



Integration Policy of Armenia

Analytical Pieces

Series of Analytical Pieces on the Integration Policy of Armenia sum up the opinions and views expressed at round tables discussions “Armenia in Between EU and Eurasian Union: Assessing New Challenges and Opportunities” organized by Yerevan Press Club in cooperation with Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

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MYTHS ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT

For about four years Armenia was engaged in negotiations around the Association Agreement with the European Union which can be considered as one of the most successful negotiation rounds in the history of the modern Armenian diplomacy. To a certain extent these negotiations contradict the generally accepted notion that EU maintains a harsh dialogue with all those seeking rapprochement with the European community. On most of the provisions that could potentially cause “discomfort” for Yerevan and create obstacles for the fulfillment of its obligations, the Armenian side managed to bargain fairly flexible formulations.

It is these sections of the Agreement which became the subject of the most active manipulation on part of opponents (explicit and implicit) of the Association Agreement. Notably, there were speculations that the new level of relations with the EU will restrain Armenia's cooperation with its strategic ally Russia. Artificial formulas of "either-or", "no-no", "and-and" were put into circulation for the purposes of propaganda. As a prove of the "either-or" principle, allegedly imposed by the European Union, the statements of some EU officials about the incompatibility of the Association Agreement and membership in the Customs Union (CU) were brought. And this interpretation from time to time was supported by representatives of RA authorities insisting that they have always been proponents of the "and-and" formula and that they were surprised with the announced incompatibility of the two integration projects. In fact, Armenian political elites and the media controlled by them were playing naive. In reality though, the Association Agreement with the EU, including the integration into the free trade zone, in no way restrained Yerevan from engaging in SYMETRIC integration schemes. Armenia could join other free trade zones, including conclusion of similar agreements with Russia and other former Soviet countries. In this regard, the Association Agreement allowed for the realization of the “and-and” formula at its best. Whereas the Customs Union prohibits engagement in other integration processes with its protectionist mechanisms, imposing the formula of “or-or” on its members.

Armenian community was forced upon the idea that, say, "it is impossible to be in one security system (meaning the membership of RA in the Collective Security Treaty Organization - **Auth.**), and be economically integrated into an alternative system at the same time." First, Armenia was not to be integrated into an “alternative” system; RA would retain the freedom to maintain relations similar to the scheme of EU's economic relations with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, as it is mentioned above. If the Association Agreement implied higher standards for the Armenian products bidding for free access to EU markets, other trade partners of Yerevan (same Moscow, Astana or Minsk) would only benefit from that. By the way, correspondent standards adopted by one of the founding countries of CU - Belarus, are now higher than in the whole Customs Union... Secondly, Turkey's accession was seriously discussed in the framework of the Customs Union. President of Kazakhtan Nursultan Nazarbaev even made a formal proposal to Ankara. But how about Turkey's membership in the political-military alliance of NATO? Or maybe the officials in CU capitals are so naïve that they allow for the possibility of Turkey's exit from NATO? All these arguments against the association with EU intended for duped audience do not deserve a name other than demagogy.

Armenia's membership in the CSTO was fundamentally considered in its variant of the Association Agreement with EU; this circumstance led to a much more modest section of the document pertaining the partnership in the spheres of security than in case of the other three countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), which have views for the membership in NATO. The Agreement did not contain any prerequisites to review the contractual obligations of Yerevan with CSTO partners. Also, as appose to the other three countries, Armenia did not raise the issue of prospective EU membership and did not assume to make any changes in the bilateral relations with Russia or interactions within the CIS. In other

words, nobody would force Armenia to choose “EU or Russia” in case the agreement was signed. At least in case of Armenia, the assurances given by EU that the Eastern Partnership is not directed against Moscow’s interests and its relations with partner countries had a good reason. To suggest otherwise is tantamount to the view that socio-economic and political development of Armenia, as such, is already against Russian interests. If so, then the problem is not in the relations of Armenia with EU but rather with those who formulate and try to realize such “interests” of Moscow...

