

URGENT CALL FOR A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN AGBU

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11th October 2018

President of the AGBU Mr. Berj Setrakian
Officers and Members of the Board of the AGBU
55 East 59th Street, New York City, NY 10022-1112
United States of America

Honorable President and Members of the AGBU Central Board,

We, a group of dedicated but concerned members of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, hereby address this urgent letter/appeal to the President and Central Board of the AGBU. This letter is being sent confidentially, prior to its public release planned for November 15th, 2018. It has been formulated to express our collective thoughts and convictions, and its signatories have signed it in a  personal capacity, even though a great many of our fellow members and colleagues from AGBU Chapters around the world share our concerns on the matters we raise below.


The current momentous changes underway in our homeland have provided Armenians everywhere with a new burst of energy and a desire for introspection. In both Armenia and the Diaspora at large, there is an urgency to improve the effectiveness of national institutions and organizations, and ensure that the most vigorous democratic procedures are enforced fully and honestly. In line with this, we call upon you to urgently consider a number of issues that we believe require immediate redress so that the AGBU can rise to the challenges precipitated by current events, and avoid the errors and omissions that have cast a shadow over its glorious history in recent decades. Whilst we hold the AGBU's multifaceted innovative programs, as well as the work and dedication of its senior leadership, in high regard, we are of the opinion that the organization must undertake internal reforms that will allow it to become an institution that adheres to the principles of transparency, accountability and democratic process. Indeed, the principles of the Velvet Revolution that has swept energy into Armenia must flow through the rest of the Nation and the AGBU as well.

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The decline in grassroots involvement in the operations of our organization, and in particular in its decision-making procedures, can be traced back to the prejudicial 1996 Convention, which in effect cut loose the rank-and-file from the central bodies of the organization. This is a fact that very few, if any, AGBU members around the globe would dispute. The innate problem of this shift is all the more apparent today, when the technological tools that allow instant relaying of opinions and votes from disparate members spread across continents are in abundant use. Of course, the technological advances that now securely permit (and indeed necessitate) high levels of involvement and interaction between a Center and its branches were simply not in existence in previous decades. But they are now.

It is our opinion, and one that is shared widely, that the organs making critical decisions on behalf of the entire organization not only do not take account of the views, ideas and reservations of individual Chapter members, but furthermore, have little interest in them. This has led to a situation where grassroots members justifiably feel that the select few running the AGBU in a 'command and control' format hold the ideas and sentiments of ordinary members in contempt — and has created an organizational infrastructure that allows those feedback loops to be easily and summarily ignored. This is neither a design that is becoming of the legacy of our organization, nor one that is in sync with the values of the new Armenia.

The outcome of the above has been a glaring, palpable disconnect between the Central Board—reflected in the actions it takes and the statements it releases—and rank-and-file members who may well have opposing views on crucial matters and who would want those views to be taken into account (if not 'logged'), as with any well-designed, democratic membership organization built

on the donations and goodwill of a community. It is noteworthy that during the recent dramatic events in Armenia, the Central Board did not once formally request the views and positions of a single Chapter, even ones whose members were acquainted with or closely connected to the protagonists of the events in question. The position of the organization both politically and socially was thus compromised and fragmented, as a supposed representative voice for a global amalgamate of chapters.

Had the Central Board engaged with rank-and-file members on the ground, whose assessments of unfolding events, crises and developments around the world may have provided insight and input towards the formulation of policy, it may have avoided misreading and misunderstanding certain events, or at least giving the impression of doing so. From a public diplomacy standpoint, the AGBU's reactions were not well-aligned to the reality or appropriate to the events underway in Yerevan in April–May 2018. Tens of thousands of people from all walks of life rose up in defiance against a corrupt, discredited, autocratic regime and forced it to relinquish power to a representative, law-abiding administration of their choice. The Central Board both misread and underestimated this movement and failed to comprehend the motivations, aspirations and determination of the people who had taken to the streets. AGBU rank-and-file members were in a position to help; they could have supported the Central Board in better understanding the true nature of those events, encouraging a position that would not have been interpreted as complicit silence with a discredited tyrant until the revolution was won. The people we serve are essentially the same as the sovereign people of Armenia who deserved this revolution and the start of a hopeful future; they are the Armenian Nation writ large, and ignoring them (as well as the existence of political prisoners in the country at that time) would not have been an option if the AGBU was functioning internally as it should have been. A more accurate assessment of the situation would have thus raised the prestige and esteem of the organization significantly, and would have shown that its leadership was not out of touch with events and sentiments on the ground.

Whereas the arguments that were put forward by the Central Board in the past, namely that logistical and practical limitations did not allow for constant liaising with Chapters, no longer apply, few visible practical measures have been taken in recent years to address the issues of operational and communications management. Dozens of technical solutions at reasonable prices are available on the market today, whether on a white label / license or an off-the-shelf basis. For a successful example of such new communication methods one needs to look no further than at new transnational organizations such as DiEM 251 and the tools they utilize to engage and liaise with their members. Few organizations can claim to have members who feel as engaged, appreciated and respected as [DiEM25](#), and this has encouraged those members to participate more energetically in the movement's progress and take responsibility for its actions, in whose evolution they feel they have played a decisive role. This is in stark contrast with the modus operandi of the AGBU since 1996.

