

## An Opinion Piece

### An Essay on Navigating Change in the Post-Soviet Educational Systems

#### Introduction

Born and raised in Philadelphia, a city where rationality, diversity, and skepticism abound, the expectations of my world have been significantly influenced by this environment. My upbringing has emphasized questioning to understand and evaluate, to seek clarification if confused, and to speak out against wrongs that are ethical, moral, and practical. Now, as a teacher in post-Soviet Georgia, I am faced with a radically different reality. The ghost of Soviet command and control still haunts these shores, complicating every worthwhile change I want to effect for the benefit of my students. In this essay, I will critically analyze the problems of effecting change in this environment and explore solutions for treading this tightrope, with an optimistic vision for the future.

#### The Cultural and Historical Context

The strong-arm tactics of the Soviet regime forever seared into the psyche of its people what freedom and authority meant. In Soviet times, “freedom” meant freedom to do what the State directed. The mentality formed during this period characterizes most post-Soviet societies today, where speaking up against a high-positioned person or giving suggestions for changes is met with hostility or flat-out negativity. Authorities at Georgian universities were educated during the Soviet regime and thus would not have the experience or will to accept real freedom and autonomy. This environment is a key barrier to progressive educational reforms that if given a chance to be implemented would benefit our students.

#### The Advocacy Challenge

My proposals to introduce changes that would be positive and would improve the educational experience for my students are met by university authorities either with silence or refusal. Such resistance is founded upon a deeply etched cultural

and institutional heritage of Soviet command and control. The unwillingness to move away from top-down decisions becomes a killjoy to critical thinking and innovation. To someone who is used to the culture of questioning and rational discourse, this is both frustrating and disheartening.

#### Strategies for Overcoming Resistance

Such resistance to an individual effort may be overcome by several strategies when fighting for change:

1. **Alliance Building:** Working with colleagues and students who are of like mind creates a collective voice that is more difficult to dismiss. By forming a coalition, it becomes possible to present a united front and demonstrate broad support for proposed changes.
2. **Incremental Change:** Making some small change, which is quite acceptable in its scope, may not be as threatening to the status quo. Small changes tend to provide momentum that can lead to further reforms.
3. **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Pilot programs or case studies can lend data and proof to the argument building up to the proposed change.
4. **Cultural Sensitivity:** This means understanding the cultural and historical context one is working in. If an understanding of the individual and collective fears of the people who resist change is conveyed, it may result in a more compassionate dialogue.

#### Hope for the Future

Slowly but surely, there is hope for the future. Within my classroom of students, their brilliance and potential cannot be denied. These students who are thriving in an environment of freedom and critical thinking are Georgia’s future leaders and change-makers. Cultivating these talents, questioners, innovators, and change agents will result in long-term, genuine transformation.



### **Conclusion**

Overcoming the vestiges of Soviet control within post-Soviet educational systems is not easy. Strategic advocacy, building alliances, and keeping a sense of hope allow one to effect change. Hope lies in the promise of a new generation of students. Being slow is not the same as being impossible. Through continued questioning, advocating, and supporting our students today, we can help deliver a future of freedom and innovation tomorrow.

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