Another myth regarding the Association Agreement has to do with one of the most sensitive issues for the public opinion in Armenia - the Mountainous Karabagh conflict. Opponents of the agreement were actively spreading false information that the text of the agreements contains a provision on the future status of MK unacceptable for the national interests of RA. It’s hard to say on who or what the authors of the misinformation were counting on because for any person even remotely familiar with resolution of the conflicts similar to Mountainous Karabagh, it’s obvious that the format and character of negotiations around the Association Agreement excludes the very possibility of stipulation on MK status in that document. At the same time, as the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council of May 29 in Astana proved, real risks for the unrecognized republic rather exist in the framework of Customs (Eurasian) Union.

Even in a question of the future of Metsamor nuclear power plant where the position of the Armenian side is highly vulnerable given the security risks posed by the plant, the Association Agreement provided “softer” formulations compared to the preceding documents regulating EU-RA relations. In the Agreement the prospect of closing the nuclear power plant was directly linked to the issue of energy security of Armenia insured by alternative means. Now compare these approaches with “integration” process of Armenia in Eurasian Economic Union...

UNION WHERE ARMENIA IS NOT WELCOME

Obstacles for the accession of RA into the Customs Union with Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia were well known long before September 3, 2013, when RA president announced the decision to join Customs Union and participate in the formulation of the Eurasian Union. Some of those obstacles, most primarily the absence of a common border with any of the member states of the union, were repeatedly voiced by Armenian high rank officials, including the former Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan. Other obstacles were broadly discussed after September 3.

As all the Armenian political elites, by conviction or under constraint, immediately turned into proponents of the CU, they started to bring random arguments as to justify the new “choice” of integration vector. For instance they argue that the absence of a common border is not a problem-the cargo containers from Armenia, intended for CU partners, will simply be sealed at the Armenian-Georgian border without customs clearance for transit delivery to the Georgian-Russian border where they will be subjected to "customs clearance". Same goes for the cargo transit to Armenia from CU partner countries. Simple, isn't it?! The pioneers of this ingenious method didn't bother to ask Georgia's opinion on the matter though, and when they did ask Georgia, many months after the decision was made, it turned out that their argument was groundless.

Russian recruits who work to allure Armenians towards the Customs Union, started to pay frequent visits to Yerevan from mid 2012, suggesting yet another “argument”: Kaliningrad region also has no common border with the rest of the Russian Federation... Let's leave the moral side of this issue: how correct is it to compare the enclave of a certain country which economic, trade and any other level of integration can't even be questioned, with a sovereign state which is meant to build relations with foreign partners based on expediency and common sense as a component of its national interests. But the argument also does not stand any criticism from purely practical point of view too. Kaliningrad region has no LAND border with Russia, but the region is linked to Russia by sea without any transit countries. Put it differently, there is a route for cargo delivery without customs procedures by other countries. Whereas Armenia does not have this option to link with Russia bypassing customs control of third countries; technically it is only possible by air which cannot be regarded as an effective route for exchange of goods among the states of a common customs space.

Another obstacle on the way of Armenia's accession into the Customs Union is RA's membership in the World Trade Organization. When Armenia joined WTO in early 2003, it agreed to lower customs duties, which corresponds to its status as a country with active export-import relations. Membership to Customs Union creates principle contradictions between WTO obligations and significantly higher tariffs provided by CU. As it is known, Russia entered the World Trade Organization later than Armenia, in 2012, and originally agreed with WTO on tariffs which do not contradict the ones existing in the Customs Union. Kazakhstan and Belarus are not yet members of WTO, and in case they ever join this organization (Astana is engaged in intensive talks on this subject) they will proceed with the tariffs existing in the CU.

Armenian authorities optimistically stated that they will agree upon more than 50 percent exemptions for one and a half thousand items of goods subject to duties under the CU. Negotiations on these exemptions were designed to eliminate the contradictions between WTO membership and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) but as it turned out, the potential partners of EAEU (this point of view was firmly expressed by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko) are strongly against the accession of new members on special conditions. In other words, if the exemptions will not be granted, it is expected that the EAEU must compensate Armenia's WTO partners for their loss in tariffs differences, as the

European Union was once doing for its new members. However, the statements of RF Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov made it clear that no one is going to pay for Armenia, and as for Armenia itself, it cannot even come close to covering the compensations on its own.

