

Challenges of communicating European values and the process of Armenia's EU integration



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The elephant of the European integration and the wise blind men of the Armenian society

In the regions of the country young people are mostly unaware of the course of European integration Armenia has been following for about a decade. They are certain of two things only: Armenia is not an EU-member, and Armenia is implementing a number of reforms because of its aspiration to integrate with Europe. However, both young people and the public in large is essentially ignorant of the outcomes of these reforms. What is peculiar about the current state of affairs is the fact that in Armenia attitudes towards the European Union are largely conditioned by stereotypes. Moreover, young people seem not to be particularly interested in the issues of EU integration: most would change a TV channel and would put away a newspaper when a programme or an article touches on one or the other issue of the EU integration: Armenians are often reluctant to listen to a message addressed to them. In the result, the process of European integration seems to have 'stagnated' within the milieu of those who have stuck to the identity of 'a promoter of European values'.

The communication gap tends to increase, and Armenians for whom Europe remains a stranger with all its opportunities and challenges, prefer labour migration to destinations which are more familiar and predictable, for instance, Russia. Many often confuse the European institutions and cannot distinguish between international and EU integration processes. For instance, the Bologna Process is presented as an EU initiative. One can often hear young people saying, "If we can't make it to a university in Yerevan, we definitely can't enter one in Europe". For them and for many other Armenians the road to Europe lies "through Yerevan"; whereas had they enough information about the EU integration, they would certainly seek for and find direct ways to get professional education in Europe. Thus, the vast majority of Armenians have misconceptions of the European institutions and standards, of the goals of European integration and available resources, of the opportunities the integration grants, and finally, of the ways to take advantage of these opportunities and subsequent challenges and solutions.

To present the issues of European integration and European values to the Armenian society is a tough challenge even when effective communication instruments are in place. Initially, the process of integration has been full of controversies: challenges of the European integration in the times of global financial crisis, diversity of the European community, clash of values and interests within the Armenian society and many others. Therefore, it is not surprising that Armenians often have absolutely opposing perceptions of the EU integration, and this reminds one of the story of an elephant and seven wise blind men. At times even the most zealous promoters of European integration do not have a clear idea of what is right: whether European values should be regarded as primary in order to progress in practical issues, or whether progress in practical issues shall trigger the development of a new set of values.

Bad language and twisted ideas: a voice in the wilderness

What may account for the situation at hand? The major reason might lie in the communication methods having been used so far: the majority of the society is not ready to listen to and to understand the 'language' which is being used to communicate European values to them. Indeed, the content of the programmes and articles is in most cases quite difficult for young people, the language and format used to convey the content is incomprehensible, and therefore the issues discussed are absolutely of no interest to them.

Second, though the bulk of information on EU integration on internet is quite large, the Armenian public appears mostly on the margins of the communication spectrum, since internet is not being used as a communication tool. Even traditional means of information exchange and communication are not effectively used to convey information and communicate values. Armenians tend to trust traditional means of communication, though in practice information channeled through these means does not reach the intended audience. Trust towards the new tools is comparatively low and the skills of Armenians to effectively use the new communication technology are minimal.



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The low level of professional qualification of journalists and their unawareness of the integration terminology also challenge the effectiveness of mass media in communicating the integration agenda and European values. It seems that there are no effective intermediaries to present the complicated content of EU integration in simple and accessible language.

Finally, a number of experts claim that the current practice of ensuring the visibility of EU integration actually serves the accountability interests of the EU bureaucracy, and often does not go beyond 'hanging banners'. Additionally, the donors also 'spoil' the already vulnerable communication methods, ordering programmes and choosing the content and format of these programmes at their discretion, without seriously considering the reality that in many cases these programmes do not attract the Armenian mainstream audience.

At the crossroad of harmony between the content and form

It is necessary to start public discussions on the outcomes of the EU integration, its regulation and procedures, the benefits of introducing European standards and the expected positive changes. For instance, many are not aware that the list of ingredients and other required information on products nowadays available in Armenia is the result of introducing respective European standards. In this regard it is very important to initiate public discussions using effective formats, which will focus on daily issues and will involve in an interactive dialogue those who are responsible for the EU integration, and the general public which will be affected by this process. Such a practice can lead to shaping a demand for awareness: Armenians should feel the need for information and its significance.

These discussions should first of all bridge the gap between the communication format and its content, i.e. the gap between expert discourse and respective framing of the same discourse in simple and accessible manner for common citizens. Therefore, the discussions should be mediated and based on hands-on methods. Except stressing the importance of interactive and attractive formats, it is crucial to carefully select the content of discussions and focus on issues and agendas that interest the target groups. The communication should target specific audiences and should be based on their needs. A common approach intended for a general homogenous public seems to have failed so far.

Moreover, the communication should be based on practical information, instead of abstract concepts to which many common people do not relate in their daily lives. It is necessary to empower Armenians to understand what tangible impact the process of integration should have on their lives. Meanwhile, it is crucial to identify those means of communication and adequate methods which are trusted by Armenians in general or by specific groups, paying special attention to e-media. Importantly, communication should primarily target the elimination of negative and impeding stereotypes.

Indeed, the role of intermediaries should not be underestimated in the communication process. In particular, the role of teachers is simply vital for introducing European values, as they are the ones to educate children in value systems that are socially preferable in a given society. It is mandatory to work with children, journalists and police first, as they are the essential intermediaries. At the same time one should not ignore those who shape the public opinion. Children should be viewed not simply as communication targets, but as the most important intermediaries: they learn much faster, than adults, communicate more effectively, and in the process teach their own families. Moreover, in five years these very children will become the most important parties of the communication.

Another imperative is the involvement of proper professional potential in communication. For instance, NGOs with a mission of introducing European values to the Armenian society having taken up the role of a communication intermediary should cooperate very closely with PR companies in order to appropriately choose the communication methods and frame their messages.

There is yet another thing that can significantly contribute to the improvement of the general environment for accessible information on European values and EU integration: equal and wide access to internet in Armenia, together with the enhanced digital literacy skills of young people. Still, the priority is to create a feeling of urgency in demand for information. This goal can be achieved, for instance, through ensuring accessibility of EU information in the regions by establishing free wi-fi zones and information access points for common citizens interested in EU integration issues.

In summary, in order to effectively present European values to the Armenian society it is necessary to identify effective communication mechanisms in parallel with the integration process. With the existing stereotypes it is necessary to dig the communication tunnel and pass through it at the same time.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "Communication on European values", which took place on November 23th, 2011. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

The round table was organized within the framework of a BSPN project.