

The directive of the development of public demand for EU integration

“And what are the advantages of being a European? Why do we really want to become European? I’d say it’s simply a fixation.” “I can never imagine Armenians as Europeans. We’re not Asians, either. We’re of some different kind.” “We have become European without having the chance to choose. We were not even asked whether we want to or not.” “What is Europe? The society should learn about Europe, otherwise it will be perceived as a bundle of perversities.” “Europe won’t allow us to eat our national *KHASH*¹, since it does not comply with European standards.”

This is not an excerpt quoted from a columnist who is a radical adversary of Euro-integration. These are the concerns expressed by common Armenian citizens at public discussions in Ijevan, Yeghegnadzor, and Yerevan. There were about 1,000 people of various age groups and professions who participated in these discussions. Actually, the complaints of our fellow citizens on adopting the EU path for Armenia’s development can be categorized by the following three observations:

1. the EU integration path has been adopted by policy makers without there being a corresponding public demand;
2. in reality, society does not know what the EU integration path is and what Europe actually is; and
3. by following the European path, we will lose our national identity and Armenian traditions.

As you sow, so shall you reap

Society knows about Europe only as much as it has been informed. However, it should be noted that very little has been presented, and even the provided information has, at times, been misleading. This is particularly true in the regions, though even among the elite there is a significant percentage that does not really distinguish what the European direction is. They simply emulate a pro-orientation stance, since talking about Euro-integration is quite trendy.

And how is Europe, and the direction that leads to European integration, being presented to our society? We have made a series of errors here and we continue to err:

- Today, whatever is being presented to us (our public) subconsciously incites us to associate Euro-integration with integration with the West, in general. In circumstances where the public’s perception has not yet totally reformed, the result is ambivalence towards orientation. In addition, there is the reality of enhancing relations with NATO which, in the public subconscious, still preserves a negative image, and the presentation of the real nature of the organization, and the task of making the public more aware of the whole process, is not enough. This results in the perception of Euro-integration as within the context of a bitter game “from one camp to another”.
- One constantly hears, reads, or takes part in debates about Russia being a jealous partner: if we were to move towards Europe, she’ll slap us on the face. It seems this is becoming the dominant public opinion.

¹ khash (Armenian) – a national Armenian dish, cow feet soup for breakfast

- Until now we have not been able to explain, and make our public aware, that Europe does not need us without our national identity, since Europe itself is a union of national states.
- We have officially stated that Armenia has chosen Euro-integration as her main direction of development. However, the process itself seems to be late; at least it is not transparent for the public. With this we have managed to alter the idea and the values.
- In the current social situation people often blame the authorities for their hardships, and since the slogan “Towards Europe” is mostly advocated by these very authorities, it results in the opposite reaction.
- Finally, until today we have not been able to effectively explain that the European way is the proven rules of the game; it is the way of piloted standards and harmonious benchmarks, and eventually the way of not crossing the street on the red light, not getting drenched with mineral water when opening the bottle, and not disposing of waste water in the river when producing chemicals.

Conditio sine qua non²

“Any reform project is doomed if it is not demanded by people and does not enjoy the public support.” This truism has been known for years; it has been proclaimed by the highest echelons of the Armenian government and is stated in various state programs.

Nowadays, when Armenia has stepped into the negotiations phase with the EU regarding the ratification of the Action Plan within the framework of the ENP, when the draft of the National Program is under discussion and the process of enhancing cooperation with Europe on the official level has obviously progressed, it is not very clear *who is creating the demand for this all*.

It is obvious that the direction chosen is correct. But beyond this, Armenia should become even more active within the ENP framework, and should pay more attention to the activities targeting this direction. However, another item is also obvious: it is high time to work with the general public seriously and systematically, in order to make it possible to achieve the desirable outcome of having a society which is a powerful supporter and persuasive advocate of the most important process of the day, i.e. Euro-integration.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion on “Regional policy and support coordination”, which took place on October 14, 2005. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, entrepreneurs, and representatives of the international organizations.

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² *Sine qua non* or *conditio sine qua non* is a Latin legal term for "without which it could not be" ("but for"). It refers to an indispensable action, condition or thing. (*Wikipedia*)