It appears that from the very beginning of the discussions of RA membership to the CU, it could be seen that Astana and Minsk were not interested in it. Unlike Moscow, they tend to view the Eurasian integration from a purely economic perspective, whereas the accession of Armenia had mainly political significance. RA's membership in EAEU would also mean further strengthening of Russia's position in decision-making, given Armenia's dependence on Moscow. Subsequently, Kazakhstan and Belarus, already disgruntled with Moscow's domination, presumably have developed a strategy to prevent Yerevan from joining the union. If Lukashenko raised the issue of the exclusion of the special conditions, the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev took the role of the defender of Azerbaijani interests, which leads a policy of Armenia's isolation from all kind of integration projects. It is no secret that for both, Astana and Minsk, Baku stands as a more important partner than Yerevan. Combined share of these two CU members in the foreign trade of Armenia does not even reach 1%, whereas Kazakhstan cooperates with Azerbaijan on a number of large scale international projects, including energy and agriculture. Additionally, the two countries are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, where they tend to express consolidated positions. The cheap loans provided from time to time by Azerbaijan to Belarus are of a huge importance for Belarus. Considering all these factors, there can be no doubt that these two countries of CU will strongly resist Armenia's accession.

Of course, Moscow has enough weight to push for a new member on conditions that will be acceptable for Russia. Nevertheless, even before September 3, 2013, and after that, Armenia's choice in favor of Eurasian integration had no value by itself, but was a factor preventing the triumph of the Eastern Partnership at the Vilnius summit in November, 2013 and, above all, the signing of the Association Agreement by Ukraine. To an extent that Russia has solved (or not solved) this problem, the issue of Armenia's membership in the Customs Union and subsequently in EAEU has lost its relevance. Hence, it should be of no surprise that Moscow's interest in overcoming the resistance of Astana and Minsk started to decline.

PREDICTABLE “SURPRISES” OF EURASIAN INTEGRATION

Along with the factors hindering (or proving unreasonable) Armenia's accession to the Customs Union, which were obvious from the very beginning of the process, later - in April-May 2014 - emerged also some hidden obstacles; although those can be labeled “hidden” only conditionally. The unpleasant “surprises” were the result of extremely incorrect assessment of the situation and, therefore, erroneous predictions. All those who did not expect that Armenia will face almost insurmountable obstacles to membership in the CU/EaEU apparently did not anticipate that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine will go all the way towards Association Agreements with EU. After all, if they (or at least only Ukraine), would have changed priorities in favor of the Eurasian integration, like Yerevan did, the CU/EaEU project (aka USSR 2.0) would have looked enough promising, so that "technical" obstacles could be neglected.

With the failed triumph of "Russian spring" interest towards Armenia alone with its liberal (under the conditions of membership in the WTO) trade regime, absence of common borders with the countries of the Customs Union (see previous analytical notes), unattractive market and poor economy has plummeted, and is being replaced by those "hidden" impeding factors. And, as it was expected, the tandem of Astana and Minsk harmoniously worked against the membership of Yerevan. In the end of April 2014 president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko quite firmly stated the principle that there should be no rush with the formation of the Eurasian Union, and if someone is not ready to accept all the package of proposed conditions, the signing of the Agreement can be postponed. Practically, this meant that the preceding negotiations of Yerevan with Moscow for significant exemptions from the list of items taxable under new customs tariffs, were a waste of time. In the end of May the president of Kazakhstan Nuruslan Nazarbaev referring to the letter of his Azerbaijani colleague Ilham Aliev, made it clear that Armenia can join the EaEU only within its internationally recognized borders. In practice this meant that there should be a customs checkpoint on the border of Armenia and Mountainous Karabagh (MK). What is more, Nazarbaev presented it as something that should be taken for granted, saying that on the same terms Armenia has joined the World Trade Organization...

None of the parties present at this meeting of the Eurasian Economic Council, including the Armenian delegation headed by the country's president, did not object that such parallels are irrelevant, because neither in WTO nor in the case of the Association Agreement the question of the special regulation of movement of goods between MK and Armenia has never been raised. Moreover, in the framework of the negotiations on the Association Agreement (as previously in the case of the WTO) partners have been sympathetic to the situation of unresolved conflict - the need for the normal life for Karabagh population, conditioned by communications with Armenia - and avoided artificial limitations.

