



Resources and Education for a Fair and Civil Society  
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***Referendum Rewind* documentary sets stage for a “Diaspora-Armenia Reset”**

New York, NY— On January 4th, over 100 people attended the premiere screening of ***Referendum Rewind*** at the Tribeca Film Center in lower Manhattan. Filmed, edited and directed by LA filmmaker and activist Robert Davidian, a native of New York, the film chronicles the pro-democracy movement in the Republic of Armenia. Through the voices of the people and live action events, it highlights the struggles against the pervasive corruption that compromised a critical referendum on constitutional reform back in December 2015.

Unlike Mr. Davidian’s other two self-produced films on corruption in Armenia, this 60-minute feature was commissioned by US-based Justice Armenia and its supporters. The mission was to investigate the situation on the ground before, during and after the vote. The results of this exploration now serve as the context and springboard for Justice Armenia's larger goal—to kick off 2017 as a new era in Armenia-Diaspora relations called the “Diaspora-Armenia Reset”.

“For those who believe that Armenia's future belongs to the people versus the oligarchs and autocrats that have entrenched themselves through systemic corruption, this event is a chance to raise important questions and seek practical solutions that involve participation of the Diaspora,” explained Ara N. Araz, moderator of the evening and board member of Justice Armenia, a 501(c)3 grass roots non-profit. Its mission is to provide education and resources for a fair and civil society in Armenia and elsewhere.

After the screening, guest speaker Nate Schenkkan, the project director of *Nation’s in Transit*, Freedom House’s annual survey of democratic governance, along with Robert Davidian and Ara N. Araz, took to the stage to field the numerous questions and commentaries posed by a diverse audience.

Many were surprised to learn that Armenia has been defined as a “semi-consolidated authoritarian regime” according to the Freedom House survey of nations from Central Europe through Eurasia. In contrast to Georgia and Ukraine, which are defined as



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“transitional governments” respectively, Armenia is in the company of countries with which it has little else in common, such as Kyrgyzstan and Kosovo.

Mr. Schenkkan has been to Armenia multiple times and has extensive knowledge of the entire CIS and Eastern bloc countries. He was quick to validate the main thesis of the film: that the December referendum was indeed one of the most undeniable of all of Armenia’s corrupted elections since independence. “Even people who do not expect much from elections in Armenia were surprised as to how blatant the fraud was,” he stated. “The report on the constitutional referendum is the only OSCE report that says plainly that the election results were changed. It says that there was actual alteration of voting results.”

The film also revealed that, had the vote been untainted, the ruling party still had the asymmetrical capacity to inappropriately impact the outcome—given their control of the media and the judiciary. But Mr. Schenkkan reassured the audience that a failure to exact a true result even with intensive outside monitoring won’t constitute a failure. Informed by the experiences of other nations struggling for democracy, he reminded the audience that “the act of organizing and monitoring is in itself significant even if the short term outcome is not changed. Networks, relationships and solidarity is being created that carries through to other parts of the country and helps you re-imagine the country as you go.”

Throughout the film, it became increasingly clear that citizen confidence in the Armenian government is at an all-time low. Some locals maintained that more radical approaches must be taken, while others support a more robust election observer network as an important next step.

One audience member suggested that it was high time that the Diaspora and community organizations as well as the Armenian church cease patronizing Armenian officials on their visits to the U.S., boycott events in their honor, and unite as a powerful voice in support of the transparency, rule of law and human rights that the government has failed to uphold. The idea received a round of applause.

It was also pointed out that Global Financial Integrity, a Washington, DC-based



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research organization, reported a nearly 50% increase in illicit financial flows from Armenia from \$1.285 billion in 2012 to \$1.848 billion in 2013. In response to a question about the more repressive actions taken by the authorities against peaceful protesters, Mr. Araz noted that between 2010 and 2016, the ROA police budget increased by approximately \$50 million and the size of the police force rose from 8,875 in 2005 to 18,333 by 2013.

Another game-changing factor was raised: the 4-day war in April 2016 with Azerbaijan, when Armenians discovered that the ROA military was grossly unprepared to withstand the assaults. This led to additional sacrifice and death of young soldiers. With an Armenian government largely asleep at the wheel, the argument for supporting the ruling party has also begun to unravel. Some in the audience expressed disappointment that the best hopes for a truly free and independent Armenia have been sidelined in favor of a false choice between national security with stability and democracy with Rule of Law.

These and other recent events, including last summer's hostage taking of the Yerevan police station, have signaled a tipping point looming in the political life of Armenia. In characterizing the current state of Armenian affairs, Mr. Schenkkan used the analogy of the tension of two tectonic plates—the people and the government—right before an earthquake erupts.

The question is in which direction will it go? Will it wind up a fully consolidated authoritarian state or a budding democracy that will ultimately win the respect and admiration of citizens, the diaspora and the world? Those who want to be part of the “reset” are betting on the latter.

“The positive feedback from this event indicates that the tide is turning, not only among Armenia's citizens, but among everyday diasporans too,” stated Justice Armenia board member Tamar Hovsepian. “When we first began this open conversation about the serious internal challenges of the authorities' own making, there were still apologists and relativists attending our events to argue otherwise. Ruling party proxies in the U.S. were urging guest panelists not to attend. But these voices have diminished as more and more community members are asking the right questions and looking for new



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answers. And most important, they're eager to play a role in reclaiming the Armenian dream of being truly free and independent.”

In the film, various stakeholders, activists, and thought leaders, along with ordinary citizens, appealed directly to viewers to stand with the people and participate as a united force in support of free and fair elections. As one expert analyst in the film stated, free and fair elections are essential to put Armenia on a true path to democracy. With the Parliamentary Elections slated for April 2, 2017, many activists on camera called upon Diasporans to sign up to become election observers. Some cited that those polling stations with a strong presence of committed observers had statistically different results than those without observers, thus supporting the positive effect of their presence.

To this end, Justice Armenia announced that it is organizing a group mission to Armenia, called the “2017 Transparency Tour” from March 29 to April 5<sup>th</sup> of this year. The trip is designed to coincide with the parliamentary elections. Participants will have the option to serve as outside observers while spending the rest of the week engaging directly with pro-democracy groups and activists, journalists and media specialists, opposition parties and other stakeholders involved in anti-corruption and pro-democracy efforts.

There will also be a robust cultural and social component in the evenings from gourmet dining experiences and new trends in the arts to networking receptions and a special farewell event. For more information, go to <http://www.justicearmenia.org/2017-transparency-tour.html>.

A second screening of *Referendum Rewind* and continued discussion with Freedom House's Nate Schenkkan will take place on Thursday, January 19th at St. Leon Armenian Church in Fairlawn, NJ.

The event is sponsored by a cross section of community organizations, including Justice Armenia, Armenian Renaissance-New York, Tufenkian Foundation, SR Socially Relevant Film Festival NY, Armenian Network of America-Greater NY, Armenian Democratic Liberal Party-Ramgavars, New York Armenian Students Association, and National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR).



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To purchase tickets, go to <http://diaspora-reset-nj.bpt.me/>.



Photo caption A:  
*Left to Right: Nate Schenkkan of Freedom House, filmmaker Robert Davidian, and moderator Ara N. Araz of Justice Armenia.*





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Photo caption B: Audience  
*Screening of "Referendum Rewind" at Tribeca Film Center, NYC*