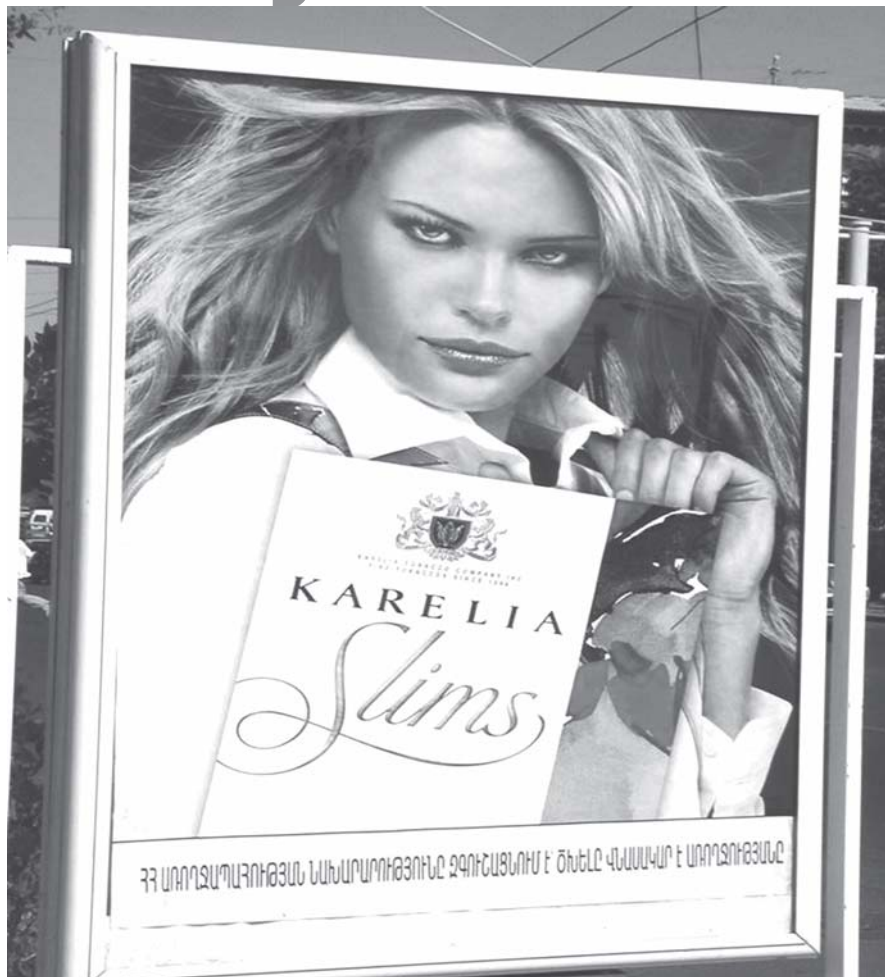


# commentary



► “You can do as you wish” - Armenian tobacco ads target the young and independent.

## The Tobacco Industry Moves East: Addiction in Armenia and the Former Soviet States

By Christine Megerdichian

It has been less than a decade since the United States succeeded in one of its longest and hardest fought battles against the tobacco industry. Public health agencies joined with the federal and state governments to curb the smoking phenomenon through mass media campaigns and paid television advertising. A monopolizing industry was uncovered, lawsuits were won, and consequently, once-classified internal reports, e-mails and scientific data from the tobacco industry are now available to the public. Fortunately, the power of the industry has been significantly reduced in the United States, but its unwavering programs specifically targeting addiction have by no means allowed the international world to breathe any more easily.

As the tobacco industry's schemes were slowly

uncovered in the United States, the industry successfully expanded and settled into a new haven internationally. Most European countries at the very least have some form of a systematic anti-smoking campaign in progress and are successfully working to divert most of the industry's carefully executed plans. Many smaller, less economically stable countries, however, are not so fortunate. The countries of the former Soviet Union are in desperate need of health advocacy and action. And Armenia, a country of merely 3 million, ravaged by genocide in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, finds itself at the top of the tobacco industry's hit list.

Presently, there are no signs of an anti-smoking campaign in Armenia. The streets of Yerevan are flooded with tobacco billboards plastered

with pictures of beautiful women with the quote: “You can do as you wish.” Working on the growing desire of young Armenian females to become more independent and empowered than their mother’s generation once was, the cigarette is made to appear as a tool to their success. But why not advertise with both males and females? The reason lies deep in the grim statistics. According to the 2000 Health and Demographic Survey in Armenia, male smoking rates in Armenia are 67.5% the highest in the European region—while the female smoking rate is below 3.1% (1).

Unsurprisingly, under such circumstances youth smoking and effects of secondhand smoke are also increasing risk factors. Smoking rates among the youth are quite high in comparison with other European countries, with 5.6% of 13-15 year old children (11.1% boys and 1.2% girls) currently smoking according to the global youth tobacco survey in 2004. More ominous yet is the daunting fact that more than 90% of 13-15 year old children are exposed to tobacco smoke daily in homes and public places (1), and secondhand smoking deaths are quickly reaching unbelievable levels. All things considered, the tobacco use in Armenia attributes to 17 years of life lost prematurely (2), and smoking-attributed mortality is at 22%—third place in Europe after Moldova and Hungary (3).

The economic drain of the tobacco use is staggering. A 2001 poll found half of the 3 million citizens of Armenia to be under the poverty line. Meanwhile, as \$26 million in loans was received in 2002 from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), \$28 million left Armenia to Multinational Tobacco Companies (4). Not only are cigarettes inexpensive, but taxation legislation has failed numerous times due to governmental ties to the industry.

A tobacco campaign currently targets the non-smoking female. Urgent action is necessary to begin an anti-smoking media campaign in Armenia that emphasizes the effects of secondhand smoking on women and children. Professor Gregory N. Connolly of the Harvard School of Public Health and Director of the Massa-

chusetts Tobacco Control Program works closely with Massachusetts state representatives. He has set the stage for the cessation of high tobacco use in Armenia. Earlier this year, the Armenian Parliament ratified and passed the World Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, banning smoking in health, educational, and cultural institutions. But the problem in a country that only 14 years ago was freed from Communist rule is, unsurprisingly, law enforcement.

“Armenia is still struggling with democracy and its economy,” said Connolly, “and poverty plays a big role in the culture of smoking” (5).

Nonetheless, as Professor Connolly and his colleagues work to begin a firm, longstanding anti-smoking campaign in Armenia, there is hope that tides will change. The campaign will form around educating the average Armenian who has never heard the term “secondhand smoke,” is exposed to enough smoke in his or her lifetime to lose 17 years of life without ever touching a cigarette, and who does not yet have the luxury of quit help-lines and nicotine patches. Of eight anti-smoking advertisements that were tested for emotional impact on young adults at the American University of Armenia this past August, the two which were found most effective will air on Armenian television this winter. There is finally some hope that Armenia will soon be able to sustain its own successful anti-smoking campaign and maybe even one day act as an example for its former Soviet counterparts.

“Smoking is not intrinsic to any population,” Professor Connolly said. “There’s no genetic pre-disposition to smoking, so I am very hopeful” (5). **H**

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