In this, and in all other matters Eurasian negotiations plunged Yerevan in qualitatively different culture of "partner" relations, wherein the interests of the weaker party are not going to be considered by anyone. Passive stance of the Armenian side at all full format discussions within CU/EaEU which were humiliating for RA, could also be explained with expectations that Moscow who has employed undisguised threats (gas tariffs, the sale of offensive weapons to Azerbaijan, etc.) to draw Armenia in its integration project will find a way to deal with the rest of its participants - Astana and Minsk.

There is no doubt that by demonstrating a tough stance against Ukraine, Kremlin could persuade their partners to accept Armenia into the Customs Union on any terms. The policy of the “big stick” led by Russia for a long time did not work as effectively as in the past few months. However, it turned out that the Russian leadership is not eager to hurry the issue of Yerevan’s accession into the EaEU. Moscow’s behavior only confirmed the obvious: its

purpose was not an extension of the Eurasian format with Armenia, but the failure of the Association Agreement between EU and RA.

No doubt also remains about the effort of "Eurasians" to consider the accession of RA into the CU through the prism of cooperation with Azerbaijan, which in turn, consistently pursues a policy of isolating Yerevan from all international and regional initiatives. At first, it may not be full-fledged participation of Baku in the Eurasian process, but for example a coordinated policy in the field of energy, which remains the main arguments of Kremlin in its deepening confrontation with the West. Joining of troubled countries like Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the Eurasian integration project are of less importance to Russia than the involvement of Iran and Azerbaijan on their side in the energy game. For Tehran it is a way to achieve a kind of revenge for years of sanctions by the West, for Baku – a way to loosen irritating pressure of the international community on issues of democracy and human rights. In this regard, another immediate neighbor, Turkey, taking into account its own complicated geopolitical calculations, as well as non-conventional approaches of its current leader to relations with the external world can act as an aid rather than an opponent in this game. Especially since, Baku as a minimum, and in certain matters also Ankara have expectations of a bonus from Moscow for their cooperation.

In this context, correlating Yerevan's choice in favor of Eurasianism and reliance on Russia, coupled with the CSTO as unconditional allies in case of problems with unfriendly neighbors, was groundless. Given the current situation, no one can offer Armenia guarantees for a peaceful life and respect of its national interests in the resolution of Karabagh conflict. Risks to the security of the country existed long before Armenia got to choose between the Eurasian and European integration. Of course, in a short-term perspective these risks wouldn't diminish in case of concluding the Association Agreement with EU. And only primitive, short-sighted calculations allow to conclude that the rejection of European integration and "knocking on the doors" of the Customs Union – is a more reliable way to reduce the risks. Subsequent developments convincingly confirmed this.

Accordingly, the version of the Association Agreement of Armenia with the EU, to which the sides came in the course of negotiations, and which did not connect directly the choice of a model of state and socio-economic structure, as well as a vector of civilizational development with the belonging to the security system and strategic partnership, was the only viable option for Yerevan. By rejecting it, the government has faced both, initially obvious, and increasingly growing hidden problems. These affected practically all the spheres - domestic and foreign policy, economics, public life, as well as security. The experience of recent months shows that crisis symptoms will accumulate until membership in the Eurasian Union remains the uncontested prospect for the country. A new challenge, in this sense, is Western sanctions against Russia, but this will be a topic for the next analytical pieces.

WAR OF SANCTIONS AS AN OPPORTUNITY AND A CHALLENGE

The war of sanctions between the European Union, United States and several other countries, on one hand and Russia - on the other, of course, affects the entire global market, including parties not directly involved in this war, whether they like it or not. Armenia as a country which has stuck halfway between the Association Agreement with the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, also traditionally dependent on import and export will be particularly sensitive to this situation. In that, some of the consequences may have a double effect - both positive and negative.

Immediately after Russia imposed ban on the import of grocery from countries that apply sanctions against RF, there was a talk about new perspectives for Armenian producers. In particular, certain opportunities for them may come with shortage of fruits, vegetables, meat, fish and cheeses that is currently observed in Russian consumer market. Needless to elaborate on the positive effects of these developments, they are obvious.