Technology Adoption

Our proposal is that the AGBU consider the relatively minor investment that is required to license or develop the platform needed to ensure grassroots members from across the world are properly and directly engaged. People's valid (paid) memberships can easily be verified through individual Chapters and managed through a central database (at low cost), and then they can be consulted on major issues concerning the AGBU and its future courses of action.

Structural Change Management

This should include consultation, and in certain cases a binding vote, on all major issues, in particular:

- proposed candidatures for membership of the Central Board;
- nominations of candidates for the Central Board by rank-and-file members;
- whether all future Presidents of the AGBU should be limited to a maximum of two consecutive terms, a reform that we the undersigned support;
- the wording of major policy statements issued, such as those released during the recent political revolution in Armenia.

We point out that such consultations (and voting) on major issues can be conducted and the results analyzed in less than 24 hours, and therefore would not be a limiting or delaying factor when urgent action is required.

Independence

The inability to mobilize, analyze and react in sync with the incredible international grassroots of the AGBU is not the only problem; the excessively close personal relationships between certain Board members and the former ruling elite of Armenia also prevented the objective positioning that would have reflected the true mission of the organization. Rather than being committed exclusively to the institutions of state and the professional channels of exchange with bodies that represent the country and Nation, some members were so intimately connected to figures like Serge Sargsyan and Garegin II that they failed (and fail, still) to see the big picture. Those relationships facilitated acceptance of a misconfigured and truncated view of developments presented to them by these individuals; both of whom, we have now seen, have lost credibility and respect in Armenian society and the Diaspora at large.

Ultimately, we seek to be supportive of the future of the AGBU and help address the reputational issues that have been amplified by a modus operandi that treats the views and opinions of ordinary AGBU members with disdain. This began more than a decade ago when the decision to unilaterally shut down the Melkonian Educational Institute in Cyprus was taken. Almost every Armenian in our global community knows well that Melkonian has been languishing in a state of scandalous neglect for thirteen years now, a period of time that was certainly long enough for alternative viable, creative, revenue-generating uses for the buildings and site to be applied. The outcome would have been different had there been the capacity to design an alternative viable plan drawing on the

resources and capabilities of global members.

In view of all of the above, and in particular of the AGBU Chapter members who have served our beloved organization (indeed, our 'Union') with loyalty and dedication for decades, we as members request a greater say in AGBU's overall policies and direction.

We call on you to urgently implement the internal reforms that will bring the AGBU firmly into our times, and back again to the center of the beating heart of Diasporan life — and to adopt some of the basic tools on the market that allow

proper member engagement. All members should have the option and right to have un-politicized, objective, transparent and systematic interaction with the Center, including a regular transfer of views, assessments and opinions prior to important policy decisions being taken. We also request greater transparency with regard to Central Board meetings and decision-making procedures. This is long overdue and is completely in tune with the expectations of our new generation of Armenians. The social, economic, political and community development of our people in the 21st century will be radically different than the current unsatisfactory status quo.

We are convinced that the esteem in which the AGBU and its various programs and chapters are held will only increase when these needed reforms of its operations, information infrastructure and management are implemented.

We have prepared this letter out of love and respect for the unique history, role and mission of our great organization — the AGBU. We hope that the Central Board will respect and consider the opinions and proposals raised herewith, and will engage without delay in a transparent and genuine debate with rank-and-file members globally. Nobody who is cognizant of the winds of change blowing across the world today can doubt that the time has come to modernize and re-democratize the structure and operation of the AGBU. It will be a move that will undeniably enhance the organization's reputation, effectiveness, relevance and appeal for all age groups in our community, and particularly the young, whose dedication we so desperately need in order to continue supporting our mission.

Yours sincerely,

Tigran Kalaydjian (Cyprus)

Taline Ouzounian Avakian (Switzerland)

Stephanos Kamakian (Cyprus)

Nar Khatchadourian (Lebanon)

Nigol Vanian (Switzerland)

Jilda Demiryan (Switzerland)

Seta Seraydarian Essade (Switzerland)

Leyla Terzian Cermak (Switzerland)

Vicken Bayramian (Switzerland)

Sonia Bedrossian (Bulgaria)

[DiEM25 is a movement](#) which in two years has gained an international membership of close to 100,000 across dozens of countries (in fact more active members than the AGBU). Their leadership structure operates in a transparent and democratic way that is both exemplary and effective. By operating a dynamic online presence and using secure methods of communicating with registered members, it regularly provides feedback to its rank-and-file about what policy discussions are taking place, and requests members to vote on actions it proposes to take or statements it proposes to issue. These votes are not compulsory, and depending on the issue concerned may or may not be binding; however the effect of addressing members directly and requesting their feedback is highly stimulating.

