in New York City, I know that similar scenarios unfolded there.

Even worse, the Armenian American press failed to critically and frankly assess Yovanovitch's opening remarks, questions from the audience, and her replies. Such press outlets include Armenia Now, the Armenian Weekly, the Armenian Reporter, the Armenian Mirror-Spectator as well as the email newsletters of the Eastern U.S.A. Diocese and Prelacy.

Unfortunately, even HETQ, the investigative journalism website in Armenia, merely republished an article from the Glendale News-Press about Yovanovitch's visit to Southern California.

What separated HETQ from some of the outlets mentioned above, however, is that it didn't censor critical reader comments posted under their online articles. While most of us recognize that Armenia suffers from a democracy and free-speech deficit, few of us have said publicly that our Diaspora media and organizations suffer from the same ailment.
I am forwarding HETQ's reader comments about Yovanovitch to our Diaspora organizations, media, and clergy because there are many questions they need to answer. Among the very first is: why did American Armenian organizations agree last year to the U.S. Senate's confirming Yovanovitch even though she and the State Department were as evasive on the genocide issue as John Hoagland, the previous failed nominee, had been?

Given Yovanovitch's and the U.S.'s dishonesty about the genocide, and the obvious fact that she was going to give evasive replies regarding a host of issues on her present tour, why did Armenian organizations even agree to host her? If their reasoning was that she needed to hear what we had to say, she undoubtedly already knew that from reading the Armenian press and news releases since assuming her ambassadorship.

Frankly, this tour was an honor and privilege that neither the State Department nor the ambassador deserved.

Armenian organizations held private meetings with Yovanovitch. What, may we ask, was the outcome of these meetings, or are our organizations once again practicing the same lack of transparency for which they criticize the Armenian government? They are accountable to the communities they claim to represent and serve, or haven't they noticed?

Ultimately, we must reject the vassal mentality that has been ingrained in us after centuries of Ottoman occupation. If we don't take a harder line in defense of Armenian rights in the post-genocide age, we have only ourselves to blame — and not the Turkish government — for jeopardizing our survival as a nation, on or off our native lands.

I direct you to **HETQ**, where outspoken Armenians have their say.

Yovanovitch Evades the Community

By Ara Khachatourian, **Asbarez**, 29 June 2009

A patronizing tone, the dodging of questions and the banning of cameras from public events highlighted Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch's tour of Armenian communities, which culminates in Washington on Tuesday.

Perhaps the clearest message coming from Yovanovitch was that President Obama's April 24 statement outlines US policy and there was nothing more to add. She also insisted that she recognizes the frustration and anger of the Armenian-American community vis-à-vis President Obama's broken promise to recognize the Genocide, and pledged she would take that message back to Washington with her.

In her meetings with Armenian-American communities on the East and West coasts Yovanovitch outlined US policy toward Armenia. She said the US was working hard on assisting Armenia to become economically independent, strengthen its democratic institutions and civil society. She also voiced support for the so-called "roadmap" agreement and the OSCE Minsk Group-led effort to find a lasting solution to the Karabakh conflict.

She reiterated earlier statements made in Yerevan that the disparity in the Administration's proposed military budget for Armenia and Azerbaijan were aimed at bolstering US interests in the Caspian basin, which include counter-proliferation, counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.

Beyond the simple recitation of U.S. policy positions that are already widely available across the internet, she brought nothing new to a community eager for honest discourse. Nor did she make herself available for any detailed questioning on these topics of widespread concern, as is the norm for public officials in American civic life.

One questions the sincerity of her stated eagerness to meet and frankly discuss issues with the community when at every event television cameras were barred from taping the events. For someone who claimed that the US was "bolstering democracy" in Armenia, the banplaced on television cameras and the lukewarm treatment of the press at a conference on Friday signaled the Ambassador's unwillingness to foster the administration stated policy of transparency and openness.

Her explanation was that since she was making similar presentations in different parts of the country, she did not want her message to get out before she could deliver it. She even went on to say that she did not want her message to wind up on YouTube.

At a press conference Friday at the Hilton Hotel in Glendale, Yovanovitch also dodged questions about the Genocide and was more comfortable answering questions about economic development and what the US was doing to benefit Armenia. It lasted 20 minutes and the press was brushed off.

Her decision to exclude cameras from the public events deprived the community from hearing her message and the response to the questions posed to her Friday evening by around 350 community members who attended the public gathering organized by the Western Prelacy at Ferrahian's Avedissian hall. The same was the case Thursday evening at a gathering at the Diocese.

Through her remarks and through her actions, what Yovanovitch managed to accomplish was further alienate the community from their government here in the US. By underestimating the intelligence of the community and blatantly banning the press from events, Yovanovitch demonstrated that she and the administration are not interested in or eager to dialogue with the Armenian-American community.

The Armenian American community deserves answers to its myriad questions and fully expected to receive them during Yovanovitch's visit. Instead they received an education in how to stage an ambassadorial visit that bills itself as open, but, in practice, undermines the very values we should be advancing both here and abroad, namely transparency, accountability, and good governance based on an informed and educated electorate.

Faced with legitimate questions and the prospect of a two-way dialogue and real public scrutiny, it seems she quickly reverted to the very types of behavior she has made a habit of sharply criticizing in Armenia.

We urge our readers to contact the US Embassy in Armenia at usinfo@usa.am. We can promise that we will pursue this matter and report on it in future editions of Asbarez.