At the same time it would be frivolous to ignore the related problems, at least for the sake of minimizing the negative effects as much as possible. The first of the negative effects that will occur is the immediate increase of prices in the domestic market, naturally caused by increased demand (taking into account the consumer resource of Russia in relation to the production capabilities of Armenia the latter can be unlimited). We have encountered a similar problem when the interest towards the Armenian lamb increased in Iran and the Arab countries - the price in the local market jumped so high that in Armenia this product became unavailable for the majority of the population. A "fresher" example is Belarus, where the population has already faced rising prices as a consequence of a reorientation of some goods to Russian consumer market.

The argument that this is the meaning of the market economy - to produce for profit and satisfy own demand with the gained profit - in this case is not quite correct. Purely market-based formulas work well when the relationship between the entities is more or less established. In this case, however, we risk facing a shock situation caused by a global crisis, wherein the interests of the small market entity in the face of the Armenian consumer may simply be overwhelmed by a powerful fellow - Russian consumer.

Naturally, for a narrow circle of Armenian business community, entrance to the Russian market will insure enormous profit, but the concentration of capital and monopolies existing in the Armenian market will not provide for redistribution of revenue among wider population. One should not also expect significant growth in jobs since the industries that potentially can be activated by changes in the Russian market do not have a demand for a great army of additional employees. Accordingly, the rise in prices is unlikely to be accompanied by a proportionate increase in the purchasing power of the population. Social problems are likely to exacerbate, and how it usually affects the migration rates is well known from the experience of the recent years...

Another likely side effect is environmental. Even before the new prospects for penetration into the Russian market, Armenian environmentalists rightly rang the alarm regarding the predatory use of water resources by fish farms. This has started to pose real threats for the basic life-supporting resources of Armenia - Lake Sevan and the Ararat Valley (overexploitation of artesian waters is fraught with irreversible consequences). Armenian fishing industry has already won its place in the Russian market. With the introduction of retaliatory sanctions and with emergency demand for alternatives, for example banned Norwegian salmon which is a common part of diet of many Russians, the demand for our gourmet food can be excessive, with all the resulting environmental consequences.

The above said, of course, does not mean that Armenian businesses should not react to the changing regional market conditions, in accordance with their own interests. Concerns over the choice of the Eurasian integration are intended to prevent the country from acquiring characteristics of North Korea, and to go as far as possible from that model. But the listed shock challenges are not at all exhaustive and addressing all those negative impacts requires high responsibility of public institutions, particularly those that implement the policy in the field of social security and pricing, free and fair competition, fight against corruption, protection of natural resources and sustainable development. Even without the approaching new wave of geopolitical and global economic crisis, the relevant authorities of Armenia have been far of perfectness. Their further inefficient operation, low level of public accountability, immunity to criticism of free media and civil initiatives can turn new business opportunity into a disaster for the country as a whole.

Today there is much talk about the perspectives of covert re-exports to Russia of goods that were banned under the retaliatory sanctions and a potential opportunity for the close partners of Moscow to make some extra profit on it.

Humorous hints and very serious business plans for the "Belarusian shrimps" or "Kazakh parmesan" have recently become common. We could be talking about hundreds of small and medium enterprises engaged in processing and even simple repacking of goods from Western countries for Russia. Moreover, it is possible that this will take place by mutual consent: Western manufacturers at least partially retain market, and Moscow will "keep in style" and at the same time will not deprive its citizens from their usual range of goods. Chances of Armenia in these combinations are likely to be small. Especially in comparison with the founding countries of the Eurasian Economic Union which are exempt from customs formalities, as well as China and Turkey which have huge volumes of trade with Russia and, therefore, worked out perfect logistic arrangements. Even Georgia, which, despite signing the Association agreement with the EU, but works hard towards economic cooperation with Russia has certain advantages over Armenia: first of all, due to the geographical proximity, the presence of a common border and lower transportation costs.

Paradoxically, the presence of competing integration initiatives, free trade areas, customs unions, and even sanctions, in a sense is promoting cooperation between certain countries that belong to different systems. By using mutual investments and sister companies, they can benefit from profitable trade and economic regimes, available for each. It is no coincidence that in Armenian government circles talks about the prospects of this kind of cooperation between Armenia intending to join the EAEU and Georgia who signed free trade agreement with the EU, are recently popular.

Similar schemes are being worked out by "tipsters" in the context of the sanctions imposed against Russian companies. Especially, since the latter are actively present in Armenia and Russian capital is involved in the majority of Armenian banks. However, in this case, the risks are quite high as the Western partners of Yerevan are likely to closely monitor potential workarounds to overcome the sanctions regime against Moscow and will take appropriate action. Unambiguous warning on this regard has already been voiced.

Mutual tacit agreement to circumvent restrictions on credit and finance operations or realization of Russian commodities in the West via third countries is much more difficult to achieve than similar operations in the opposite direction. The understanding with which the United States and Europe approached the Armenian-Iranian trade relations as a means of survival for our country, may not apply to Yerevan's cooperation with Russia which is currently sanctioned by the West. One of the obvious consequences, for example, can be a non-renewal by EU of the GSP + regime which in its practical application is close to free trade.

In a word, the habit of RA authorities to "go with the flow" and pretend that the crisis do not affect the country may be even more adverse to Armenia than the global economic crisis five years ago. Therefore, a concrete program of action on all aspects of the current situation, instead of a hope for a life-saving miracle is required at this stage.

P.S.: Needless to say that any expectations for large-scale Russian injection in the Armenian economy, even in the case of RA's accession into the EAEU, are idle in the context of sanctions. Losses of oil, gas and energy companies, as well as all raw materials sector in Russia is so predictable that all of their investment projects in Armenia should be forgotten. What can be expected though is yet further attempts to recoup their losses on other fronts, squeezing the last juices from the partner country. This is to say, the recent price increases, particularly for gas and electricity were not the last...

TIME TO RIP OFF THE MASKS: TRUE FACES ARE OF VALUE

Recent developments around Ukraine and Russia-West relations in general, not only undermine the foundations of international relations which seemingly were permanently established after the Second World War but also lead to rethink and change views on values, goals, priorities of a certain part of humanity that traditionally adheres itself to European civilization. Consequently, these new developments question the content of many development and cooperation programs, jeopardizing consistency and responsibility of the partners in caring out their mutual obligations. Unfortunately, this also applies to European integration processes, including the agenda of EU "Eastern Partnership" Initiative.

Of course, international agreements were not being implicitly implemented before the Ukrainian crisis too, and all those claiming a vision of European future were not convincingly and steadily moving towards the agreed reforms. But retreat from the principles would usually occur with bashful expression on the face and was accompanied with assurances in the steadfastness of the course, excuses and references to the "dark past", slowing down the progress. And only in the "post-Maidan" period, the cynicism and even the bravado in denying hitherto accepted standards and norms became particularly widespread. It turned out that the signatures and seals of dignitaries in bilateral and multilateral agreements relating even to the key issues such as national sovereignty and international security, are worthless. What to say about the humanitarian sphere - the functioning of democratic institutions or human rights!?

Perhaps the first victim (and at the same time the weapon) of the "new world order" was mass media. Leading Russian TV channels became trendsetters here; they have been coming to their current "triumph" for nearly two decades. Following the liberalization of the perestroika period and the first years of democratic statehood in Russia, the first generation of Russian oligarchs and "pro-Western" officials who seized control over the media, decided to abandon the principles of free market in the media industry which they have earlier declared. This was done in order to support "their president" and all available dirty propaganda techniques were employed for this goal. Such a concession could not remain without consequences. Once accepting the "rules of the game", according to which television, print media and other outlets are not subjects of free business, but above all, stand as instruments of political manipulations and therefore do not comply with the principle of protection of private property, "pro-Western elite" was forced to come to terms with the transition of the most important media assets to the hands of new "loyal" owners.

The story of how "Gazprom" became the owner of NTV is a "genre classic". The story of the former owner of that TV channel, Vladimir Gusinsky didn't serve as a lesson for another oligarch and media magnate Boris Berezovsky. The latter sponsored the most sophisticated techniques of "media annihilation" to insure smooth transfer of power from one "their" president to another. Among the "situational" victims were even such giants of Russian politics as former mayor of Moscow Yury Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov.

Gusinsky and Berezovsky have both successfully handled the task of manipulating public opinion in the campaigns of bringing to the throne the "needed" candidates in 1996 and 2000 accordingly; after that there was no more need in themselves for Russia. And the major media resources once owned by them, including television and screen heroes, rose to a new level of moral decline (if you'll pardon the pun), to outdo in their current anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western propaganda most odious Soviet patterns.

The path that the Russian media went through at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, and the policy of monopolizing the main resources of manipulating the public opinion was reiterated

by their counterparts in different countries of the former Soviet Union, including Armenia. But the recent "success" of Moscow's leading TV channels in zombifying citizens remains out of reach. No one else in more or less open societies can "brag" about such efficiency in disseminating outright lies, racism, chauvinism and xenophobia demonstrated by Russian media. In this regard, a number of countries have banned or restricted retransmission of some of the Russian TV channels. In Armenia, despite the presence of these channels in free access and a flagrant violation of national legislation by them, the responsible authorities are neglecting this topical issue.

Meanwhile, in contrast to previous years, when the use of manipulative techniques in Russia was justified by the interests of the Russian elite which was busy with building a Western model of a free, democratic state, and fighting the communist revenge, today all masks are ripped off. Russian TV stars openly mock European values, humiliate entire nations, countries and are not shy to say that this is the way journalism should be.

One of the symbols of the "modern media age" Dmitry Kiselev, lecturing in Yerevan for the Armenian fans of his "talent", challenged the very foundation of journalism and ethics - the need to separate the facts from the comments and opinions; as though it's an outdated principle... In other words, according to the "guru" of the Russian propaganda, it is ok to mix the raw information with its subjective interpretation to an extent that the consumer will lose the factual basis of the media product and will blindly follow the guide. This is what actually is happening with the audience of Russian media, including, unfortunately, the Armenian audience. In the context of such an impact of the "idiot box" and Eurasian aspirations of the Armenian political establishment, the complete oblivion of the lessons of true professional journalism received over the past 20 years by our media representatives, and a switch to the "theory" of the "masters of the word" from Moscow seems inevitable. The only hope is that this will happen at the usual provincial level - and hence without the stunning effect...

How to get rid of any alternative sources of influence on the society is well demonstrated by another companion of our Soviet past – Azerbaijan: about 100 political prisoners, including journalists and bloggers, in a country where anyhow not many people dare to express their opinions openly. Relatively recently, this country revoked the official censorship, was tolerant of criticism in the media, allowed for a real multi-party system, was not explicitly interfering in the work of international organizations with the local civil society, and was not punishing for being engaged in dialogue with Armenians. As for now, almost all the media outlets depend on the government's support and are controlled by the authorities, oppositional activity is equated with anti-state action, funding of NGOs by foreign funds is allowed only with the approval from above, contacts with Armenians fall under the definition of "espionage" and "treason." On the international reactions to the above-mentioned problems, the Azerbaijani leadership who, of course, realize the above stated changes in the global political climate, respond quite defiantly: deal with your own problems... Note that we are talking about a country like Armenia - member of the Council of Europe, participant to the EU initiative "Eastern Partnership". And one cannot deny that in the Armenian higher political circles, there are people who like similar nature of relationship between the power and the citizens...

It is worthwhile to briefly discuss here yet another neighbor in the framework of the proposed topic - Turkey. It would be unfair to put it on a par with the above examples. But here, too, they love (and again especially lately!) to blame the West and put it back in its place for any criticism in their address. Several months ago, the country's authorities deported journalist back to Azerbaijan, being well aware that he will be immediately arrested on fabricated charges. Its political leaders allow for openly armenophobic statements and convincingly win in the elections. On one hand, they obviously cross the borders of a secular state, which is one of the fundamental principles of European civilization, and on the other, the newly appointed minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey declares that EU accession is a foreign policy priority for them...

All this is taking place amid the acute geopolitical confrontation, real threats to global security and break of international legal ties. This is the environment in which the agenda of cooperation between Armenia and the European Union is being discussed. It continues to prioritize justice reform, fight against corruption, human rights, the strengthening of democratic institutions – topics that are no longer a priority in the light of the more pressing challenges. If we look at the things realistically, external factors and incentives which used to play a crucial role in promoting the reforms are more than ever weak now. Mimicry under the name of reforms is increasingly losing its meaning. And with the Eurasian process stalled, but not canceled, the external influence has a punctuated opposite vector. Will there be internal recourses for progress? Will the pro-reformist forces in the country realize their responsibility in this new situation? The answer, what is the true face of Armenia in the world today, is to be given in the upcoming fall of 2014.